

My work this semester departs from reflecting upon a question from last semester, “why did you put your work on the plinths?” On one hand, it seemed obvious why I would put my ceramic vessels on plinths (Fig.1), but being asked this question, it became interesting to me how, as a student in the school, that there is a kind of expectation to use (given their abundance in certain locations to be checked out), but also to not use the plinth (Fig. 2). There is a notion of futility in considering this question, which I became interested in expressing formally. The question that I am asking with my work is: what happens when the object and plinth are both extensions of each other?



(Fig. 1. Installation of work, December 2020)



(Fig. 2. Student Exhibition, March 2021)

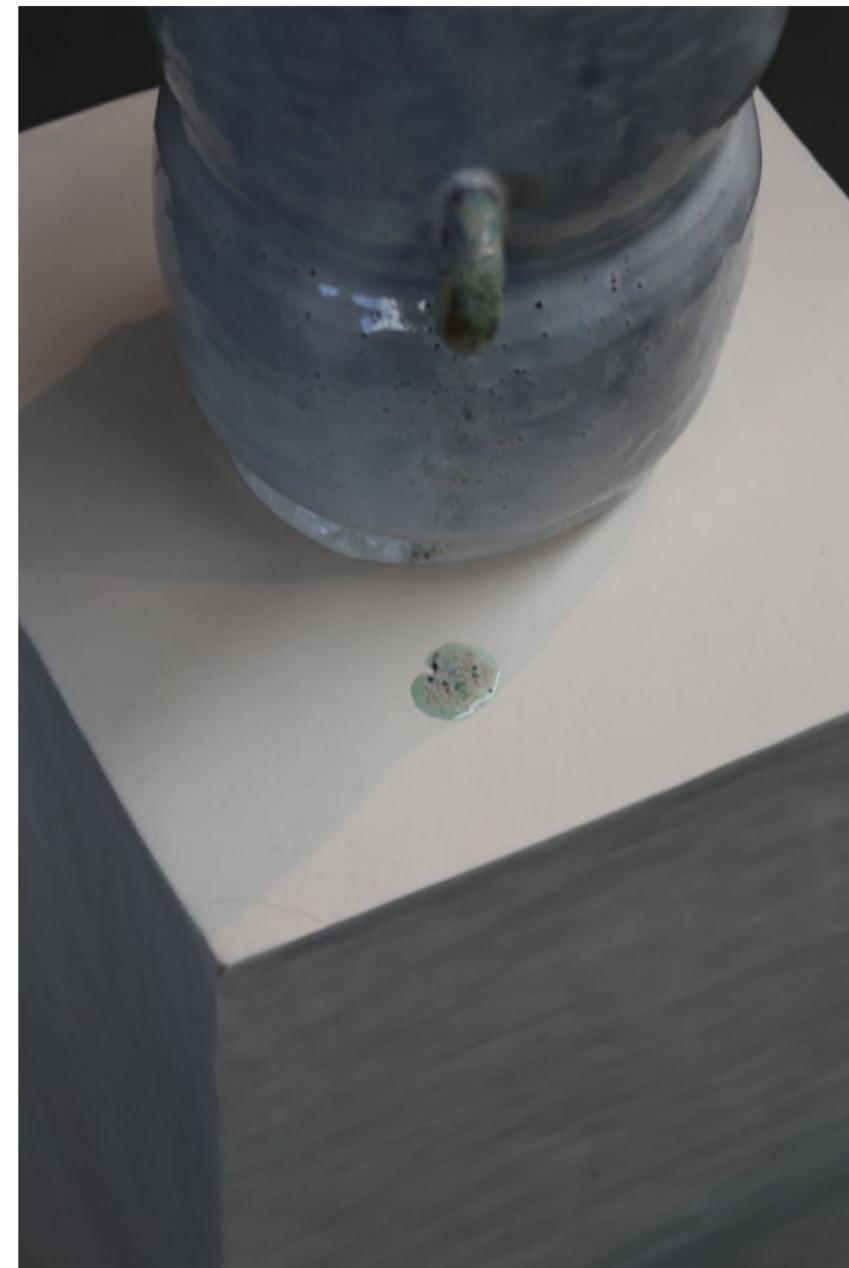
When thinking about my own familiarity with plinths and observations of their relationships with objects and architectural space, I noticed the practice of extraction and consumption of the culture of “other” extending to the connection between historical (and present) display of artifacts (Fig. 3) and contemporary display and commodification of pottery as both art and craft. Thus, My work serves as material investigation into the relationships between ceramic vessels to their spatial and political occupancies. Through my observations, the dominant cultural narrative in institutional spaces takes the form of the plinth as a direct ligament between object and architecture. The role and form of the plinth is significant in its indication of possession and access by enforcing the identity of “other” through hypervisible displays of objects while seemingly invisible itself through its minimalist appearance and absence in materiality.



