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Metaphors

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May, 2015

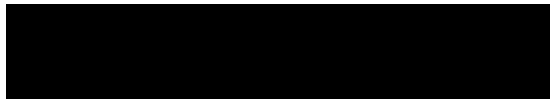
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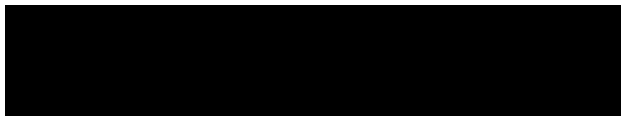
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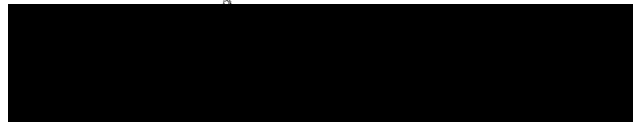
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Committee Member



Dean, College of Visual and Performing Arts



Dean, Graduate School

METAPHORS

A Thesis Statement

Presented to the Faculty

Of the

College of Visual and Performing Arts

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for Degree

Of Master of Fine Arts

In the

Department of Fine Arts

Winthrop University

May 2015

By

Dean Mobley

Abstract

This statement analyzes and reflects upon my Master of Fine Arts thesis exploration of material collision as a metaphor of my life experiences. The thesis exhibition, entitled “Equilibrium”, consists of six sculptural works constructed in glass, wood, metal, and repurposed heavy industrial objects. Within each individual piece I selected materials that would, when forced together under pressure and intense heat, bring attention to the utilization and exploitation of their inherent qualities. The manipulation of these material qualities has enabled me to express the complexity of human emotion. I am confident that all materials can convey certain emotional properties. During the fabrication, shaping, and forming of such a variety of materials I have attempted to exemplify personal reactions to events in my life, to search for meaning, and to understand my emotional response to the forms I have created.

Acknowledgment

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METAPHORS

My current artworks are created with glass, wood, metal, and found or repurposed heavy industrial objects. The sculptures utilize heat and pressure that result in compression, tension, and suspension. The purpose is to exploit and change the materials' appearance in such a way as to express or convey a human emotion. The objects' and the materials' visual strength becomes symbolic as meaning is added to it through transformation into art.

The sculptures are a product of my travels, family influences, life experiences, and lessons learned over the years, including my most recent travels to the island of Crete, in Greece, which have greatly impacted my artistic style. I remember my first experience with clay when I was four years old. Playing with clay ignited creative imagination. I have always felt comfortable with this material. Later in life, I discovered that the possibilities of working with clay were numerous and endless. My art is a culmination of these experiences and influences from my first memories to the latest.

Most objects or materials have more than one life and can be used many times over. To me, broken and shattered materials create opportunities and possibilities for use them with a different and new

perspective. One of the most important influences throughout my life, regarding the evolution of my art, comes from my mother's habit of repurposing materials. She taught me the lesson of recycling at an early age. She would take old worn-out blue jeans, cut them into strips, braid the strips, and then coil them into an oval shape to make a throw rug. I recall countless woven blue jean rugs that my mother had actually given a second life too. She would give new life to old furniture by reupholstering the skeletal framework into fresh-faced staples of our household. She sewed our clothing on an antique pedal sewing machine that she had also brought back to life and then used for years. These lessons in repurposing still dictate my adult habits. Their effect is evident in my art today, in the way I collect and use recycled materials as a source of inspiration.

Another way this influenced my childhood was through the strong desire to construct things that I felt all through high school. My favorite activity was to reconstruct model airplanes from various parts. My first memory of this was when I was seven years old. My brother and I would attach a string from a third story window and lower it to the ground, tying it onto a stone wall. We would then send a model airplane down the string to crash into the stone wall. These crashes gave my brother Dale and I many parts with which to rebuild model airplanes. We transformed the remnants into giant, almost ridiculous, triple winged bombers. This cycle of

destruction and reconstruction of models continued for many years. Over time, different forms of destruction and reconstruction emerged, with differing styles and models being torn apart and recreated. With each form of destruction, I devised different ways to stress or deform these plastic models of airplanes, automobiles, and ships. The scale of these models still influences my art today. I felt at ease around these miniature forms, which culminated in a deep-rooted attraction to petite and portable objects. Small-scale sculptures dominate my overall production.

