

Foliage and Fabrication

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by

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Artist's Statement

In my photographic work, I contrast natural and man-made objects abstracted by manipulation of scale. Details of the objects are blown up to proportions larger than life. By distorting the scale, I aim to allow the audience to view the image out of context, enabling the viewer to see it for its aesthetic value rather than the object's functional purpose.

Brief Background

I graduated from James Madison University with a Bachelor of Fine Arts, concentrating in ceramics with a minor in art education. Although I studied drawing, painting, and printmaking, the majority of my undergraduate work dealt with 3-D design. In my sculptural work, I used a variety of materials including glass, metals, wood, paper, and ceramics. Initially, I had little preference for one material over another.

Over time, I gravitated toward clay due to the university's strong ceramic department. Excellent instructors, well-equipped facilities, and access to a virtually unlimited supply of clay and glaze, made the ceramic studio hard to pass up. I enjoyed creating ceramic forms. The medium of clay demands that the artist become completely engrossed in the process. When I mixed chemicals to create glazes, I often researched traditional glaze recipes passed down over centuries to use on a particular piece. I also experimented with chemicals using a combination of intuition and experience to achieve a desired effect. This mix of inspiration and science has been a methodology throughout my artistic experience.

In the beginning of my undergraduate study, I worked almost exclusively with hand-built forms, creating trompe l'oeil sculpture with carefully composed compositions. This series consists of carefully crafted clay sculptures made to mimic ordinary everyday objects. One such piece was sculpted in white

porcelain to resemble leather gloves limply resting by a bent pack of matches. Another piece mimicked a distressed box



tossed aside. (Appendix A, No. 1) These representations of personal effects were created as portraits of the individuals who owned them. From there, I began combining wheel-thrown with hand-built forms. I also experimented with a variety of clays such as stoneware and porcelain.

Similar to my experience with glazes, I also experimented with multiple firing techniques including Raku, pit firing, and wood firing. Once again I was seeking to achieve greater control and predictability over my work. Pit firings were the simplest of these firings and produced some of the most dramatic results. Using available materials and working with professors and classmates, I was able to construct a wood kiln. This high fire kiln produced an appealing ash



glaze, which coated many of my most successful pieces. On a smaller scale, I also constructed a small Raku kiln, which produced a fiery copper effect from the reduction process. (Appendix A, No. 2)

My desire to be able to control a predictable outcome for my art originated with these experiences in my undergraduate years. While glass, metals, wood, and paper were media that I enjoyed working with, ceramics provided me with the best way to fulfill this need of predictability.

In addition to my studio classes, I studied art education. I had little interest in these education classes or in becoming an educator until my student teaching experience. During my student teaching, I was pleasantly surprised to find I adored working with elementary school aged children. After graduating, I

quickly found a position teaching art in this capacity. After spending several years consumed with my job, I realized I was no longer creating art and truly missed it.

VCU MIS Graduate Program

Ceramics

Because of my background I naturally began my Virginia Commonwealth University, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies work focusing on ceramics. Being comfortable with the medium, I picked up where I had left off, primarily working with thrown and altered forms.

My forms, often nonfunctional, sculptural vessels, were similar to much of the work I had completed in my undergraduate program. In one series I created a number of **wheel** thrown and altered vessels based on forms inspired by the life stages of the mayfly insect. (Appendix A,



No. 3) In another series, I continued with thrown and altered forms creating a



number of nonfunctional teapots. (Appendix A, No. 4) In both of these series, I began experimenting with a variety of surface

treatments, such as crystalline glazes, terra sigillata, and Mason stains. These materials were new to me and gave me a variety of new



solutions when working with familiar forms. (Appendix A, No.

5)

Although these various effects held fresh possibilities, I found myself having a hard time breaking away from the same redundant forms I had worked with throughout the later half of college. As I continued in the program, I became concerned that my work was becoming formulaic. In an effort to bring

freshness to my artwork, I decided to take a break from ceramics and work in another medium.

Photography

Many years prior to my first graduate photography class, I took a couple of photography classes and had set up a home darkroom. My darkroom supplies had been in storage for over ten years when I decided to dust off the boxes. Too much time had passed and I was unable to recall the photo chemistry necessary to set up a darkroom. Then, I registered for a photography class. My previous knowledge of the subject was quickly restored along with a new vitality in my work.

Both ceramics and photography rely heavily on exacting science. Controlling and predicting results depends on following ritual-like processes precisely. Although both media tend to be unforgiving with imprecision, the innate predictability of the respective processes is reassuring. Whether mixing either glazes or photo chemicals, the methodical routine can be therapeutic.

