

*What is
Hidden*

dedicated to my
great-grandmothers



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What is Hidden
Rhode Island School of Design (RISD)
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Abstract

Bodies accumulate emotions and desires just as houses collect sheets of dust and memories. What remains visible, and what becomes obscured through shame and time? What happens when we peel back the facade to reveal what’s buried? Through the accretion of materials and layering of surfaces, my work presents the human figure as a site of cyclical hiding, unearthing, and discovery. Working within the queer feminist tradition of reclaiming the feminized body and its fluids, I create ceramic figures, paintings, and written stories to question the boundaries between attraction and disgust, discomfort and fear, femininity and truth, touch and intimacy.

I coil clay into femme figures with pointing fingers and cheeky expressions to challenge viewers’ preconceptions of desire, identity, and beauty. Red flowers and blushing cheeks disguise grotesquely long necks and oozing wounds of colorful glaze, just as pink satin pointe shoes covered my blistered feet throughout years of ballet training as a youth. Just as the pink tights hid weeping cysts on my thighs. Just as the stories and secrets of my Slavic ancestors were hidden away deeper with each new generation of women. Beauty is always accompanied by darkness. Dread and delight hold hands like laughing and crying.

I infuse levity into my pieces by presenting the objects as catalysts for joyful performance and transformation: figures are used as stools, mythical creatures are worn as masks, and sculptures are accompanied by pieces of creative fiction. All together, the work becomes an immersive, intimate space filled with objects that syncretize imagined histories and ancestral mythologies with my lived experiences. These spaces and objects allow me to investigate my relationship with my body and my heritage on my own terms, and reclaim autonomy from under the shadow of transgenerational trauma.

Glossary of Symbols



Chicken Feet

I've always loved the story of Baba Yaga and her house that wanders on chicken feet. She embodies contradictions and ambiguities, appearing in tales as both beautiful and ugly, young and old, masculine and feminine, monstrous and human, kind and villainous. She is a woman of multitudes and she does what she pleases despite her inconsistencies. She changes at a whim and without apology.



Long Neck

The head is far from the body, floating in the sky. Nubivagant: wandering among the clouds, dancing through the air. The head observes the body from a distance, dissociating as a way to process complex, emotional experiences. Aesthetically, the long neck not only references the historical exaggerations of the human body as an act of quiet rebellion by Mannerist painters, but also the contorted bodies of the cartoons and ballet dancers I grew up with.



Simple Flower

This shape appears in my drawings and sculptures again and again. It is a comforting shape from childhood and easily fills space, creates pattern, and builds texture. It screams hope, cuteness, growth. Its roundness and familiarity represent the nostalgia of adolescent naivety. Iterations of this form are found across time and place as a motif in Slavic craft objects such as domestic textiles and clothing.



Teardrop

A drop of rain, puss, saltwater tear. Things leaving the body. A secret being squeezed out. What happens while laughing or crying: two opposite emotions can look the same. Nourishment for budding seeds under the surface. The teardrop is fluid, caught in a state of transition between discordant places or ways of being.



Three-Headed Flower

Past, present, and future growing from the same stem. These three connected flowers bring together my real and mythological ancestors, my current self, and the imagined world I create with their remaining stories. In Slavic mythology, the three-headed figure of Triglav, a fusion of the three supreme Slavic gods, rules over the three kingdoms of humanity: sky, earth, and the underworld, representing future, present, and past. Triglav is often depicted with blindfolds across all six of his eyes, witnessing all and nothing at once.



Void

The blank that's left after matter is scooped away. A manifestation of nothingness. Among many phrases about the void here are my favorites: screaming into the void and the call of the void, the first an expression of pent up emotion that no one witnesses or acknowledges, and the latter a common irrational impulse to jump when standing in a high place. The void replaces the faces in several of my sculptural figures, the head becoming an emptiness into which viewers can scream or jump.



Wailing Mouth

An iteration of the void. An open mouth, teeth bared. The expression vacillates between laughter, frustration, and fear. The mouths of my masks are open and yet make no sound unless activated by the wearer. They wait for someone to tell stories from behind their safe facades.



Hollows
❧
Secretions

A hole, a crater, a cave (in the body, or in the mind). Two punctures on the side of the neck from a vampire, red running out. A place once closed but now open, and who knows what might escape from inside. A place to hide. A place to emerge from. A cavern to hide memories and discard unloved trinkets, save them for later. A space of vulnerability, which can be entered and explored and probed, which might suddenly heal over, trapping you while you're still inside.

