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What Is Now, Is No Longer / Everything Has Been Preserved

By

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B.F.A Montana State University

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

May 2005

Approved by:

Chairperson:

Dean, Graduate School

Date
What is Now, is No Longer/ Everything Has Been Preserved

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This paper is written in conjunction with my thesis exhibition held May 4th-13th 2005. As an exhibition it was held alongside the work of Marcy James, M.F.A-Photography. The title *What is Now, is No Longer/ Everything Has Been Preserved*, reflects the historical and archival nature of both of our work. It also reflects our mutual appreciation of ambiguity and obscured meaning; much like a Zen Koan, it is an attempt to enlighten or get closer to an understanding of the world we inhabit, and the ways we hold on to it.

Characterized by the effects of both wood and soda-firing, and rough surface treatments, my sculptures are reminiscent of various kinds of industrial detritus. I find the creation of such objects to play and important role in the process of informing the relationships we have to both our natural and constructed worlds. Contradiction is a very important aspect in the creation of my art; it is in the presentation of objects of art that are somewhat crude and imperfect, yet created with the utmost aesthetic consideration. As well, the works often assert themselves as strong and forceful, yet reveal themselves to be fragile and vulnerable.

This latter sort of contradiction is important because it often reflects the problematic nature of our concepts of reality. They are contradictions like: “when we are young, we think will change little;” “when we are healthy we think not of sickness”, or “we cherish what we kill, and kill what we cherish”. In the contemporary world, there is much to distract us from the realities of our current situation, much less the tenuous nature of that moment’s stability. In general I find that we lack mindfulness, both in the way we engage our world, and in the awareness of the things that go on around us. I also find that we usually attempt to do well with the tools we have, yet most of our works wind up being destructive. In consideration of these dilemmas, I am concerned with making things that are capable of grounding us and causing us to reevaluate the world we know.
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I would like to thank first and most of all, Beth Lo, Professor of Ceramics at The University of Montana. Her guidance, kindness, and wisdom taught me a great deal about fostering an academic community if patience and individual vision and avoids the conflicts of competitiveness. I would also like to thank Professors Valerie Hedquist and Rafael Chacón, for their enormous amount of input into the work of myself and many others. Thanks also to Professor Albert Borgman for his time and contributions to my committee. And not least of all, thanks to Alex, Orville, Sarah, Hak Kyun, and Marcy, who have all displayed tremendous patience and given much to my endeavors. I am very grateful and hope that you all remain near and dear to my heart.
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Nature is always reminding us that its grace can be rough, brutal, and violent. Most of our efforts are intended to insure safety and stability amidst the power of nature, our social structures, and political realms. We employ an infinite variety of technological systems, devices, and materials to create safety and stability for us. However, they are often disregarded as temporary and beside the point. Consequently, we ignore or fail to question the intentionality of technological devices and the significance of their physical presence in our lives. Like nature, technological systems are also powerful; they demand control and order. In many ways, our actions conform to those demands. As a result, we lose mindful and authentic engagement with things and others in the world, and more importantly with the forces of nature and spirit that course through all of being. The most disregarded aspects of our world are always reflective of our cares and intentions, and they are capable of informing us about the way we treat nature and our world.

Art provides the opportunity to confront otherwise unconscious conditions of our relationship to the world. I am interested in how art can help us understand the tension that arises between power, vulnerability, and destructiveness in the external world and control, care, and sentimentality in the internal. Power is not always brute force; sometimes it is delicate and caring. In contrast we are often irrevocably subject and vulnerable to the destructive power of nature; yet it is in such moments that we can discover that which is most sublime and beautiful.

Art is also a gift that can help us reevaluate what it is we truly want and value in this world. The technological mind necessitates a hierarchal order of material value; it fears things like rust, imperfection and entropy; it abhors and refuses to give significance to
things that are useless. Ironically, the wake of technology and production leaves all that is outdated in a sea of useless objects and meaningless commodities subject to their own decay.

My work is intended to aid and inform the art of being in a world that is often brutal, destructive, and out of order. The task of finding things of beauty, meaning and value in the contemporary world is often difficult; knowing how to hold on to them is even harder. Sometimes beauty is veiled in ugliness or dependent on a degree of violence, we may find it in things that are fragile and temporal. Trying to hold on to the things we cherish, as we do the fragility of our existence, we often use solutions that are restrictive and controlling. At other times we take fascination in manipulating things and small pleasures in being destructive. Beauty often seems to be in the caring rather than the cared for, but caring can often turn into brutality. We might then take note of the Taoist statement that says, “Work at things and you ruin them; cling to things and you lose them.”¹

Contradiction and tragedy seem to be an inherent part of life, the more we want something the more it eludes us and the more we evade something the stronger the grasp it has upon us.