Observing my more experienced classmates encouraged me to take risks and try new techniques. One very noticeable change in my work was its scale. My work began growing exponentially in size. Initially my work was limited to 3 X3 and 5 X7 inch formats. Then, I began working with 11 X 14, 18 X 24 inch print formats. Eventually my work grew in size to as large as 3 X4 feet. Working large scale like this created new technical hurdles. Not only did I need to address how to maintain clarity when enlarging my work to this scale, I was also



faced with adapting my limited equipment to accommodate sizes it was not designed for. (Appendix A, No. 5) I found myself jerry-rigging my enlarger to project on the wall of the darkroom, which in turn allowed me to print much larger images. Although scanning my work into a computer to create large scale digital prints would have been much simpler, at the time, I was unwilling to give up the traditional darkroom methods and the unique quality silver gelatin prints have.

Artistic Inspiration and Influences

Although I had taught elementary art for eight years, up to this point my own artwork and my profession had little to do with each other. Professionally, my basic philosophy was to pass on a general love for the visual arts. I did not believe my own work had much to do with teaching specific skills or principles of art. While I was continuing in the program with photography I decided it was time to align my professional and artistic lives. I interviewed and was hired to teach high school photography. Changing teaching positions renewed my enthusiasm for teaching much the way my transition to photography renewed my fervor for creating art.

Now, I was both teaching and studying photography. As a result, photography became much more central in my mind. I began thinking about the subject continuously. As I observed my students work and experiment with the medium, I began thinking of how their work could apply to my own.

Conversely, as I learned more in my graduate studies, I began thinking of how

my recently gained knowledge could apply to my students' work. As I taught, my students began to inspire my own work. Through both my own classroom and my graduate classes, my knowledge of the history of photography began to expand rapidly. Learning about the work of prominent photographers, in particular the work of Group f.64, proved to be a great influence.

In 1932, a group of influential photographers formed Group f.64. The original group consisted of eight Californian photographers: Ansel Adams, Imogene Cunningham, Willard VanDyke, John Paul Edwards, Consuelo Kanaga, Sonya Noskowiak, Henry Swift, and Edward Weston. This society of photographers is largely credited with the creation of what is termed "the straight photography movement". Group f.64 abandoned the hand-manipulated techniques and sentimental imagery of the late 1800's and early 1900's Pictorialists such as Clarence White and Julia Margaret Cameron. The work of Group f.64 is characterized by crisp clarity and commonplace subjects, while the Pictorialists, in contrast, tried to imitate the soft images of the Impressionist painters. Breaking away from this imitation of painterly styles helped legitimize photography as an independent art form. In my own work, I embrace the techniques and subjects of the early straight photographers.

Straight photography relies on precise mechanics and techniques. Even the name, Group f.64 refers to the technical aspects of the movement. Group f.64 manifesto states, "The name of the Group is derived from a diaphragm number of the photographic lens. It signifies to a large extent the quality of clearness and definition of the photographic image which is an important element in the works

of this Group.” (Heyman, 32) The Group’s tenets are comforting to me. As mentioned previously, the consistent mechanics of the camera and routine of the darkroom procedure create predictable results that appeal to me.

Photographers such as Edward Weston (1886-1958) and Ansel Adams (1902-1984), central figures in the movement, used a technique called previsualization: imagining the appearance of the finished product before taking the photograph. Obviously, my interest in a predictable process is perfectly in tune with the tenets held by Group f.64. In addition, I find that the ritual of the process allows me to meditate more on the content of my work. As I meditate, I project the ultimate result. This is similar to the Group f.64 previsualization techniques.

The subject matter of the Straight photographers was of an ordinary nature. Objects such as vegetables, mechanical gears, or pieces of wood were photographed with rich detail. Extreme close-ups often disguised the subject’s true identity and highlighted the elements of design. Margaret Bourke-White’s (1904-1971) industrial images stress the elegance of the form over the purpose of the machine.

Photography- Part II

In my own work, I also choose the subject for its form. Avoiding subjects recognized as beautiful objects helps the viewer not to rely on preconceived responses. (Appendix A, No. 7) I enlarge my subject to unnatural proportions as the Straight photographers did in the past.



By enlarging my subject, the object's true identity is not immediately recognizable. My audience is free to view the beauty of the form and not be distracted by a cultural association to the object.