Itch



Itch, 2020
Stoneware, nichrome wire,
underglaze, glaze, yarn

An itch wakes me up most nights. I dream of clawed shadows chasing me and then there is an itch — on my innermost thigh, on my low belly, on my groin — and I'm dragged into the waking world by my own sleeping fingers, scratching my skin awake, blood under my nails.

During my decade of ballet dancing, there was always a strict appearance required for class: slicked back hair in a bun, pink slippers, black leotard, pink semi-sheer tights. As I entered adolescence, this uniform began to hug my body in a painful strangle, tender flesh squeezing into spandex, squishing out along the seams. I puzzled at the dark hair sprouting from my legs and underarms. These hairs weren't invited to ballet class, so I learned how to shave at the age of twelve. My best friend sat on the edge of the bathtub to offer instructions, her legs already hairless and moisturized, as I nicked my skin again and again, blood collecting in a crimson pool on the porcelain.

The hair fought back: in angry red dots and then bigger ones. I was told by the magazines it was just razor burn, a normal part of any woman's existence. Put some aloe gel on it. Try a bikini wax. But the lumps only grew in size, expanding across the continent of my body one angry welt at a time. My hips grew wide and my chest peaked into twin mountains. Cysts ranging from pea- to marble-sized pushed my skin into mounds on all the tender parts of my body, all the parts exposed by those pink ballet tights. Sometimes the angry bumps burst and wept, and I with them, unable to reconcile with the adult, bleeding body that I had been forced into so suddenly. I covered my wounds with foundation and skin-toned band-aids, pulling down the back of my leotard to hide my scars and scratch the itchy patches that burned like fire. I wore two or



three pairs of tights at a time to hide in the increased opacity. I scrubbed the stains out in the sink. I hoped that the girl behind me at barre didn't notice.

Some years after puberty struck me hardest, I was cast as a character in the dance studio's annual recital. I was to be the wardrobe that comes alive in *Beauty and the Beast*. My costume was a large cardboard box with arm holes, painted to look like an ornate piece of furniture with fabric appliques and gold gilding on the edges. Only my legs from below the knee and my arms below the elbow were free to move. Disappointment and relief: I was no princess in a pink tutu, but this box covered all the wounds and scars on my skin. My body was hidden; my body was safe. When it was time for my solo at the recital, I smiled with a red lipstick mouth into the stage lights. The audience laughed in the dark as I staggered across the stage, struggling to move my limbs bound by cardboard holes.

I was humiliated, but also free. No one had seen my skin. I was a box staggering around the stage and nothing more.

Fourteen years later and now I've been told that the angry lumps living on my skin have a name: Hidradenitis Suppurativa. A painful, chronic skin condition without a known cause or cure. I still can't find beauty in these red eruptions, but I can find a story: I left ballet almost twelve years ago and my skin is now untamable, my hair unruly and thick. I do not own red lipstick. I can no longer hear the audience laughing, and if they are still there in the dark, I do not care. I'll wear a box if I want to. Here is my skin, here are my wounds: it itches, it is painful, but it is mine.

Big Head





Where do you keep all your thoughts in that pretty little head? When all the space in your mind is taken over by worries and what ifs, here is a garden where you can put them to rest. The flowers are red as menstrual blood, lining the womb of the head, ready to expel worrisome thoughts that don't serve you. Hide your shames and secrets here, where they will fade and become buried in time. Rest your body on Big Head, and let her hold your pain for you. You'll have to take the chance that she might eat you alive.



Big Head, 2020
stoneware, underglazes, slips, glaze

Basket Case



a person or thing regarded as useless or unable to cope

but then who is a flower when the wind blows too strongly

functionally incapacitated

when the world is not built for love and self-knowing

*dysfunction from extreme nervousness, emotional distress,
or mental or physical overwork*

so the stories we want to tell
and the feelings we need to feel

*extremely nervous or anxious and is therefore unable to
organize their life*

we bury these next to the flower

helpless, impaired, or incapable of functioning normally

but they ooze to the topsoil of our skin
in hiccupping spurts
the truth

(Definitions quoted from Oxford Languages, Merriam-Webster
Dictionary, Cambridge Dictionary, Dictionary.com)