One other major influence is ancient Greek sculpture. While I was an undergraduate, I went to Egypt on a school trip. Seeing those ancient sites ignited my passion for ancient cultures and led to my first experience in an archeological dig in Greece in 2011. Since then, I have participated in four dig sessions at the ancient site of Gournia, an ancient city with a small Minoan palace. The influences of ancient Greek ruins, their pottery found there, and the murals have inspired me in my work. One example is *Mycenaean Bomb Rack* (Fig. 09). The deeper reason for my inspiration, I believe, comes from the connection between my interest in repurposing and reconstructing – as mentioned above – and the symbolic meaning I attach to finding discarded objects and giving new life to them. While in Greece, as I wash and organize the ceramic sherds, I wonder where they come from and what purpose they serve. This imaginative reconstruction

happens also and as I work with my materials in constructing my art pieces. Slowly they become meaningful and reflective of my interior life. Glass, wood, and found objects become metaphors for emotionally charged responses.

Another strong influence in my artwork happened in 1991, when the cabin I was renting caught fire. This quick and devastating force destroyed the majority of my worldly possessions. After that event, I found a new perspective in the way that I view and use materials. I developed a feeling for temporary ownership towards material possessions, and an understanding that materials have metaphoric properties, which is the primary emphasis of my work.

Although the loss of my possessions did not greatly affect me, as I had invested no great sentimental value in them, in other ways the effects of that fire have had a profound influence in my artwork. Flames started where the stovepipe penetrated the wall, climbed, and continued to burn in the ceiling corners. The flame then spread into the bedroom. By that time, the build-up of smoke and heat was intense, which consumed all of the oxygen in the structure and the flames could not survive without it. The interior of the cabin was like a giant thermometer.

By observing what happened to the contents and the level of

deformity that they were subjected to, I could determine the temperature that had been reached at different heights. The first two and a half feet from the ceiling suffered complete destruction. The next three feet down, no plastic, paper, or cloth survived, yet the metals were not damaged. Subconsciously, I stored the memory of these observations and images. For example, I noticed that my elevated loft bed was still in perfect form. The mattress, though, had been subjected to intense heat, and when I touched it with my hand, it was reduced to a cascade of falling ash. My mountain bike had some plastic and rubber damage at the handlebar and the seat level, but the tires and lower mechanics survived. The CD's that were at floor level also survived and I enjoy listening to them to this day. Looking back, what I experienced can be likened to seeing the devastating effects of heat inside a kiln. It was destructive heat, frozen in time for me to witness, comprehend, and continually process. This scene of destruction I encountered had a lasting effect on my art, and inspired me to utilize this devastation in my artwork. I was more curious to see what happened to materials, objects, and furniture when they were subjected to heat. For me, that experience was a discovery and adventure. The fire exposed another aspect of the possibilities of the materials.

My relationship to non-ownership, or my acceptance of it, and my interest in reconstruction allow me to experiment freely without fear or

failure. During my undergraduate studies, for every finished piece I brought forth, there were three failed attempts that never saw the light of day. Failure is part of my process, and I know I have nothing to be afraid of. Thomas Edison was once asked about his supposed failures in experimentation of electricity. His reply was simple yet profound, "I have not failed. I have successfully found 10,000 ways that will not work." (Hendry) I feel much the same way. I have found many ways to shatter glass, melt iron, make ceramics explode, and crack wood. I have also found a few ways to mold these mediums to my ideas, and to create a physical form that metaphorically embodies my emotions. One can see an example of this in *Asphyxiation* (Fig. 08). In this work I use iron rope to constrict around a ceramic vessel to the point of collapse.

