

# IMPROVISED STRUCTURES:

## RECENT SCULPTURAL WORKS BY NICOLAS DARCOUNT

February 13 through April 23, 2023



Hillstrom Museum of Art



ABOVE: **Needless to Say**, 2022, red stoneware, glaze, 23 x 22 x 10 inches

ON THE COVER: **Longacress Fields**, 2021, red stoneware, underglaze, glaze, 16 x 18 x 2 1/2 inches

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# IMPROVISED STRUCTURES

## DIRECTOR'S NOTES

The Hillstrom Museum of Art is pleased to present *Improvised Structures: Recent Sculptural Works by Nicolas Darcourt*. Since 2012, Darcourt has taught ceramics at Gustavus Adolphus College in the Art and Art History Department, and he serves as the studio and visual arts programs manager for the department.

*Improvised Structures* is Darcourt's first solo exhibit at the Museum, although he has shown works here before. He was one of 40 artists included in the Museum's 2006 *Clay Bodies by Students Bodies*, a juried ceramics exhibition for graduate and undergraduate students from Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin. His architectural work titled *Stacked* (2005) was selected from among the 56 pieces on view to receive one of two top prizes.

An interest in architectural imagery also informs Darcourt's recent works in this exhibit, all of which date from 2020 through this year. As noted in his Artist

Statement, architectural ornament is a focus of his current work: "By focusing on a mix of architectural ornament, exposed layers or earth, engineered forms, monument, and manufactured byproduct, the accumulations I create express abstract notions of the confluence of memory, geography, and society."

The Museum is grateful to Darcourt for sharing his intricate yet monumental works that partake of both the elegance of fine decorative arts from the past and the rough, earthy nature of his clay medium. We are also grateful for him sharing his thoughts on his works, not only in statements accompanying the exhibit but also in an Artist Talk at the opening reception.

Donald Myers  
Director  
Hillstrom Museum of Art

## ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Nicolas Darcourt was born in Lima, Peru, and was raised in Appleton, Wisconsin.

Growing up with divorced parents and families in different hemispheres of the globe created for him a situation of always comparing cultures, and needing to imagine great distances to understand the everyday. He discovered his connection to clay and the ceramic process at a young age, and can remember a profound aesthetic experience working with the material when he was 10 years old. Regarding his continued relationship with the material and process, he has written, "Clay has the ability to be a very personal, yet permanent material. It can record a fingerprint, then transform it to something stonelike. Ceramics represents culture and civilization. It's what we have in common, a subconscious equalizer."

Darcourt received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Northern Michigan University, and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, with a Minor in Art History. After obtaining his education, he was a resident artist at the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts.

Darcourt's ceramic work has been shown nationally and internationally, and is included in a number of

private collections. He has exhibited his work in solo, two-person, and group exhibitions in regional art centers such as the Minnetonka Center for the Arts, in Minnesota; the Phipps Center for the Arts in Hudson, Wisconsin; and the Carnegie Art Center in Mankato, Minnesota. Darcourt has also exhibited in local and national juried group exhibitions at such venues as the Rosalux Gallery in Minneapolis; the Workhouse Art Center in Lorton, Virginia; the LH Horton Jr. Gallery at San Joaquin College in Stockton, California; the Mulvane Art Museum in Topeka, Kansas; and the Kirkland Arts Center in Kirkland, Washington.

He has received a McKnight Artist Fellowship and a Minnesota State Arts Board Artist Initiative Grant. He has taught ceramics at Minnesota State University, Moorhead, and the Regis Center for Art at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Currently he is a Continuing Assistant Professor in the Art and Art History Department at Gustavus Adolphus College. He and his wife and son live in Minnetonka, Minnesota, where he has a home studio.