Basket Case, 2020
stoneware, porcelain, mason stains,
underglazes, slips, glaze

The Body List

accretion, anxiety	
beauty, body, bury	
caress, carve, cavities, confession, cute	
discomfort, distortion, domestic, drift	
embrace, empathy, empty	
fear, feminine, fingers, fullness	
genders, gesture, ghosts, guilt	
hands, hard, hauntings, hidden, hollows, homes, houses	
identity, illustration, impressions, imprints, intimacy	
jealousy	
layers, leftovers	
masks, memories, motherhood, movement	
narrative, necks, nostalgia	
pain, patterns, perception, performance	
queer, quench	
residue, repetition	
secretions, shadows, shame, slippery, soft, still, stories	
tears, tension	
unearthing	
vulnerability	
wanting, withheld, women	

Into the Void



Into the Void, 2021
stoneware, porcelain, mason
stains, underglaze, glaze

Why All the Pink?

Pink like the inside of your, baby
Pink behind all of the doors, crazy
Pink like the tongue that goes down, maybe
Pink like the paradise found
Pink when you're blushing inside, baby
Pink is the truth you can't hide, maybe
Pink like the folds of your brain, crazy
Pink as we all go insane...
Pink like the lips around your, maybe
Pink like the skin that's under, baby
Pink where it's deepest inside, crazy
Pink beyond forest and thighs
Pink like the secrets you hide, maybe
Pink like the lid of your eye, baby
Pink is where all of it starts, crazy
Pink like the halls of your heart...
Pink like the inside of your, baby (we're all just pink)
Pink like the walls and the doors, maybe (deep inside,
we're all just pink)
Pink like your fingers in my, maybe
Pink is the truth you can't hide
Pink like your tongue going round, baby
Pink like the sun going down, maybe
Pink like the holes in your heart, baby
Pink is my favorite part

(Lyrics from PYNK by Janelle Monae)



Discomforts



Hauntings

The quiet feeling between expectation and understanding, one foot in pleasure and the other in pain. A giggle bubbles to the surface, but you bite it down. There's a presence here, a memory you've halfway forgotten, casting a shadow onto the wall behind you. It presses down on your shoulders but you cannot touch it.

Who Were You Expecting?





Who Were You Expecting?, 2020
stoneware, underglaze, glaze

We are taught from a young age to identify gender binaries from minimal evidence. In ballet, girls wear pink tutus and leap into the arms of boys wearing black. There is no room on stage, no costume, left for anyone outside of these two roles. This figure challenges these preconceptions of gender identity. From one perspective a viewer might assume the figure is a woman with a mundane face, but from another side, the figure is discovered to be a vertical wall with a bizarre face and monstrous features. There is a transformation occurring in the viewing of the figure, from an object of desired feminization to an uncanny character. They seem to be saying, “Hey, I’m just an object sprung from the mind of my maker. To assume I even have a gender is absurd!”



Their hands are disconnected at the wrist, struggling to dig into their true nature, while hands of ambiguous origin hold them back from being understood. Or are they the figure’s own two hands in double, reaching through the void of space before them, looping back to support their own ambitions? These two pairs of disembodied hands reference the Italian literary fairytale, Penta of the Chopped Off Hands, in which a maiden cuts her hands off in order to reject the romantic advances of her brother, who admits that he is most attracted to her hands. She sends her amputated hands to him on a platter and tells him to enjoy his favorite part of her, and hopes her hands can bring him the pleasure she refuses to.

Two-Faced



Two-Faced, 2020
stoneware, underglaze, glaze

*I Said No /
You Heard Me*

When my no is small, or quiet, or unsure, this lady steps in, pushing aside doubts with her powerful shoulders. She reminds me: my no is good, my no is enough, my no is deserved. She says, “Say it again!” And I say, joyfully, “No!”



I Said No/You Heard Me, 2021
stoneware, underglazes,
slips, glazes

I'm Trying to Tell You



I'm Trying to Tell You, 2021
wood-fired stoneware, glaze

Uncomfortable Figurine



I carved you from an unshapely lump of clay, from my imagination. Your limbs became longer than anyone's and I went home to try to pose like you, twisting into an approximation of your impossible pose. I looked at these pictures of myself, so uncomfortable in my body, and I sculpted myself into you. I become a ghost of you and you become an impression of my discomfort. Beauty becomes discomfort becomes beauty.



