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Elemental: promise of plenty

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ELEMENTAL: PROMISE OF PLENTY

A Thesis

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Louisiana State University
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In

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By
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ABSTRACT

This body of work is about human nature, and centers on issues of aggression, consumption and collapse. Five materials make up the exhibition, and each carries a specific metaphor: wood is flesh, brick represents collective history, rope is a metaphor for human activity, metal is control and salt is a quintessential commodity. Craft is used as a means to explore the boundary between natural and synthetic phenomena, as well as elevating the status of the base materials. The work is arranged to provide an environment and context for the viewer to respond.

ELEMENTAL: PROMISE OF PLENTY

Statement of Purpose

Why make sculpture? Why make wooden objects?

This body of work is handcrafted from reclaimed and discarded natural materials, which are composed and presented as peers to the viewer. I have three basic hopes:

1. That the work is visually dynamic and engaging and that it possesses a basic elegance which elicits emotive response from both trained and untrained viewers.
2. That the material handling or craft in this body of work is reminiscent of a pre-industrial aesthetic. Skill in labor was discarded by postmodern artists as it was being discarded by capital-based models of production. Revisiting craft as an ideal is deliberate social protest.
3. That the forms presented function as a viable metaphor for the state of nature, questioning growth, consumption, and the myth of plenty.

Introduction

Consumption begets violence.

We live in a time of vast abundance and increasing inequity. Inequity is both maintained by and is the fundamental precursor to aggression.

Birthright and the cultural environment shape an individual's aesthetics, beliefs, behavior and expectations. Western art and aesthetic are strongly determined by a patriarchal capitalist worldview, which clearly divides nature from the spiritual. There is a parallel between that fundamental divide and the reality of our common perception of plenty.

This work was made in response to social and environmental catastrophe, the degradation of individual labor and the subsequent decay of individual aesthetic. As observers of culture, artists have a responsibility to respond to the society in which they live. I have attempted to address issues in such a way as to reach the broadest possible audience and to stimulate questions rather than providing answers.

Historical Context

“The iron law of capitalism is that one must either grow or perish.”¹

In the United States, we set a highly visible model for potential middle class consumers worldwide, and our economy relies on creating a sense of parity and opportunity for the increasing billions of individuals. The promise of plenty is central to our well being, and the friction that unfulfilled promise brings is a continuing wellspring of potential aggression.

This sense of economic opportunity or equality has been fueled by an increasing array of consumer goods, made in ever more efficient factories. In order to meet the increasing desire for cheap consumer goods, the economy has made a decisive shift from a basis in labor to a basis in capital, transforming skill in labor into a relic. “The transformation of working humanity into a ‘labor force,’ a ‘factor of production’, an instrument of capital is an incessant and unending process”². The modes of production which have replaced skilled labor that formed the nexus of Marxist thought and the models for the Arts and Crafts movements have themselves become obsolete. Industrial mass production signaled the end of the era of skilled labor, and globalization has now signaled the end of production in the developed world. Craft was discarded by postmodern artists as it was being discarded by capital-based models of production.

The natural world has been synthetically ordered, fundamentally altering our environment and our perceptions of it. What remains has been mapped, charted and divided into preserves. It is enough for most people that it “looks natural”, and without active and sustained investigation, *everything* appears to be natural. The gestural, organic forms I work with exploit the junction between a natural and a made aesthetic.

Response

The creative act.

Artmaking is essentially an individual statement, and each of the three players defines the artist/artwork/viewer relationship. It is possible to influence a viewer’s emotive state through the indirect communication that art objects afford.

All of the work in this thesis exhibition was labor intensive in the making, and much of it was physically demanding. Each of the objects bears the marks of numerous processes, each vital to both the character and the creation of the piece. Craft establishes the tenor of the relationship between naturally occurring elements and those that are manufactured, while the nature of craft is one of the primary qualities that a viewer has to determine the makers’ intentions and relationship with the work.

This body of work explores the relative supremacy of man and nature by composing objects from natural materials and placing them in a context that presents them as peers to the viewer.

¹ Jan Jagodzinski, “Toward an Ecological Aesthetic: Notes on a “Green” Frame of Mind”, Compiled in Art in a Democracy p.148.

² Harry Braverman Labor and Monopoly Capital p.139.

Visual Choice

We determine what the world looks like.