# Recent Sculptural Works by Nicolas Darcourt

## ARTIST STATEMENT

Clay, and the ceramic process, allows me to make a permanent record of what filters into my daily experience. A material that is immediately responsive to my fingertips, or to a surface of a mold, lends itself well to capturing and rendering visual information from the world that surrounds me. Through the use of press molds, I can make multiple transfers from real objects, and combine them with simple hand-built shapes. Translating my ideas into clay of warm terra cotta hues speaks of timelessness. Clay is a material that is both intimately connected to our humanity and can be made to take any form. As a companion to society, I feel it owns a historicity like almost none other.

I am committed to using clay and the ceramic process as a means of artistic exploration. This is a purposeful step away from the creative path of craft, and instead, a step toward artistic expression through the lens of sculpture. My artistic process combines multiple parts, pieces, and fragments into sculptural forms. By focusing on a mix of architectural ornament, exposed layers of earth, engineered forms, monument, and manufactured byproduct, the accumulations I create express abstract notions of the confluence of memory, geography, and society.

An important theme in my work is the human condition, specifically a psychological relationship to accumulation. I view the world around me as a landscape of accumulating visual information constructed of sporadic cultural significance; ambiguity defined by brief moments of clarity. I am fascinated by how, as decades pass, the new and old overlap and fold into each other. All of the information we see in the present also contains something of the past, the process behind the viewable surface. Both natural and human made, we are surrounded by vast accumulation, fragmentation, and deep repetition. My work attempts to express this viewed reality, not from a place of judgement, but rather a place of reflection and rumination.

Familiar in specificity yet ambiguous as a whole, my work references the actions of suspended perception and fluid interpretation. Therefore, a secondary and related theme in my work is the phenomenology of perception by the viewer. I ask my viewer: how does one interpret or make sense of the whole when the multitude of parts are ambiguous, fragmented, and improvised? That is, can one assemble a sense of meaning amongst the accumulated parts, and make sense of the larger object which is comprised of the accumulated parts? Or does one always mutually exclude the other? My goal is that there never is a concrete interpretation of combining what is recognizable in the work; rather, new conclusions are constantly formed and are built from what was recognized in the past.

# IMPROVISED STRUCTURES

## The Grand Object

My approach to applying these ideas to specific forms has been shifting over the last few years. With earlier works, I was using this technique of combining fragmented and ambiguous parts into pure forms such as circular enclosures or nonrepresentational wall pieces. However, more recently I have been making reference in my work to nineteenth-century Western ornamentation, such as loose interpretations of decorative objects found in garniture sets (historically, groupings of similarly designed and decoratively ornate objects, often made of porcelain or gilded metal and displayed in places of domestic importance such as on a mantelpiece). This as an attempt to offer a reference of recognizable symbols from Western historical society, while simultaneously deconstructing their meaning.

This is an attempt to step outside of the cultural landscape I have been presented with and offer opportunities to the viewer to question the more recognizable objects and themes from Western culture. This is a purposeful deconstructing of these icons, which are typically associated with wealth, power, and high culture, and rebuilding them in a manner which questions their status. Instead, mixed, arbitrary, and precarious arrangements of parts begin to be discerned. The typical signifiers quickly dissolve, and the viewer is left with a challenge to perceive and interpret these objects in a traditional sense. In this process, I offer a more personal, and perhaps an anti-heroic, communication of stories, perspectives, successes, and potential failures. The Grand Object becomes recontextualized with mixes of nonrepresentational shapes, ambiguous shape relationships, and fragmentation.

My fascination with the Garniture Set is based in the art historical context of the Neo-Classical period of the nineteenth century. As witnessed in the work from the atelier of French decorative sculptor and designer James Pradier (1790-1852), the Neo-Classical was an aesthetic confluence of classical architectural motifs with a latent prevalence for rococo exuberance. Further, in my opinion, this was the first time that Western design significantly overlapped itself. And in so doing, became self-referential and practiced adding a new layer to what was already known. Or possibly, a first step toward the phenomena of accumulating visual information.