Uncomfortable Figurine, 2021
stoneware, underglaze, glazes



Accretion



Obscurity

Materials, memories, associations, time, and labor accumulate in made objects. What can you see, and what remains buried beneath the facade? Can you see the strata, each layer of focus and distraction? Is the most important story the one you can see? You wonder about peeling back the layers of a painting, the glaze from a pot, the face from a mind to find what's obscured, forgotten, hidden.

A Letter to the Beach, A Stone in My Bed



A traumatic experience leaves behind a deep impression that the mind comes back to many times, even as the years pass by. No matter how much time passes, that memory's emotions will stubbornly force its way through to the present, disturbing a person like the pea stuck under the princess's mattress.

I wrote a letter to a memory that haunts me and placed it under a clay slab. I laid down on this slab of clay and traced the shape of my curled up body onto it. Each day after, I added another layer of material, alternating between clay, glaze chunks, slip, and sand from the same coast of the memory. After several weeks of adding layers, I sliced the slab into ribbons, revealing the physical strata I'd created alongside the remains of the buried letter. The shape of my body in the clay became indiscernible. When I fired these slices of layered clay, the paper letter burnt and disintegrated in the heat of the kiln, leaving only a small pile of ash behind.

Partly hung on the wall and partly laid out on the floor, the layers of material read as time and landscape. The letter-ash rests in a bowl next to what remains of the outline of my body, dislodged from my memory, made into something small and harmless.

*A Letter to the Beach,
A Stone in My Bed, 2021
stoneware, porcelain, mason stains,
oxides, beach sand, paper, ink*





Dread
❦
Delight

Earthly Delights *Mugs*





Earthly Delight Mugs, 2022
stoneware, porcelain, mason stains,
oxides, beach sand, paper, ink



Big Moody



Big Moody, 2021
stoneware, porcelain, mason
stains, underglaze, glaze



Self-Pleasure



She really didn't know how to do her makeup. She tried so many times, so many colors, but the eyeshadow and the blush and the foundation never suited her. It always left her feeling like a clown, like she had put on someone else's skin and couldn't wait to take it off, until one day she made a last-ditch effort with a new lipstick color and went on a first date but the man didn't even look at her face, just stared at her cleavage, and she thought Why do I even bother?

At that moment her face, the whole eyebrows-eyes-nose-philtrum-lips-mouth of it, popped right off the front of her head and floated up into the sky like a helium balloon. The date ran screaming from the patio table, knocking a glass of red wine onto the concrete; its crimson stain bloomed on the sidewalk. A cool breeze filled the woman's skull and she bit back a moan. She took a golden compact mirror from her bag and snapped it open.

Staring back was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen. She was bare-faced, no makeup in sight, and the inside of her head glimmered with viscera. It was her. She was a natural beauty!



Self-Pleasure, 2021
stoneware, underglazes

Pusillanimous Headdress



This wearable ceramic piece marks a drastic turn in my ceramics practice, and informed the direction for my thesis work. I made this headdress very quickly, in about a week, at the very end of my second-to-last semester. My sculptures up to that point had been visceral yet static, and I wanted to explore ways of activating ceramic form and space with my physical body. I also aimed to create an object that would make me laugh and bring me joy after completing the emotionally heavy, time-based piece, *A Letter to the Beach*, *A Stone in My Bed*. I needed levity and solace.



Pusillanimous Headdress, 2021
stoneware, underglaze, glazes, yarn





*What is
Hidden*

What is Hidden



I sat in the backseat of my great-grandpa’s ancient beige Buick. My mother sat in the passenger seat, my Pop Pop in the driver’s seat, and I watched the backs of their heads– one bald and liver-spotted, the other still covered in dark hair– bobbing with the pavement as the car pulled out of our driveway. The leather seats had been baking in the southern summer sun, and the backs of my thighs stuck and ripped away from them with a sound like velcro.

Pop Pop was my mother’s grandfather. His belly was round and dense in opposition to his spindly limbs. He told me that he had eaten a watermelon seed years before I was born, and since then the watermelon had grown big and round inside his stomach. He came over for spaghetti dinner on Sunday nights and had a laugh that sounded like Santa Claus. He and my mother told me brief stories about her childhood: going to the Russian Orthodox church to have a basket of Easter foods blessed by the priest, making pysanky by drawing intricate wax designs on eggs and then poking a hole to blow out the insides, going on vacation to Niagara Falls with Great-Grandma Mary. Whenever I asked more questions about our heritage, I was met with silence.