(Fig. 3. Mini plinth inside a cabinet at the British Museum, September 2019)

Ceramic art and pottery has been allowed a huge shift from being categorically artisanal since before the 19th century Arts and Craft movement to its contemporary acceptance “back” into the fine art world (Garth Clark speaks of a metaphorical place of exile for 150 years and what he described as “two years that have changed ceramics forever” in a commentary from 2015). Now as fine art objects, ceramic work often (though not always) uses the plinth to position and assert its presence in institutional spaces (or conform to it, if its original place is arguably craft); implying possible past, future, and parallel lives of these objects outside of the museum and gallery context. As in the case of the display of artifacts, the plinth justifies the removal of the object from its function, history, culture, and context (rendering these aspects of the object invisible) – for as long as it sits on the plinth – by reciprocating with hypervisibility to an audience.

My work consists of a number of “vessel on plinth” objects which I’ve decided to call Vessel-vessels. As the name suggests, my work is not about the plinth; rather, I’m interested in the (question of) temporality of the object-on-plinth relationship, which might also inform how transitory aspects of the process can become haptic and how the object-audience-architecture dynamic can be spatially relatable. The duration of its use varies, but the white-box-plinth made for the object – and importantly, any object – can imply an eventual (thought not always fulfilled) end to possession, access, and display. My series of Vessel-vessels takes advantage of the material and temporal ambiguities presented by the plinth through my making it out of clay as an extension of the vessel, consequently subjecting both components to the same passage of time and equal expenditure of energy-work (mine and the kiln’s), and finally imposing a permanence and hypervisibility on the object-plinth relationship (Fig. 4).