Artist's take on take on aesthetic responsibility for what they make. The visual arts are essential to the well being of a culture, central to the cognitive development of children, and of vital importance in understanding global cultures and diversity. Globalization, multiculturalism and historical awareness are facts of the 21st century and mold aesthetic, critical and material choices which artists make, in turn shaping the aesthetic environment. There is an infinite array of material and formal choices available to contemporary artists, and the choice to select, use and acknowledge what is commonly held to be a primitive material is deliberate. There is innate nostalgia in the decision to work with wood in a traditional manner. In the Unknown Craftsman, Suetsu Yanagi opines, "I feel that the great problem is how to make things in the present state of society. I wish that everyone would realize that until recently beauty in things was commonplace and that it is our responsibility to demand that of the future".¹ Sincerity is the prime requisite for an object maker.

Craft

I approach object making as an essential and cooperative exercise.

When I first see a work of art, I wonder how it came to be, and what it's made of. Work that denies a response to these two questions usually leaves me cold. As we critically examine any work of art, our perceptions of material source define the reading.

My craft aesthetic is evolved from figurative woodcarving. Carving wood with edge tools inherently requires a cooperative approach with both the material and the element of change. Quickly, one learns to navigate the physical properties of the wood; the grain, color and texture. The most constant reward and most vital element to working wood with hand tools is the physical contact with and the responsiveness of the workpiece. Each swing of the mallet or rotation of the chainsaws cutters represents a decision. As multitudes of decisions accumulate, a form with a unique and complex surface develops.

The physical complexities involved with using tree parts influence and add a distinct element to each working decision. Consistent throughout my work is evidence of my interaction with materials. Tool marks build up and create surface. Taking advantage of the organically occurring colors, grain and texture I work to compose with the existing qualities of the wood. Knots, burls, figure and checks are all opportunities to respond formally to a previously unknown variation in tone. Wood that is uniform enough to be interchangeable is visually dull, and I generally avoid it. Flawed, found or otherwise distressed wood brings more to the aesthetic table, but often necessitates a change in plan.

The element of chance that begins with worker error is compounded when material failure is a real possibility. Subtractive processes involve a certain amount of trepidation and a certain amount of risk taking. Most importantly, they involve flexibility

¹ SuetsuYanagi, The Unknown Craftsman, p 105.

in planning. I have found David Pye's division of craft in terms of the 'workmanship of risk' and the 'workmanship of certainty' to be useful in defining my approach to object making. The workmanship of risk is that which follows a gradient from rough to finished, allowing for change and risking error along the way. The decisions of where and when to stop are left to discretion of the worker. The workmanship of certainty follows no such gradient, and is represented in terms of exactitude, modern design, and mass production. While there are appropriate moments for each approach, we live in a time dominated by the workmanship of certainty. The goods we buy every day are uniform. Good or bad, their designs will be the same for each consumer. Along with this Pye states that, "the workmanship of risk has no exclusive prerogative on quality. What it has exclusively is an immensely varied range of qualities, without which at its command the art of design becomes arid and impoverished"².

Craft Applied

"Machinery gives speed, power, complete uniformity, and precision, but it cannot give creativity, adaptability, freedom, heterogeneity"³

The quality of craft is important throughout my work. In this thesis exhibition, craft is synchronous with form and process primarily in regards to joints and most evident in the surface quality. Most of this work is put together with finger joints that are pinned in place. They are strong, functional, visually appealing and appropriate to the task. They are also one of several direct references to traditional furniture making. The surface quality of the wood is a combination of chainsaw marks, spokeshave and plane smoothness. These two widely divergent types of tools are ideally suited for making the required shapes while leaving compelling texture behind and showcasing the grain. The finish that I used in this work comes out of the Arts and Crafts movement. White oak (in this case live oak) is surfaced with edge tools, then fumed in ammonia vapors. The ammonia reacts with the tannic acid present in varying degrees in oak. Since the level of tannin varies between heartwood and sapwood, differences in the color and texture in the wood are heightened rather than unified (as a stain or paint would do).

During the Kamakura period (1185-1333), Japanese sculptors evolved a process known as *yosegi zukuri* (multiple hollow block technique), which is designed to produce large, lightweight wooden sculptures quickly. Basically, the mass is built up with multiple blocks, which are shaped, hollowed out, jointed together and surface carved. This makes for more efficient use of material, allowing larger or extended forms to be built up from smaller blocks, rather than demanding a single, enormous piece of wood⁴. As I produced this show, I generally made the elements in small sets prior to assembly in order to match them as effectively as possible. The conical forms that are the heart of this exhibition were designed with the *yosegi zukuri* process in mind.