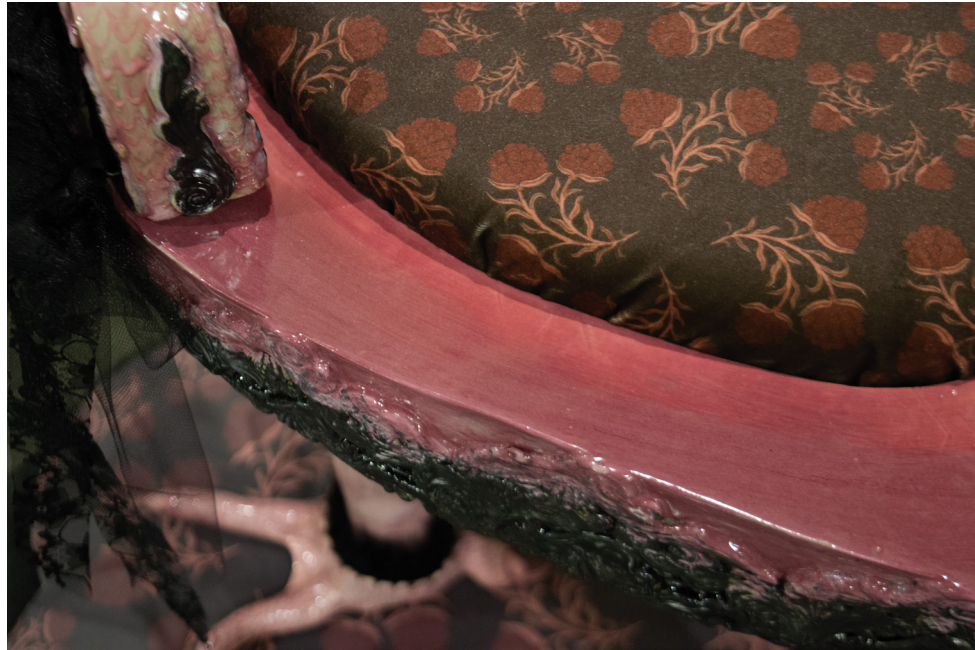
In the car on that hot and sticky day, I listened to Pop Pop talk with my mother: “... but your father’s biological father...” My mother quickly hushed him, put a hand on his arm. But I’d heard a word I didn’t know, and my mind got stuck on it.

As their conversation moved on, I kept repeating biological, biological in my head, willing myself to remember the word until I got home and could look it up in the dictionary. The way my mother had nearly jumped, glanced back at me over her shoulder. How she had put her hand on Pop Pop’s arm so firmly and he had gone quiet so quickly. Even as a young child I understood the gravity of overhearing those few words. I had heard something I was never supposed to know, and I yearned to understand it.

I don’t know if it was hours or years later, but I eventually comprehended what I had heard in the car that day. As I grew older, my imagination ran wild with questions about my biological great-grandfather: Was he a Russian celebrity? Was he a baseball player? Was he still alive? Had he loved Great-Grandma Mary? Why did he leave? And why did his existence feel like a heavy blanket weighing down on my Mom’s side of the family? Why would no one speak about it or tell me more about Mary?

During this time, my mother was constantly redecorating our home. Bare bedroom walls became green or pink or blue, scuffs





and nicks in the house spackled and painted over. She wiped the wet paint back and forth with oiled rags to create faux wallpaper textures, concealing the walls' stories behind a facade. My father sewed curtains and pillowcases which she arranged around the house to hide the frames of our windows and old fabric pillows. She also brought me to dance lessons, where I was dressed in spandex and sequins and ribbons and studied my moving body in wall-to-wall mirrors and stood in the back corner of the room. When I began dancing en pointe at thirteen years old, I learned how to smile while my toes cracked and bled under a pink satin shoe. I learned to hide my emotions, my sexuality, and later, my gender identity. I learned that hiding was an innate part of being born a woman in my family.

I think I tried, once, to ask my mother about her family and her biological grandfather. We sat at the kitchen table, and I asked, and her face went dark. The air felt suddenly chilled, like a storm might roll straight into the house from the open porch door. I want to say that she said something like, "We don't talk about that," or "I don't know what you mean," but the truth is that I don't remember what she said. I only remember that I never tried asking my questions aloud again.

In the silence of unknowing, this thing that I was never meant to know grew bigger and bigger inside of me, a secret watermelon seed that I had accidentally swallowed. The roots of the watermelon in my belly are long and reach back to my mother, her grandmother, and to all the women who came before us, with all our unspoken shames and desires tangling us together. Shame is an heirloom that was passed down to me.