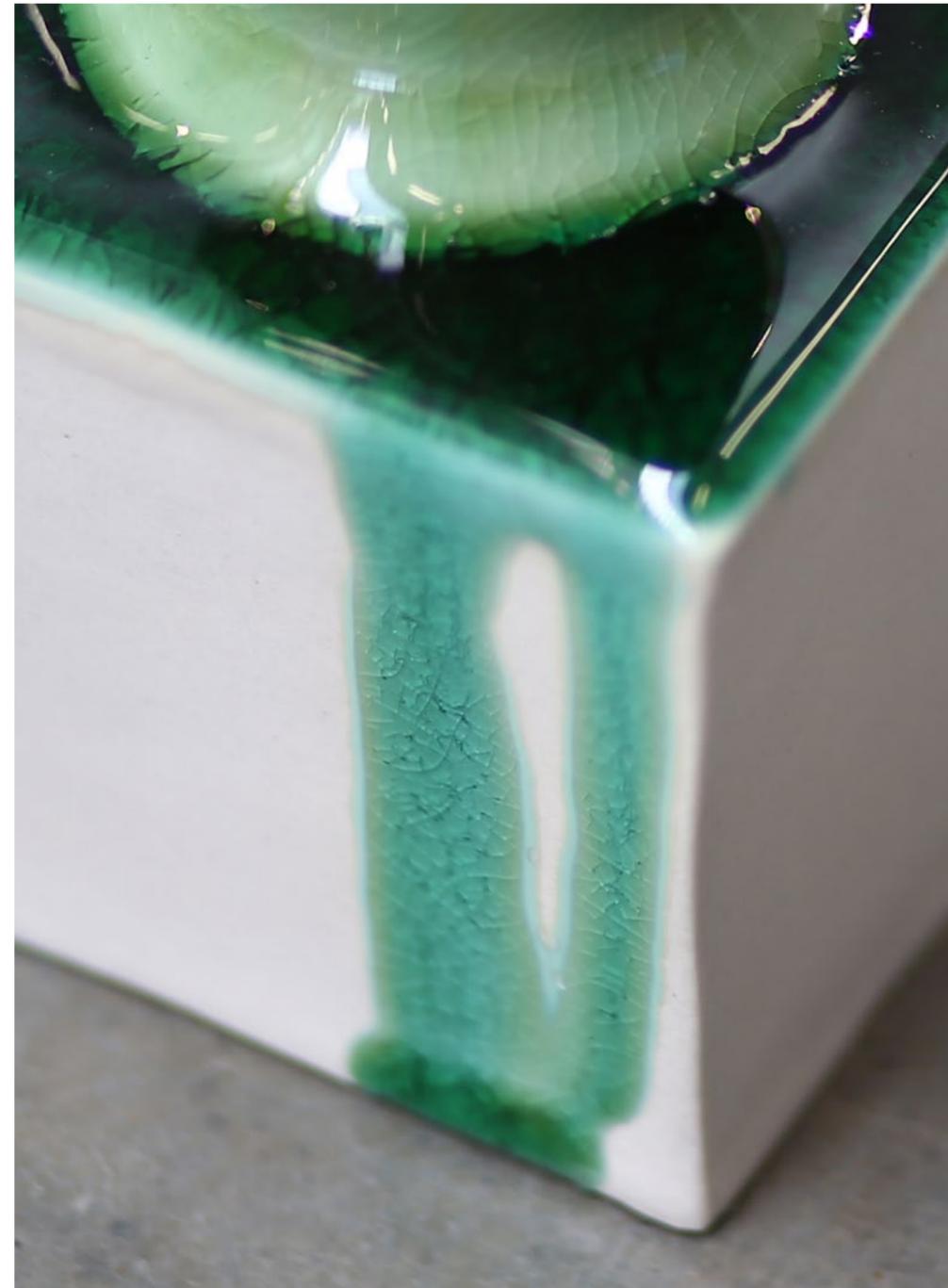
(Fig. 4. Evidence of the materiality and process of the plinth experienced through the glaze, April 2021)

Through an act of refusing the status-quo “as both an act of protest and a generative process of renewal”, which Clare Gormley in *“What Does It Mean (Not) To Be Seen? Representation and Resistance in Contemporary American Art”* described as being accomplished through modes of opacity, liquidity, and rupture, my process is ironic in that it simultaneously allows and denies the plinth’s desired relationship to the object. Temporality becomes fossilised into perpetuity (opacity) and conformity can become an exercise of protest (I wonder, where is the power to possess, without agency to relinquish?). Additionally, the plinth’s position is to hold the vessel, and through the act of holding, it also becomes a vessel (I define this as liquidity). The vessel, being held, is a vessel within a vessel. Conceptually, physically, and materially, the plinth and the vessel are one, thus blurring the boundaries between hyper/in/visibility.

Through this body of work that span a varied scale, I am also trying to make sense of the in/visibility of the glaze substance as well as mediating bodily experience within an immediate architectural space. The glaze transcends a traditional place of visibility to that of hypervisibility through an emphasis on its physical material. Not only is it a crucial indicator of the otherwise immaterial object-plinth relationship, it also literally has the potential to rupture it. I am interested in the potential for the glaze’s material substance to reveal its dimensionality beyond surface decoration, as both a physical measurement of temporal process and an invariable manifestation of the object-plinth relationship itself. The smaller sculptures use crystalline glazes (Fig. 5), which can grow impressive crystals through specific firing schedules but are also known to run during the process. (Traditionally, a crystalline vessel would sit on top of a detachable ringed-foot during the firing process, then broken off to remove excess glaze.) These two properties of the glaze lend conceptually and materially to my work; the aesthetics and formation of crystals make visible the consumption of time and energy, and the pooling or dripping of the glaze (Fig. 6) reveals the plinth’s materiality distinctly as neither absent, neutral, nor non-political.