² David Pye, The Nature and Art of Workmanship p.23.

³ Yanagi, p. 105

⁴Victor Harris and Ken Matsushima, Kamakura, The Renaissance of Japanese Sculpture 1185-1333.



Figure 1: *Five Cones*



Figure 2: *George Nakashima Table*

Generally, green wood is considered undesirable for sculpture. Wood fresh from the tree contains a huge amount of water that will evaporate over a period of years. As it does so, the wood will shrink, warp and check. Hollowing out the form decreases the problems associated with water and wood by greatly reducing weight and nearly eliminating checking, as the remaining wood is able to dry evenly and flex. If the sculptor can work quickly enough, a green log can be hollow carved and finished before any checking occurs. Green wood is much easier to carve than seasoned lumber, and in South Louisiana, it is essentially free. By removing the center of the wood and the majority of the water, the remaining cones are generally free to shrink in on themselves with minimal checking. Bearing in mind that the process is cooperative, I allowed and in some places encouraged checks to occur and become part of the visual appeal of the work. In numerous cases, checks are fixed in place with inset dovetails (made from pear) which hold the

checks in stasis. The numerous dovetails in this work provide visual focus and are a deliberate reference to high craft. They acknowledge that wood is a living material and are a pointed reference to both changes over time and resistance to the same.

Iconography

Gesture, cones and spikes.

This work is designed to combine a set of archetypal forms along with gestural and figurative qualities into a series of metaphorical individuals that will surround the viewer. Variations on scale fluctuate around human proportions, in order to provide a direct link to the viewer. Gesture is the basis for the connection between form and figure, and communicates emotion, intent and individuality. The majority of the forms in this exhibition are designed around gestures of growth, assertiveness or collapse. The individual gestures obviously are reflective of the chosen materials of which they are made. In most cases, the objects in this show were made from live oak limbs which grew near LSU. The trees themselves are remnants of plantation culture and the region as a whole. Their prominence and massive size belie the turbulent and mixed history with which they are visibly identified. However, it is easy to anthropomorphize them, especially in formal terms: they rise from the ground and in a show of strength wind and twist outward while slowly returning to the ground. Equally emblematic, and with a similar growth pattern, magnolia is the wood of choice for the gestural elements in *Writhing*.

The work in this show revolves around the cone. As a mathematical model, the cone begins at a single point and gradually expands outward forming a curved and ever expanding plane enclosing and defining a far greater volume. This model serves as a metaphor for the course of a human life, and as in a single human life, the shape and nature of the form define the content. Direct readings of the form itself revolve around the control of space, whether by drawing space inward or projecting a radiance outward. In either case, each of the conical forms in this exhibit consumes space, both figuratively and implicitly. Alternate labels that could be attached to the cones include funnels, bells and trumpets. In each case the archetypal form is formally and metaphorically designed to control space. A figural reading of the objects links the cones to heads or mouths.

In western art history, the cone is used as a symbol for plenty. At the beginning of the cone, the single point becomes a spike. Although the majority of



Figure 3: *Writhing*

spikes are clustered on a discrete series of wooden forms, there are a number of pieces that fuse the two forms varying the rhythm and visual qualities of the installation. In combining these two paired icons, I have established a link between plenty and the concealed aggression that both provides and is engendered by a belief in plenty. Dominant western aesthetic commonly divides the natural from the spiritual. There is a strong parallel between that fundamental divide and our common perception of plenty as reflected in our standard of living. We consume and ignore the consequences.

Material Usage and Metaphors

Things are what they are.

My aesthetic is rooted in the ephemeral nature of physical form, and controlled collapse has been an underlying theme in my work for years.



Figure 4: Mature birch tree growing out of a logged stump in the Monongahela National Forest, WV

All of the materials I have used (wood, rope, brick, metal and salt) have strong cultural connections, and have been absorbed into our daily awareness. The major elements are reclaimed discards, and there is no attempt made to mask the temporal nature of any of any material used. In order to mix and match materials effectively, I have carefully maintained a large pile of logs and limbs collected around the city. This collection of tree

parts has been influential on the development of my work, both in terms of forms and a sense of responsibility to the inanimate but collected pile of material. This show effectively utilizes the available wood and is directly reflective of the place of origin.

Wood is the flesh of trees.