## Tableaux as Non-Narrative

Most recently, I have started to explore a thread with my studio process which uses high relief and the archetype of the Tableaux, a French nineteenth century combination of three-dimensional objects and figures that imply a scene or a moment in narration. This framework is exciting to me because of the potential to combine press-molded and hand-built shapes in ways which suggest non-narration. Attempts in this direction have included flat wall reliefs with repeated press-molded fragments and, most recently, an attempt to turn this process into free-standing three-dimensional reliefs. Considering these reliefs off of the wall as three-dimensional sculptural objects has been a big shift in the momentum and overall style of the work.

I have also made the conscious choice to leave the backside of these three-dimensional reliefs open and unfinished to reveal interior areas of the positive shapes from the front. This is an important step for two reasons. First, it helps to dissolve a viewer's awareness of what each mold or object represents, because of the shift when viewed from the back, thereby helping to suspend recognition. This step also helps express my ideas of how I view the accumulation of the information which surrounds us. It shows the past, the process behind the viewable surface. And this information is just as important to the composition as the front.

In the Tableaux Series, the typical narrative signifiers quickly dissolve, and information becomes re-contextualized with mixes of nonrepresentational shapes, ambiguous shape relationships, and fragmentation. The separate works read as both a cross section of layered societal detritus, as well as an attempt at organized narrative. Conclusions cannot help but become purely subjective, and the shifting meaning only exists because there is someone attempting to interpret it.

Nicolas Darcourt

# Recent Sculptural Works by Nicolas Darcourt

## GARNITURE SET



*Improvised Ornamentation*, 2020

Stoneware, red stoneware, underglaze, glaze, 28 inches height, width and depth variable

*Myron and Virginia Pose for a Photo in November Diptych*, 2022

Stoneware, red stoneware, underglaze, glaze, wood, 25 inches height, width and depth variable (work not illustrated)