Living artfully in the world requires mindfulness of one’s actions, even the most habitual. It means striving to act authentically amidst systems that administer regularity and conformity through the propagation of obsolescence and consumption. I create objects that emulate industrial refuse, detritus, and other materials that are useless, meaningless, and sometimes banal. This is in part an effort to undermine and challenge

systematic ways of technological and economic thinking. This kind of creative effort is
counter intuitive and irrational, and therefore an act of authenticity in artful living.

This undermining is not mere irony, it is an attempt to find and unveil the truths that lie
beneath the promises of consumption and technological security. The things and
experiences that are most important in our lives inform our psychological connection to
our world. They say something about purity, frailty, and the temporal nature of life. The
contemporary world of commodification cannot supply such things or experiences in a
way that is both lasting and freeing. The experience of art can provide the opportunity
for such realizations, yet the art object is generally co-opted into the realm of
commodities and often fails as a result. Art should always be seen first as a gift rather
than a commodity, and in that sense a possible reminder of what is most important,
overlooked or ignored.

Foremost authenticity rejects material hierarchy in the sense that it sees the value of all
material things beginning equally. It sees and tells the world for what it is rather than
what it wishes it to be, and accepts the inevitable mortality of all things. In this sense art
can medicine, both in the creative act, and the self-prescribing choices of the viewer.

Self-medicating with art involves risk; art can distance us from truth and reality, and
encourage us to naively hold on tighter to life. Fredrich Nietzsche saw this possibility
when a culture rejected what he termed the Dionysian impulse and with it the
confrontation of tragedy, the rejection of which resulted in counterfeit and masked
passions and assertions about the world.\(^2\)

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1993) 14.
Through art, authenticity confronts and embraces the tragic nature of life. There is a Buddhist phrase “Duhkha,” it is used to express all forms of suffering, evil, and disease that arise from the desire to hold on to pleasant experiences. Duhkha generally means “pervasive unsatisfactoriness.” It also can be translated as “Bad Axle Hole,” which means: one is holding their wheel of existence incorrectly, and should rather stick their head in the eye of the storm or further suffer. Reflecting this Nietzsche writes...

Dionysian art, too, wishes to convince us of the eternal delight of existence – but we are to seek that delight not in the phenomena themselves but behind the phenomena. It wishes to acknowledge that everything that comes into being must be prepared to face a sorrowful end. It forces us to look at the terrors of individual existence, yet we are not to be petrified with fear. A metaphysical consolation wrests us momentarily from the bustle of changing forms. For a brief moment we really become the primal essence itself and feel its unbounded lust for existence and delight in existence. Now we see the struggles, the torment, and the destruction of phenomena as necessary, given the constant proliferation of forms of existence forcing and pushing their way into life, the exuberant fertility of the world will. We are pierced by the raging goad of those torments just as we become one with the vast primal delight in existence and sense the eternity of that delight in Dionysian ecstasy. For all our pity and terror, we are happy to be alive, not as individuals but as the single living thing, merged with its creative delight.3

Historically, material art has always been made in and effort to simulate a state of coming into being, evolution, or a climactic state of permanence. Postmodernism has changed that, now the work of many artists has been marked by the possibility of the work’s non-existence or points to its own devolution. The latter is something I have focused on extensively. My work generally appears to be moving away from a state of concreteness, it is often broken or wounded and then repaired or patched. My work attempts to share, in Nietzsche’s words “with the sphere of Apollonian art an utter delight

3 The Birth of Tragedy, 54.
in appearance and looking, and at the same time it negates that pleasure and draws even higher satisfaction from the destruction of the physical world of appearance. ...Or to put it in aesthetic terms, ugly and discordant elements- are repeatedly portrayed with such love and in such countless forms." it is in this aspect that art becomes medicine, not only as an imitation of the truth of the world but a supplement to overcome it.

The true nature of the contemporary world is one in which a massive amount of our physical material environment is in disregard, disorder and disuse. At the very same time the most meaningless of commodities, from soaps and soft drinks to stain-free carpets and lawn chemicals are the most intentionally aestheticized and glorified aspects of our lives. This contradiction makes locating the important experiences and spaces difficult. Art cannot work in a manner that strives to aestheticize an object in an original manner, or present a pleasing object, without being co-opt into the culture industry, then reproduced, marginalized and eventually discarded. However, art that displays or at least suggests excremental objects, refuse, residues and temporal materials, stands a chance at maintaining a cultural logic of sublimation.\textsuperscript{5} In the active acknowledgment and valuation of a less than perfect side of life, one can, as with nature, co-exist with it to overcome its barriers.