(Fig. 5. Crystal formation, April 2021)



(Fig. 6. Pooling and dripping of glaze, April 2021)

The technical process of the diminutive sculptures differs to their larger counterparts and together they are conducive to complementary expressions. The larger sculptures are subjected to elevated material constraints due to its increased scale. The scientific relationship between substance and form is comparably more precarious, thus requiring alternative strategies in their construction and completion. Gravity’s effect on these sculptures are amplified; a rough pillar was coil-built inside each plinth in order to support the top slab and vessel before the bisque firing. To ensure the structural integrity of the sculptures, glaze firing was at a lower temperature than for the smaller pieces, hence I used low fire glazes to achieve the effect of pooling (Fig. 7).



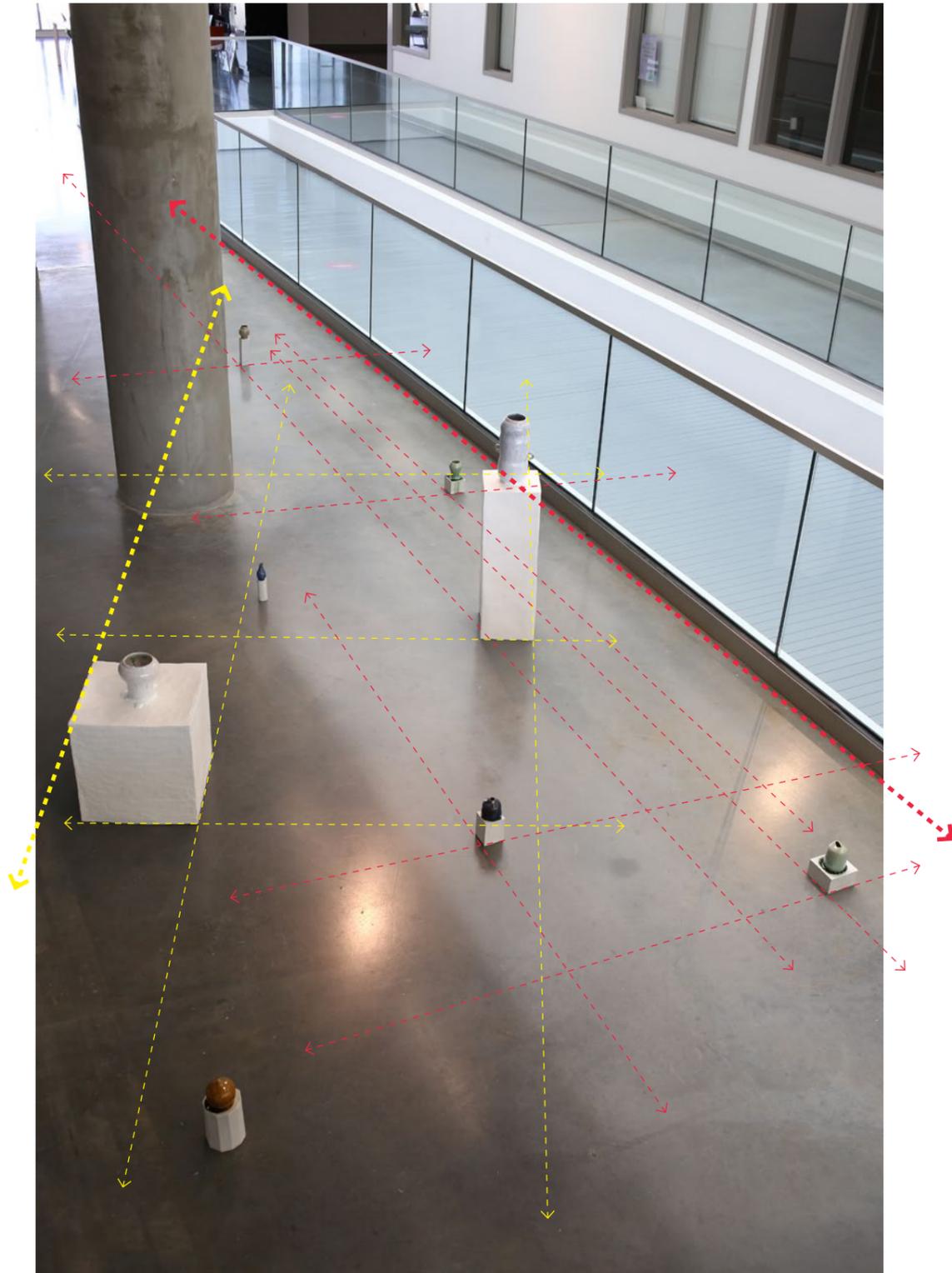
(Fig. 7. Pooling of low-fire glaze, April 2021)