My artwork is not only influenced by life experiences. Other artists have also played an important role in the development of my art. As far as the medium is concerned, among my influences is ceramic sculptor Robert Arneson. He started the Funk Art Movement centered in California. From personal experience and attraction to his work, I can completely comprehend his message. The connection between Arneson's work and my own work lies in the sculptural attitude towards clay. Clay is typically viewed with a

preconceived notion of its creative limitations, restricted to utilitarian use. Arneson dared to have other ideas. He directly confronted the issue by using brick as a sculptural material. Bricks were reoccurring objects in many of his sculptures. They became a symbol of his challenge to change the attitude that people have towards the medium of clay. Brick is thought of as arguably the lowest form that clay could take. Robert Arneson set out to change this preconceived idea one brick at a time (Fig. 11).

Like Arneson, I choose to use a functional ceramic vessel, which many people view with the same stereotypical attitude associated with a brick. I incorporate these forms into my sculptures much in the same way as Arneson did (Fig.10), as I change the way they are usually perceived and recover their inherent qualities and potential as art mediums.

Another influence on my choice of mediums is Arthur Ganson and his mechanical sculptures, which consist of metal work and gears, constructed to move on their own, in ways that allude to deeper meanings. In his piece *The Red Thread*, Ganson uses the movement of the gears to unwind a suspended spool of red thread, which becomes a symbol for time running out (Fig. 12). This idea is mirrored in my piece *The Wait of it All* (Fig. 03), which references an extreme emotion brought on by stress and tension.

Artists like Arneson and Ganson were influences on individual pieces of my work. However, my work as a whole has been mostly inspired by British contemporary artist Simon Starling. In my eyes his repurposed works are unparalleled by any other artist. In reference to his work, he states, "I have always tried to find ways to use, you know, very outmoded, outdated kinds of technology and conversations and ideas and try to give them some new life in relation to a contemporary understanding." (Art) He takes the untold journey of an object and recreates it, which, in effect, retells its story. His execution of deconstruction and reconstruction has ignited in me many different avenues of thought. I now look for objects that evoke a stronger message and emotion in my work.

John Chamberlain was also an influence on my approach to sculpture. While reading through Paul Aubinder's book, *John Chamberlain- A Catalog Raisonne of the Sculpture*, I discovered that I am using similar methods and ideas in my art. The way he uses common and abandoned materials inspired me. With found materials he evokes meaning in the sculptures through composition and compression. I use common and abandoned materials also and I bring about a new meaning to these objects by applying compression, tension and suspension. His example encourages me to combine different materials such as glass and

metal. Although I do not use the same process as John Chamberlain, I was motivated by his studies of compression in his sculptures (Fig.13) and I created my own version.

At Brevard College, while I worked towards my Bachelor of Arts in Sculpture and Painting, I also minored in geology, which is a passion and hobby of mine. Without realizing it, I began to infuse my artwork with geological principles. The properties that I currently utilize in my art (compression, tension, suspension, heat, and pressure) are actual geophysical processes that deform and change the landscape. Upon returning to Brevard College in 2008 for a B.A., I took this destruction/reconstruction philosophy into the ceramics art studio.

My concentration in sculpture led me to combine two materials with opposite qualities, to create a unified form. At Brevard, the two opposing materials were fired clay and iron. My interest in ceramics had started early. When I was about four years old, my aunt Cathy Hanson introduced me to a potter's wheel. Ever since then my fascination with clay has continued to grow. My experience with metals started in high school, in a class which also happened to focus on machinery. This gave me an introduction to technological processes that expanded my capacity to handle different mediums. After high school I dabbled in some backyard welding, and years later I worked for my brother in his machine shop

before returning to Brevard College. While at Brevard, these two mediums collided and became my focus. I wanted to take the materials to their physical limits, to the point just before they collapse and break, or where complete destruction occurs. One example from my undergraduate work is *Asphyxiation I and II* (Fig. 08).

At Winthrop University, ceramic and iron were left behind for wood, glass, and various metal industrial objects. The framework that I fabricate is comprised of painted black metal, while wood creates the inner forms; glass is the fragile material that I am applying destructive forces to. Finally, industrial objects are used to apply tension and stress to the sculpture. I see myself as a fabricator much in the same way that sculptor Richard Deacon does, who said, “All of the work I make is fundamentally made. It’s not cast or modelled or carved. Almost all of it is built, so fabricator is a very straight forward way of describing that without specifying a technique” (65). Many techniques are used in constructing my sculptures, and I feel fabrication is the best way to describe my process.