The subject matter of my work is often industrial refuse of some sort. As subject matter, refuse has the possibility of posing questions about the intentions of its existence in relation to the contradictory nature of our material world. However, the work’s content stems from the cultural implications associated with its

\textsuperscript{4} The Birth of Tragedy, 114.

materials, its posture, brokenness, or contradictory self-assertion of strength and frailness. The conceptual associations are intended to be fairly simple. In most of my sculpture, the objects resemble concrete or steel. They are resilient materials that perform great functions, but are of minor aesthetic or monetary value. Yet the works are made of stoneware and porcelain, materials that perform fewer functions and in the case of porcelain maintain higher cultural value. They are permanent materials unaffected by rust and decay; they can only be worn and broken down to smaller pieces. Porcelain, considered fragile and precious is placed into aggressive and powerful forms. The aggressive nature of the form is often negated in some sense by an attempt to care for the porcelain within.

This kind of ambiguity is evident in the *Excavator's Daughter* in which the main form of stoneware resembles the bucket of a backhoe and at the same time an infant's cradle (figure a). The form seems to have forcefully scraped up the fragile porcelain elements inside, and at the same time seems to hold and shelter them. The porcelain inside, made with care and patience, is delicate and fragile. However the rods assume no real value, they are only rods, reflective of any common industrial material such as PVC, electrical cable, rebar, or conduit. The care that the piece implies is meant to conversely point out the lack of care that occurs with the handling of common materials, objects and places in the construction of our world.
These primary kinds of relationships or juxtapositions pull from the very primary and physical ways we enter and engage our world. We organize, collect, build, push aside, and store the material world. We attempt to put borders up to defend ourselves and preserve our possessions against destruction by nature and others. Our efforts are backed by a strong hope that our work will hold and last. These hopes can become anxiety and fear, which in turn forces us to work more systematically and scientifically. We end up thinking in a way that makes everything objectively distant and valued simply according to use; in the end we wind up further distanced from the world than when we started.
Punch Roll (figure b.)

The task of undoing this kind of process is difficult. Many of the works I make insinuate a sense of past purpose and history, but refrain from revealing insight into their purpose. As a result they become merely present and their meaning or message is solely about their state of being. Works like Punch Roll and Tools are indicative of this (figure b. and c.). In Punch Roll, the object is reminiscent of something like a large-scale nut that would act as a fastener of some sort, it has suffered a break and a large patch that protrudes from its side has repaired its wound. In the case of Tools, the object makes a direct reference to a toolbox. However, the concept of toolbox is negated by its own inaccessibility. Aside from the fact that the tools contained within the box are unable to perform any specific function, the extra handle on the box also restricts their removal. Not only are the tools rendered unusable so is the toolbox it self. Only when a tool malfunctions is it revealed as a mere physical object, which then can be looked at as abstractly and dealt with perceptually.
Objects whose original functions are unknown are often encountered in our everyday world. If we refrain from trying to find function and meaning for them, they can inform us about our present situation and provide us with the opportunity to be as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht says, “in sync with the things of the world.” It can be an experience of the self-unconcealment of being.... “in which we recuperate a glimpse of what things of the world might be.” Experiencing the things of the world in their preconceptual objecthood reactivates a feeling for the bodily and spatial dimension of our existence.\textsuperscript{6} The experience with artwork as an aesthetic epiphany in this sense triggers the possibility of connecting back to the world in a new way in order to see the things of the world in a relational manner rather than a ready-to-hand form of serviceability.

This way of seeing and connecting to the world has profound connection to my work; it relates not only to Nietzsche’s, concept the Dionysian, but also to the thoughts of Martin Heidegger and to the Japanese aesthetic philosophy of Wabi-Sabi. Central to them both is the juncture of nature and our created world. In the “Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger emphasizes the words “earth” and

"world." For Heidegger the earth is a mysterious aspect of our existence that is elusive, self-secluding, concealing and sheltering. The world, on the other hand, signifies not only everyday life, but also our worldviews, histories, and physical environment. The opposition of earth and world are in a kind of strife, in such conflict an inseparable unity is created that raises them both to their essential nature. World attempts to manipulate and interpret earth, but earth resists and draws the world into itself. Heidegger states, “Earth thus shatters every attempt to penetrate it.”