In the presentation of my work, I installed the collection of sculptures in a peculiar place within the school: on the third floor where two sets of gridlines of the building meet at an angle, which forms a triangular floorspace between columns and balustraded opening to the floor below (Fig. 8). This allowed me to configure my sculptures in alignment within a junction between two imaginary cartesian spaces (defining the architecture of this institution) which then makes them visible. Except for two sculptures

(which have cylindrical and decagonal bases), the bases of my work are orthogonal and thus indicative to being oriented to one of two cartesian planes (Fig. 9), with the two larger sculptures aligned to the column gridlines, and the smaller sculptures aligned to the floor opening gridlines (which is also the primary gridlines of the building, hence my decision for the mass of the work be in this alignment). By emphasising the configuration of the architectural space through an orientational overlap within the navigation of my work, I am attempting to generate a shift in the visibility of connection between object and object, to object and architecture. In addition to the making of both large and small plinths, the experience of the installation aims to refuse a normative experience through my attempts at introducing nuanced absurdities to in/visible political relationships between body, object, and architecture.



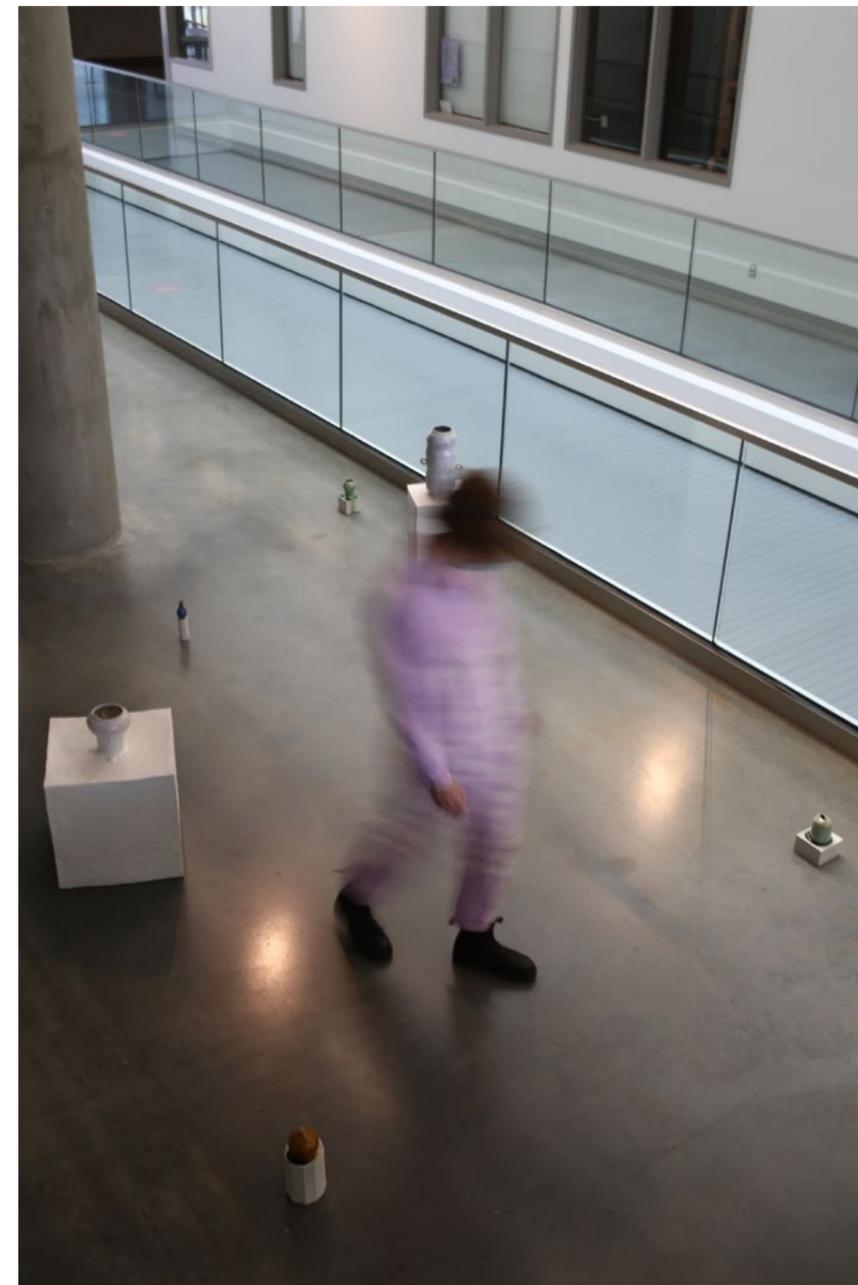
(Fig. 8. Installation of work, April 2021)



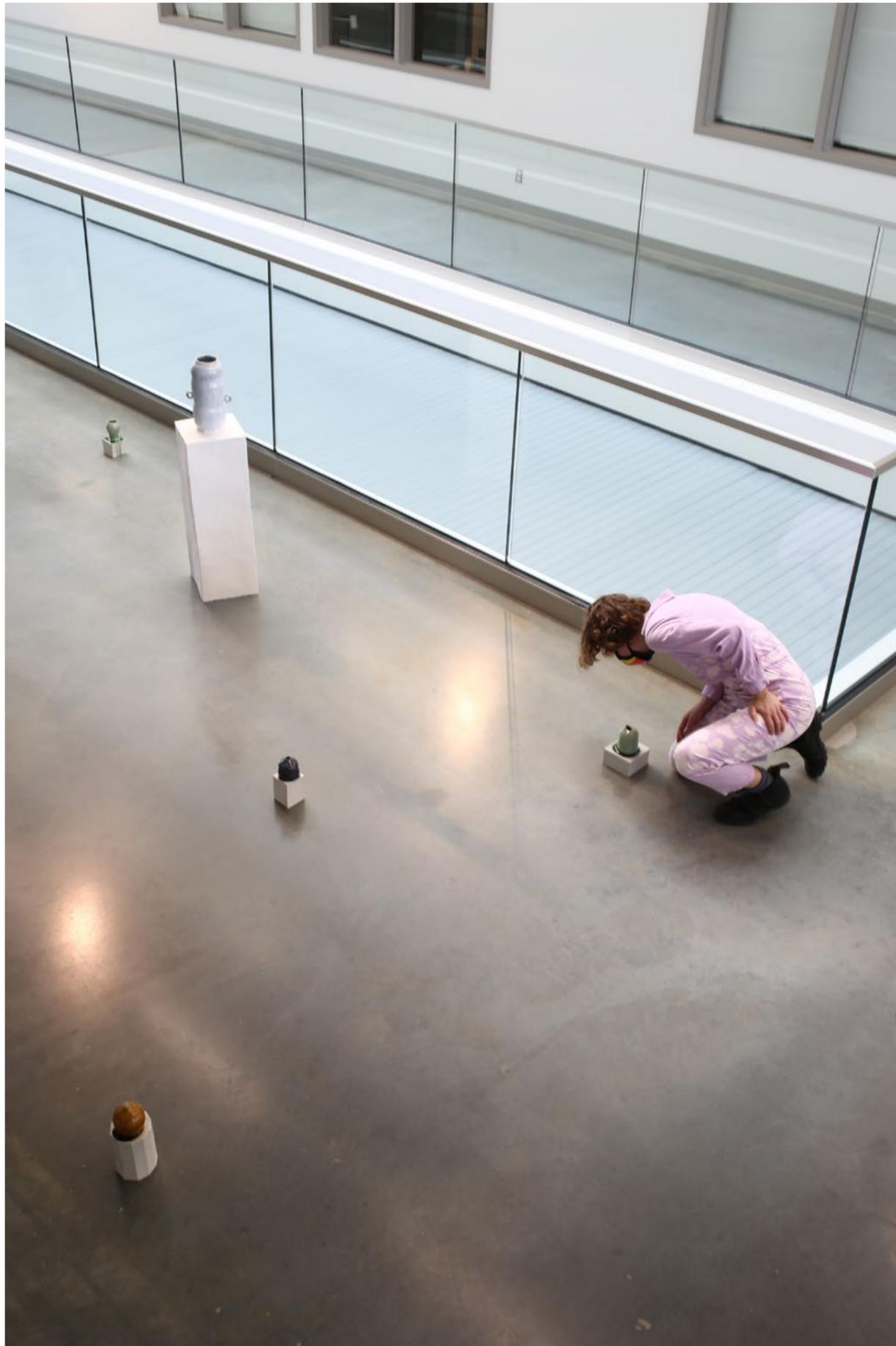
(Fig. 9. Orientation of sculptures in relations to column and balustrade, April 2021)