In my thesis work, I am exploring material collisions as metaphors for my life experiences. The work is organized around four topics: compression, tension, suspension, and heat with pressure, all of which reference the physical world. They are geologic terms for events bringing about metamorphic physical changes. These changes are present in the

environmental elements and minerals, no matter whether at landscape or molecular levels. In the case of human beings, emotions such as stress, strain, heat, and pressure also bring about transformational changes in the way that we think, feel, and act. In this series of work I tried to capture emotional stress and strain at the verge of a breaking point. This state of emotion, almost to the point of collapse, is what I am exhibiting in my thesis *Metaphors*.

Compression, tension, and suspension reference emotional pain much in the same way that Louise Bourgeois does with her sculptural series titled "Cells." In her own words, "The cells represent different types of pain: the physical, the emotional and the psychological and mental and intellectual. When does the emotional become physical? When does the physical become emotional? It's a circle going around and around. Pain can begin at any point and turn in either direction." (25) Bourgeois is using objects to activate large cells, and while what I am doing in my work is using metal frames to hold forms while the action of the frame is applying pressure (compression, tension, or suspension). This action activates my forms with symbolism.

Compression (Fig. 01) was the first successful sculpture of my M.F.A. experience. It is a relatively small sculpture, welded together and painted black. Made of metal, wood, and glass, it essentially represents a

visual depiction of compression. The frame consists of a ½-inch square solid metal framework. The metal legs are 5 inches high, and support a rectangular frame 5 x 9 inches. This frame has four threaded holes that hold four stainless steel hex head bolts, which in turn compress seven 4 ½ x 4 ½ x ¾ inch square oak blocks against six 4 ½ x 4 ½ x ¼ inch squares of glass. Four stainless steel head bolts compress alternating blocks of oak and glass together under extreme pressure.

In *Compression*, I chose the mediums of wood, glass and metal to represent basic elemental human emotions. Some emotions are as hard as oak, maturing and aging over the years, while others are as delicate as glass, frail, and transparent. A sensitive person may harden their personality into a shell due to pressures over time. The shell may be difficult to crack, protecting the inner, more delicate emotions tucked in, unscratched, here represented by glass.

In my thesis piece *Under My Skin* (Fig. 04), I repurposed a heavy section of a large sprocket that came from a bulldozer, and mounted it to a metal stand that holds it with the sprocket teeth facing upwards. In the metal stand, I inserted four adjustable large bolts that can elevate the sprocket stand from 1 to 2 inches. Separate from this is another black frame constructed from a ¾ inch solid steel square rod. This frame is 42 inches long and has two parallel bars 5 inches apart that encapsulate the

heavy metal sprocket. At the end of the 42 inch parallel bars are four legs, 11 inches high. The upper parts of the legs have been machined so that a 4 inch horizontal metal bar can slide up or down. At the top of these legs is another horizontal stationary metal bar that has two threaded holes holding two 2 ½ inch bolts, which forces the first metal bar down. This downward action puts pressure onto a 4 x 48 x 1/8th of an inch piece of glass that is being bent over the bulldozer sprocket to the verge of breaking. My intention is to show an emotion that is under strain to the point of an explosive reaction.

Suspension (Fig. 05) relies heavily on the use of multiple Jägermeister bottles torqued under pressure. This piece of art is constructed from ¾ inch solid cold-rolled steel stock. The framework stands 5 feet high and is 2 x 2 feet square. Eighteen inches from the top is another 2 x 2 feet square frame. Nine inches from the bottom is one more 2 x 2 feet framework to help support the long legs. This ¾ inch solid steel stock was machined to precise measurements of less than 3/1000th of an inch difference in length. These precise measurements and sharp corners of the cold-rolled steel give a very calculated and clean appearance. At the top of this 5 foot framework is a square frame that measures 24 x 24 x 18 inches. From the inside of the square are eight springs that measure 7 ½ inches, and each is attached to the eight inside corners. The springs

suspend an internal square frame that measures 13 ½ inches square; this material is 2 ½ x 3/8th of an inch steel. This 13 inch internal frame has four stainless steel hex head bolts on each side that penetrate the steel material and suspend ten rectangular 750 milliliter Jägermeister bottles in a square form that then create a rectangular shape in the in the middle. This creates a void space shape of two bottles, caused by the pressure applied to the bottles from the hex head bolts.