Wabi and Sabi are two different words whose meanings have coalesced into a complex set of meanings and feelings about the world. Wabi refers to a spiritual way of life that is inward, subjective and philosophical, it is concerned with spatial events. Sabi in contrast is concerned with material objects such as art and poetry, the outward and objective, aesthetic ideals, and temporal events. Like Heidegger, Wabi-Sabi romanticizes nature and promotes adapting to it rather than the demands of technology, without refuting technology’s necessity. For Heidegger the truth of being reveals itself in the strife of earth and world, Wabi-Sabi finds truth in the observation of nature, especially when worldly things and events find themselves irrevocably caught up in the forces of earth and nature. In such instances, Wabi-Sabi, like Duhkha, finds beauty and value in things that are imperfect, useless, and even sad and tragic.

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The philosophy of Wabi-Sabi also sees earth as self-concealing or withholding; it sees a worldly thing’s being as always enveloped in aspects of earth and nature that make its presence possible and demise inevitable. It tries not to grasp at earth or nature; it rather embraces what embodies earth in its essence or what it leaves behind in marks or residues. Following these tenets, the subject matter in my work is often similar to industrial detritus. However, the object only serves as a vehicle or platform for embodying and suggesting elusive essences that are earthly and natural.

In an effort to suggest such earthly essences, much of my work is fired in an Anagama wood-burning kiln. The kiln design and firing process stem from the 12th to 15th centuries in Korea and Japan. The firing process has close connections to the principles inherent in Wabi-Sabi. Wood fired works are often valued for their rough and austere nature and for the sense of history place they may convey.

All wood-fired work shares a similar trait of modeling by flame and deposits of ash. In many ways the firing is a very violent process similar to what might happen geologically over a thousand year period or in a raging forest fire. In my view the kiln maintains or engenders something very near to Nietzsche’s concept of Dionysian forces, both in its results and in its act. By its nature, it is difficult to control and its results are irregular and cannot be truly preconceived. As an endeavor it is economically and physically irrational, and success with it is dictated mostly by intuition.

In part, many of my sculptures are made to be subjected to the process itself, not in a gesture of violence, but with the knowledge that the work’s trails will speak
through in the end. British artist Andy Goldsworthy views his process of
constructing cairns as a similar sort of trial as well. After spending hours on end
building six-foot tall egg shaped stone cairns at low tide, Goldsworthy waits for
the high tides to engulf the work all at the risk of its demise. For Goldsworthy, it
is not a gesture of violence, but an offering to the sea and earth itself. In such
gestures, he sees a kind of healing take place, one that prepares an individual for
the inevitable catastrophic surprises of life.⁹

![Image of a piece of wood with a hollow center]

*Truss Core* (figure d.)

Themes of preservation, protection, collection, containment and control are often
central to my work; these themes are to be seen in the shadow of eventual loss and
catastrophe. This threat may come from the wood-firing process, a sense of decay
or fragility within the confines of powerful elements or may already be present in
a state of brokenness. These themes may arise just in material terms, as in the case
of *Truss Core* (figure d.), which seems to both grasp and crush the fragile

elements within, and attempts to protect them at the same time. Or they may arise in social and political terms as in the case of the clay work Koran (figure e.) and the painting Dionysian Prayers (figure f.).

In Koran, the main structure is a giant industrial version of a desktop paper skewer, impaled on it are porcelain slabs of clay that generally relate to the format of a paper book. Aside from being the title of the holy book of Islam, koran also means to collect and tie together. In Dionysian Prayers,
the apparent fence or barrier draws specific reference to the thirty-foot tall concrete wall currently being constructed around Jerusalem. In the painting the solidity of the wall is in question; certain places within it seem to contain gaps that one might be able to pass through. Thin frail black rods appear to hold up the wall with a patch or bandage of some sort, and at the same time provide the possibility for the wall to be brought down.

Both *Koran* and *Dionysian Prayers* pose questions about the relationships between violence and security or order. However both works are somewhat vague and abstract in their assertion, in addition many people currently have no idea what the wall looks like in reality. Without such knowledge of the real wall, a firm understanding of the painting cannot be arrived at. What remains important is the realization that there may be an illusionary perception of the security.
solidity and concreteness of our constructed reality and that in the grey and bleak world that the image reflects, the service of hope remains tenuously.

Asking or encouraging cultural authenticity, involves showing bleak things, for what they are, and in a sense acknowledging the pervasive unsatisfactoriness of Duhkha. Yet it is in the examples of care for things disregarded and in need of repair, that communal care and responsibility arises. If beauty is not found in tragedy, we will always run from insecurity, we will continue to passively engage our world, and many of our efforts and endeavors will continue to remain destructive.
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