For my thesis installation, I wanted to create a space to play and reclaim my identity in the face of transgenerational shame. I wanted a domestic space where I could imagine the women who came before me and the stories they might want to tell. A place to imagine who they loved and what their secret desires might have been. A place where I could try to pick them out of the reflection of my face behind a costume. A place to celebrate the multitudinous nature of myself and the people who came before me.

Could I make this space by combining my imaginings of my grandmothers with pieces of my heritage? Could I preserve the fragile history of these women and their secrets within domestic craft objects? Would they want to come meet me if I set the stage for them?

Starting with the small bits of information I've gleaned from my mom's side of the family, I researched Slavic folktales and Russian domestic crafts to inspire a backstage "dressing room" where I hope my grandmothers' ghosts might like to come play dress up with me. There are five distinct masks hanging on the wall: Great-Grandmother Leshy (protector of the forest), Grandmother Sirin (harbinger of both fortune and death), Mother Kikimora (emotionally fickle domestic house spirit), Daughter Rusalka (water spirit of fertility and nourishment), and Sister Baiyun (charismatic storytelling cat). Throughout the course of history and folklore, each of these creatures has been presented as good and evil, feminine and masculine, beautiful and grotesque. These characters fluctuate alongside my comprehension of myself and my understanding of my family's histories. I combined these personas with references from my experiences in dance (over-ornamentation, pink and black colors, tulle and ribbon) to transition them from the realm of established mythology into the world I've imagined for my great-grandmother and other ancestors.

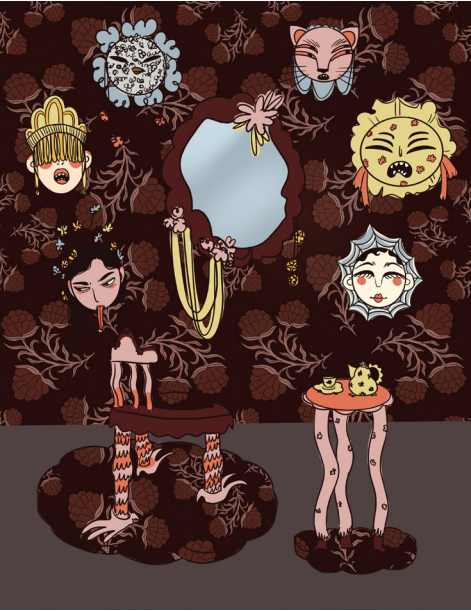
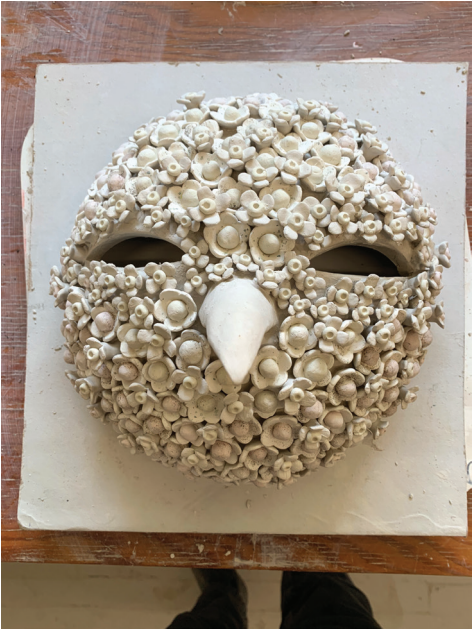
I believe masks have a twofold purpose: to conceal, and to free. Not only does a mask hide the wearer, but it can also engender the expression of a truer self from underneath its protective shield. Through the concealment of the expected self, a mask can make room for the exploration of the true self. Behind a mask, one can tell secrets and stories without the pressures of generational shame or gendered roles.

So I hang these mythological masks on the wall as stand-ins for my many unknown grandmothers. A chair, table, and tea set wait patiently for their arrival, while a mirror observes the empty scene, ready to capture the truths of the women who will sit before it.



*Behind the
Curtain*

Process



Playlist

I want to commemorate the time I spent working towards this thesis with a playlist of all the songs that kept me company in the studio. This playlist acts as a time capsule of these past two years during the production of *What Is Hidden*.



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What is Hidden

Works by Kalee Calhoun; presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Ceramics department of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island, 2022.

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Guest Critic

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