In this work I am referencing a friend's descent into alcoholism, his life shattered due to a car accident in which his neck was broken. The form of this sculpture looks intentionally like a medical halo, like the one he wore afterwards. The fragile suspension of the glass bottles is meant to imply the delicate dance that some alcoholics must perform on a daily basis.

The final subject that I investigate in my thesis is heat and pressure in reference to alcoholism. In *Bam!!* (Fig. 06), I use both to change the physical shape and appearance of a wine bottle. The heat is generated from a ceramic kiln, and the pressure from gravity. The industrial object is a 13 inch section of a metal I-beam used in the construction of large building. I cut this I-beam at a 10 degree angle on one end. Next, I fabricated a metal frame to hold this I-beam over the wine

bottle while it was in a kiln. I then raised the temperature to cone 015, which is 1549 degrees Fahrenheit. This heat changes the physical property of the glass. Consequently, it can no longer support the weight of the I-beam. The visual result is an I-beam that deformed a glass wine bottle, causing no cracks or fractures in the structure. The metaphoric implications are that the effects of alcohol and alcoholism can be fast and devastating (Fig. 06).

Conclusion

In my thesis work *Metaphors*, I explore material collisions as metaphors for human emotions. The work is a culmination of a life-long process that includes influences from my personal life and from other artists. Through my sculpture, I explore materials, scale, form, and line to suggest emotional states through static form. In exploring form, I was inspired by Robert Arneson, Arthur Ganson, John Chamberlain, and Simon Starling among other Kinetic artists. Their examples have inspired me to continue to investigate these smaller scale mechanical sculptures. Studying in the Master of Fine Arts at Winthrop strengthened my technical ability, and helped me to communicate human emotion through sculpture by enhancing my ability to express metaphoric meanings through juxtaposing material, forms, and structures.

IMAGES

Figure 1. *COMPRESSION*

Wood, Glass, and Metal.

Dimensions: 9" X 8" X 5"

2014.



Figure 2. *A BITTER PILL*

Glass, Metal, and Wood.

Dimensions: 18" X 9" X 8"

2014.



Figure 3. *THE WAIT OF IT ALL*

Glass and Metal.

Dimensions: 36" X 12" X 4.5"

2014.



Figure 4. *UNDER MY SKIN GLASS*

Metal and Industrial Object.

Dimensions: 46" X 12" X 4.5"

2014.



Figure 5. *SUSPENSION*
Jagermeister Bottles and Metal.

Dimensions: 5" X 5" X 2"

2014.



Figure 6. *BAM!!*
Wine Bottle and I-Beam.
Dimensions: 11" X 11" X 5"

2014.



Figure 7. *CHOKE ON THIS*
Wine Bottle and Splitting Wedge.
Dimensions: 6" X 6" X 11"
2014.



Figure 8. *ASPHYXICATION I and II*
Ceramic and Iron.
Dimensions: 20" X 15" X 11"
2010.



Figure 9. *MYCENAEAN BOMB RACK*

Ceramic, Rope, and Wood.

Dimensions: 8' X 3' X 3'

2011.



Figure 10. *KILN MAN*

Robert Arneson,

Terra Cotta Brick,

1971.



Figure 11. *BALANCING ACT.*

Robert Arneson.

Ceramic,

1974.



Figure 12. *THE RED THREAD*

Arthur Ganson,

Metal and Thread,

Date Not Available.



Figure 13.

Untitled Crash 1

Red Mitsubishi Eclipse

Spider 2001,

John Chamberlain,

2009.



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