In addition to the composition and scale of my work, I also experimented with the media. I began with resin-coated paper. However, as my forms and compositions evolved so did the paper. Fiber paper provided the depth and rich tones that I sought for many of my pieces. Fiber paper also has wider range of values and reveals more detail. These characteristics lend texture and weight to photographs not achievable using resin coated paper. Photographic paper also comes in cool and warm tones. The texture and tone of paper affects a photograph like glazes and other surface treatments affect ceramics. I discovered that the choice of paper and tone could have dramatic effects on the final piece.

Using these principles I developed multiple series while completing my postgraduate program. In one series I explored long abandoned farmhouses in



the Shenandoah Valley. I was inspired by the repetition of simple lines and basic geometry found throughout these rustic wooden structures. (Appendix A, No. 8) In another series I photographed a

large turkey coop consisting of thousands of birds. Their large bulbous forms, bred to be mirror images of one another, provided the foreground to the rigid backdrop of the prefab steel structure that housed them. In yet another series, I discovered an automobile graveyard of cars dating from the 1930's and 40's, spread across a small glade. They retained highly reflective chrome details that contrasted elegantly with the matte finish of well worn sheet metal. Again, all of

these images were enlarged so the audience would focus on the beauty of the form. Experimenting with both resin and fiber paper with their respective cool and warm tones, I decided which suited each composition.

For my final show I narrowed my work into two groups: foliage and fabrication. The foliage collection consists of plant images photographed with a macro lens. Small sections of the leaves are enlarged to focus the viewer's attention on a network of veins creating intricate patterns of line. Wrinkles in the leaf may resemble the hills of a landscape rather than the minute details of the surface. (Appendix A, No. 9)



Throughout the creation of a print, I lose myself in the meticulous process. I struggle to achieve exacting focus, a large depth of field, and a full range of values. My decisions regarding composition are intuitive in comparison to the mechanics.

My fabrication series consists of construction building materials and equipment. Each print within the series is printed 3 X 4 feet in size. Enlarging 35mm film to this scale can make a tiny scratch on a negative appear massive. Any imperfection becomes immediately noticeable. Working on this scale forces me to be fastidious in the process. This particular content consists of functional objects created originally with little regard for aesthetics. One such subject is a group of corrugated drainage tiles haphazardly stacked on freshly bulldozed earth. (Appendix A, No. 10) My challenge is to create a beautiful image from unappealing objects.



As stated previously, Group f.64's abandonment of blurry Pictorialist's images honors the characteristics of the photographic process itself. The subject matter of the Straight photographers places the primary focus on the elements of design. My approach to photography is in the spirit of Group f.64. In so doing, I pay homage to those artists as well.

Conclusion

My work in Virginia Commonwealth University's Master of Interdisciplinary Studies program has profoundly affected me. Prior to the program, I was both artist and art teacher. These two parts of my life were significant yet separate. Participating in the Masters program helped to combine these two separate facets of my life.

My role in the classroom changed. I was demonstrating the same studio processes and procedures to my students that I used in my own work. My students saw me not only as a teacher but also an artist while I saw them as both students and developing artists too. It is this evolution, made possible by the VCU MIS program, that has profoundly changed me both as teacher and artist.

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Appendix A

1 Trompe l'oeil Box
stoneware, 14X14X18, 1991



2 Raku Pot
stoneware, 16X8X8, 1992



3 Mayfly Bottles
whiteware, 14X8X8, 2000



4 Bottle Teapot
earthenware, 12X14X8, 2001



5 Assembled Teapot
earthenware, 12X14X8, 2001



6 Helix
resin print, 40X48, 2004



7 Treaded Toroid
resin print, 40X48, 2004



8 Abandoned Door
silver gelatin, 18X24, 2002



9 Topology Close-up
resin print, 12X14, 2003



10 Corrugation
resin print, 40X48, 2004



Appendix B
Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Exhibit

1 Beaded Branch
resin print, 12X14, 2003



2 Topology
resin print, 12X14, 2003



3 Topology Close-up
resin print, 12X14, 2003



4 Crenulated Leaf #1
resin print, 12X14, 2003



5 Crenulated Leaf #2
resin print, 12X14, 2003



6 Crenulated Leaf #3
resin print, 12X14, 2003



7 Jagged
resin print, 12X14, 2003



8 Curled Vegetation
resin print, 12X14, 2003



9 Square Botanical #1
resin print, 12X14, 2003



10 Square Botanical #2
resin print, 12X14, 2003



11 Square Botanical #3
resin print, 12X14, 2003



12 Corrugation
resin print, 40X48, 2004



13 Stacked Cylinders
resin print, 40X48, 2004



14 Ocular
resin print, 40X48, 2004



15 Treaded Toroid
resin print, 40X48, 2004



16 Helix
resin print, 40X48, 2004



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