## IMPROVISED STRUCTURES

### OBJECTS OF GARNITURE



***Diverging Narratives I***, 2021  
Red stoneware, underglaze, glaze, 15 x 9 x 5 inches



***Diverging Narratives II***, 2021  
Red stoneware, underglaze, glaze, 15 x 10 x 6 inches

## Recent Sculptural Works by Nicolas Darcourt



***Diverging Narratives III***, 2021

Red stoneware, underglaze, glaze, 15 x 10 x 6 inches

## IMPROVISED STRUCTURES

### OBJECTS OF GARNITURE



*Ornamental Enclosure I*, 2022

Red stoneware, underglaze, glaze, 14 x 14 x 10 inches



*Ornamental Enclosure II*, 2022

Red stoneware, underglaze, glaze, 13 x 11 x 8 inches

## Recent Sculptural Works by Nicolas Darcourt



*Ornamental Enclosure III*, 2022

Red stoneware, underglaze, glaze, 12 x 10 x 8 inches

## IMPROVISED STRUCTURES

### WALL TABLEAUX SERIES



*The Chemical Composition of Gold*, 2021

Red stoneware, underglaze, glaze, 12 x 20 x 2 1/2 inches

## Recent Sculptural Works by Nicolas Darcourt



***Layered Memory***, 2021

Red stoneware, underglaze, glaze, 12 x 21 x 3 1/2 inches



***Ruminations on Unknowing***, 2021

Red stoneware, underglaze, glaze, 13 x 20 x 2 1/2 inches

## IMPROVISED STRUCTURES

### WALL TABLEAUX SERIES



***Longacress Fields***, 2021

Red stoneware, underglaze, glaze, 16 x 18 x 2 1/2 inches

## Recent Sculptural Works by Nicolas Darcourt



***Singing Logic***, 2021

Red stoneware, underglaze, glaze, 16 x 17 x 3 1/2 inches

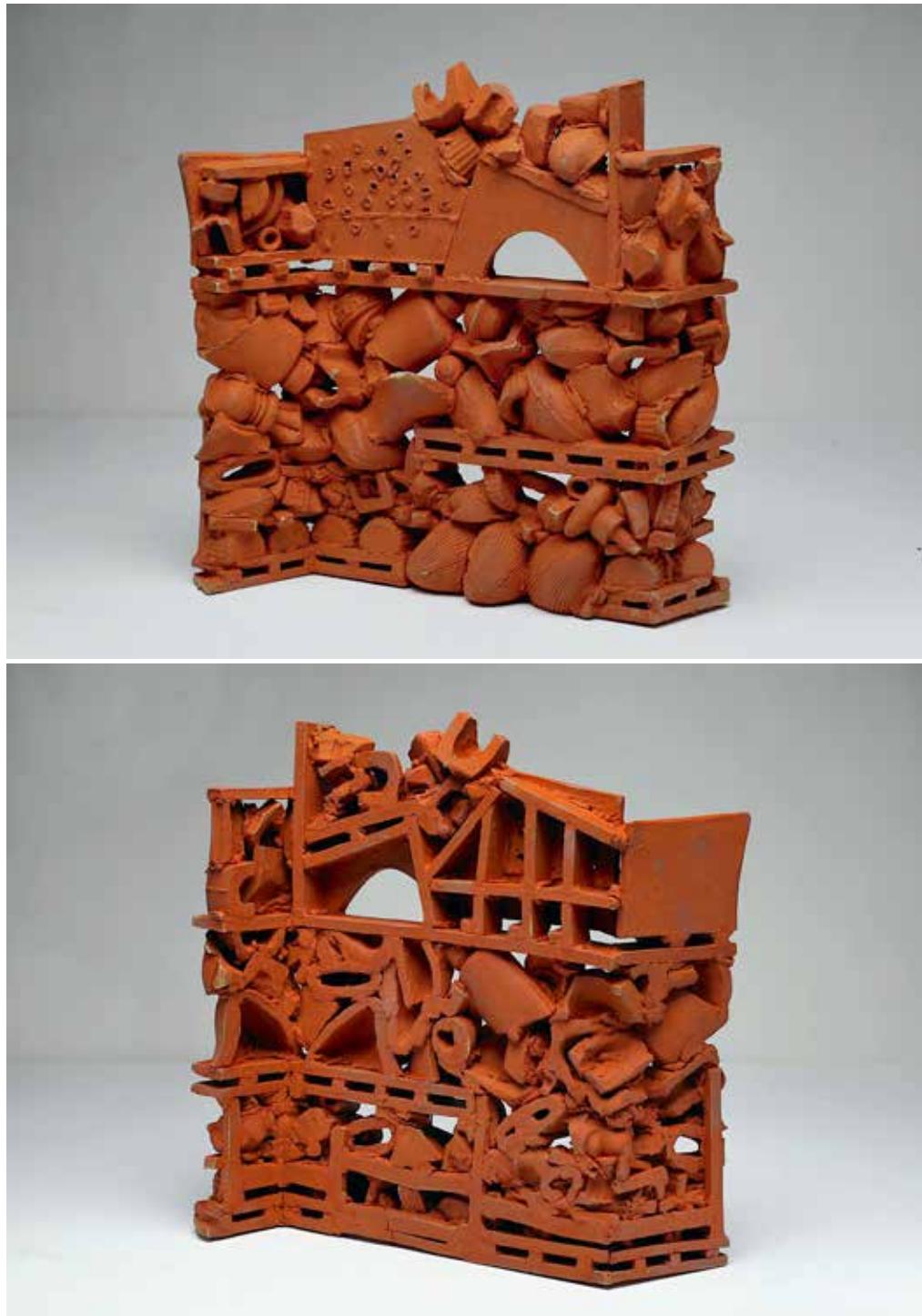
## IMPROVISED STRUCTURES

### TABLEAUX RELIEF SERIES



***The Birds of Agreement***, 2021  
Red stoneware, 18 x 16 x 7 inches

## Recent Sculptural Works by Nicolas Darcourt

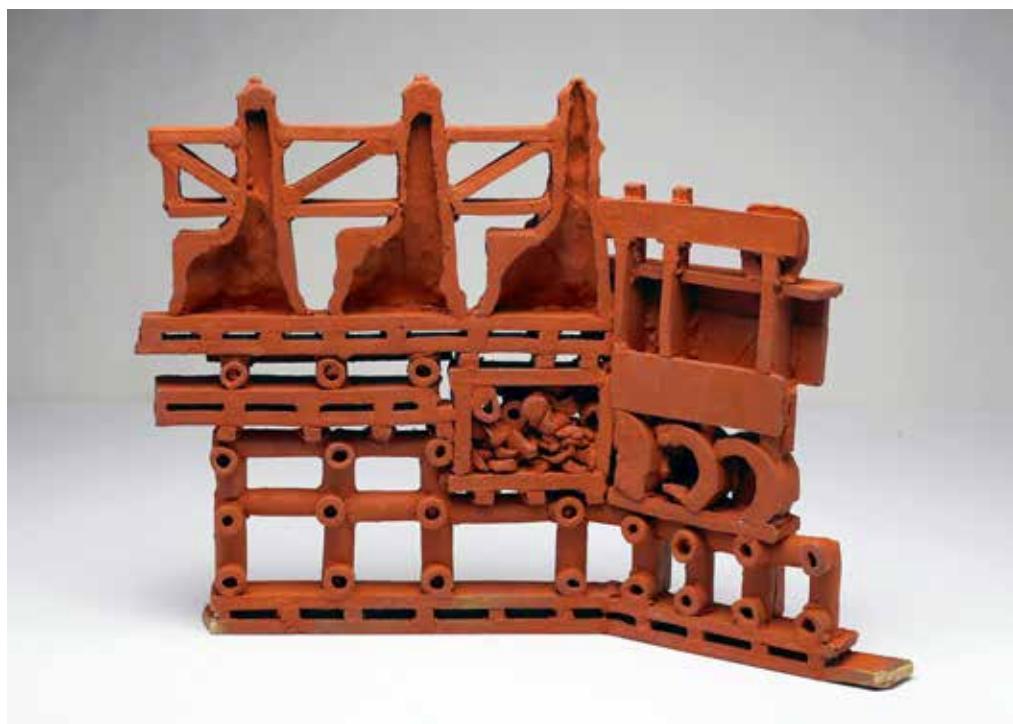


***Accumulated Perspectives***, 2021

Red stoneware, 16 x 17 x 7 inches

## IMPROVISED STRUCTURES

### TABLEAUX RELIEF SERIES



*I Need an Incantation*, 2021  
Red stoneware, 15 x 16 x 7 inches