Susan Stewart, in *“On Longing, Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection (1984)”*, speaks of “proper perspective” as “the perspective of the bourgeois subject”, and how miniaturisation “continually refers to the physical world”(p45). At the same time, it is through the miniature that its context is remarkably transformed (p46). The smaller sculptures retain semblance of their larger counterparts as miniature variations, thus introducing a contrast in the objects’ spatial

occupancy. “The proper” vessel-vessels provide bodies accessing the installation with a point of reference to a proportional experience of vessel on plinths; a perceived normalcy which then might augment one’s awareness of architectural space around the work, and the positionality of own bodies relative to architecture and object (Fig. 10). the contrast between the proper and the miniature provide an exaggeration which Stewart states “must take place in relation to the balance of measurement offered as the body extends into the space of immediate experience”, when the body is the primary mode of perceiving scale (p132)(Fig. 11). Through their proximity with each other, this exaggeration also establishes a correspondence that can accentuate topics of containment, ownership, and control, which already exist (although perhaps not as obviously) in the politics of the display of object within institutional spaces.



(Fig. 10. Body in relation to architecture and objects, April 2021)



(Fig. 11. Body as a mode of perceiving scale, April 2021)

References

Devine, Carleen, et al. "Commentary: Diaspora: Two Years That Have Changed Ceramics Forever: CFile - Contemporary Ceramic Art + Design." *CFile*, 5 Nov. 2015, cfileonline.org/commentary-diaspora-two-years-that-have-changed-ceramics-forever-contemporary-ceramic-art-cfile/.

Clare Gormley: WHAT DOES IT MEAN (NOT) TO BE SEEN? REPRESENTATION AND RESISTANCE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ART. Belfast: the MAC, 2019. Exhibition catalogue, accessed March 15, 2021. <https://thealternativeartschool.files.wordpress.com/2019/11/on-refusal-publication-email.pdf>

Stewart, Susan. *On longing : narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection*. Durham London: Duke University Press, 1993. Print.