## Recent Sculptural Works by Nicolas Darcourt



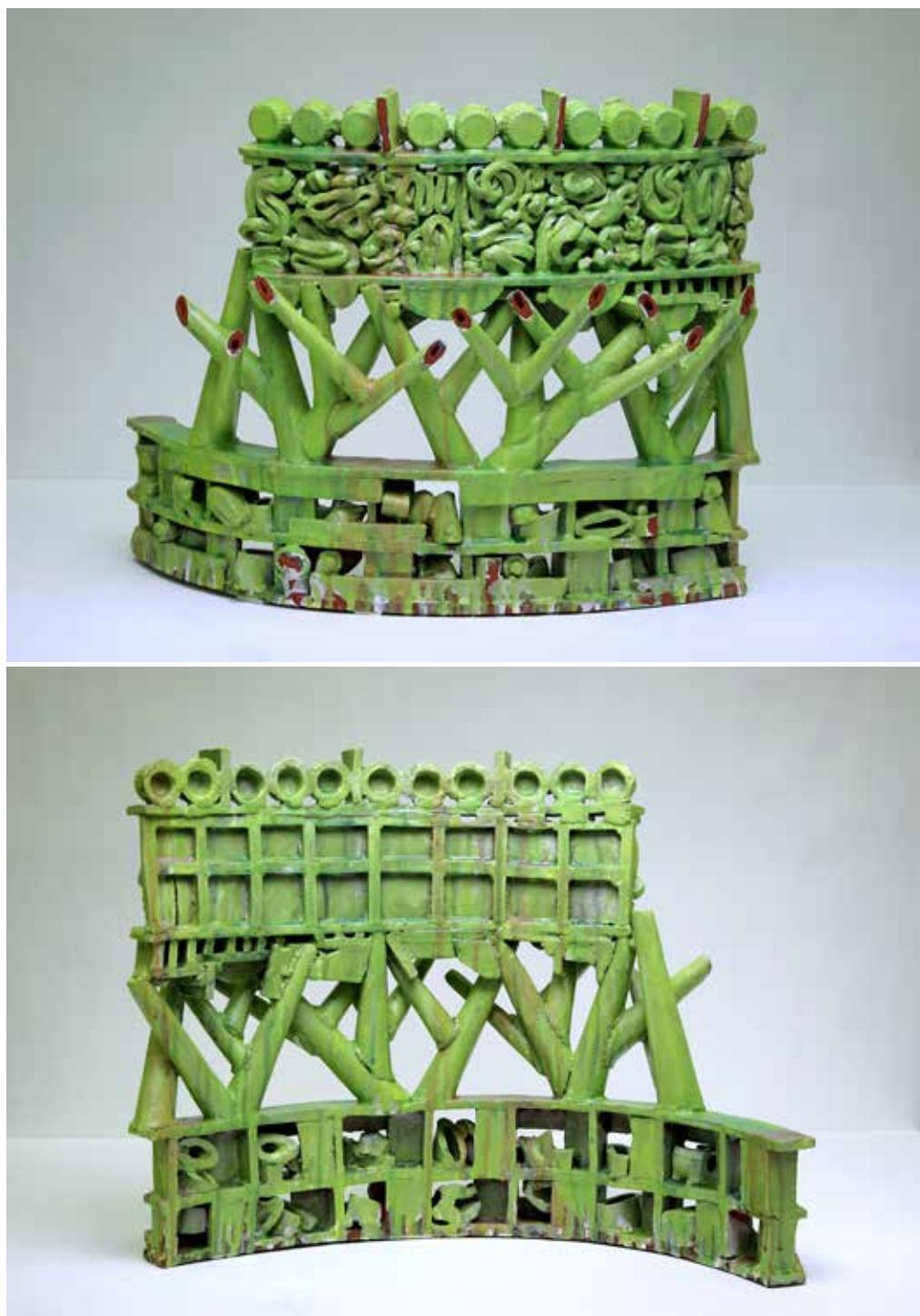
***Needless to Say***, 2022

Red stoneware, glaze, 23 x 22 x 10 inches



## IMPROVISED STRUCTURES

### TABLEAUX RELIEF SERIES



***Hawthorne Ridge***, 2023

Red stoneware, underglaze, glaze, 24 x 25 x 10 inches

## Recent Sculptural Works by Nicolas Darcourt



***Wine Dark Sea***, 2023

Red stoneware, underglaze, glaze, 25 x 23 x 10 inches

## IMPROVISED STRUCTURES

### SMALL SCALE STUDIES



**Scatter**, 2022  
Red stoneware, 5 x 8 x 1 inches



**Moonscape**, 2022  
Red stoneware, glaze, 5 x 8 x 1 inches

## Recent Sculptural Works by Nicolas Darcourt



**Modernist**, 2022  
Red stoneware, 5 x 8 x 1 inches



**Reach**, 2022  
Red stoneware, glaze, 5 x 8 x 1 inches



*Diverging Narratives III*, 2021, red stoneware, underglaze, glaze, 15 x 10 x 6 inches



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