Humankind is and has been dependant on trees for oxygen, shelter, food, fuel, transportation, building materials, paper, and the shared aesthetic environment. Carving the flesh of trees has been one of the most ubiquitous of folk arts. We have a long history and a close relationship to trees and the materials we take from them. As anyone who works with wood knows, the idea that wood is an inert building material is a fallacy. Wood is vascular and structural tissue, which changes shape and size in response to the environment. While our individual histories with wooden furniture lead us to expect wood to be hard, smooth and warm, the reality is that unlike most sculptural materials, wood is neither homogenous nor predictable.



Figure 5: *Red Oak Bench*

I have chosen to use wood as tree parts, rather than building material, allowing me to take advantage of the tremendous amount of variety it possesses. Shrinking, warping, checking, bark inclusions, grain irregularities, knots, rotten sections, fungal growth, epiphytes, insects and their larvae are all reminders of the origins of wood and the comparison to flesh. The visible documentation of a tree's life span is distinctly evident in the number of growth rings. The analogy to human flesh begins to break down only in terms of clarity; the history of a tree can be read through the grain while it is much easier for us to mask our own history.

Rope as a metaphor for human activity.



Figure 6: *Aggression Tree Series*

The manila rope used in this exhibition is little more than plant fiber tightly twisted into a single cord. It is a material rich in formal and literary references, with direct associations to slavery, shipping, agriculture and commerce. Fundamentally, rope binds, ties, strangles and holds, but only as directed to. Continuing the metaphor of wood as flesh, rope functions as sinew and muscle. By winding it tightly around and through the dangerous elements in the show the rope refers to violence, anger and tension. Like the other elements in the show, it is a crafted and fundamental entity. The winding and binding is a purposeful and consequential activity.

Brick represents the sum total of human accomplishment.

Each broken brick is nothing more than dirt and a record of the activity that transposed it. Brick begins as dirt which is collected, formed and fired for the express purpose of building structures. In time these structures are inhabited, used and eventually decay. By employing brick collected from a number of sites around Baton Rouge, I am referencing a common and collective history of cyclical development and decay. The unknown and anonymous contributors represent a summation of collective human ambition. The collected brick provides an environment for the individual wooden forms, connecting them to a real place and time.



Figure 7: Altar

By building brick enclosures, floors and islands, I am providing a context for the wooden forms. Each of the fragments of used and broken brick has a separate history; however they all share a common beginning and a common end. Stacking brick is an extraordinarily fundamental activity, recalling the blocks that young children play with. Using this primal method to construct a cohesive structure is a powerful alteration of space. Aside from the fragments of text available on a number of the bricks, the material is nearly impossible to date or place. It appears timeless and universal; simply a mound of collected activity and an attempt at permanence.



Figure 8: Part of a Cham temple complex at My Son, Vietnam

Metal is control.

The ephemeral nature of memory on both an individual and social level is amazing: we tend to think of memories as fixed facts, although our perceptions of memories change with time. Histories are dialogues between myth and memory. There are a large number of references in my work to organic, naturally occurring forms, and each is very deliberately made. Metal, in this case copper, is the ideal material for asserting the complex and essentially synthetic nature of each sculpture.



A defining quality of human culture has been each group's relative proficiency in using metal. Metal is qualitatively fluid and can be made into basically any shape or form desired, and so is symbolic of man's control over the environment. Copper plates redefine, structure and emphasize certain junctions in this work. In some places, the copper is functional, spanning a splice. Inherent in the nature of metals are references to control, structure, braces and armor. Each of these readings is synchronous with my stated intention to redefine and question what is natural.

Figure 9: *Elemental detail*

Salt is a quintessential commodity.

Historically, salt is among the most sought after commodities ¹ and using it in sculpture opens up a bevy of potential references, which center on consumption and necessity. Salt is a vital and ubiquitous material which is intimately connected to numerous aspects of daily life. Perceived salt availability has played a major role in shaping the locations of community development, and salt production has been a driving force in technological and cultural development. Salt is an absolute necessity for mammalian life, yet over consumption is a serious problem in contemporary culture. Prior to refrigeration, salting was a prime means of preserving food.

The *Salt Shrine* was made by melting and pouring salt into a mold containing a copper armature. The gestural salt form



Figure 10: *Salt Shrine*

¹ Mark Kurlansky, [Salt: A World History](#).

created will absorb moisture out of humid air which corrode the copper buried inside, leaching oxides to the surface. Salty water will also drip onto the bronze disc at the base. In addition to the record of decay and corrosion that will gradually evolve on the surface, this is a truly ephemeral object.

Installation and Conclusions

“...Gardens eventually become transitional zones between the world of nature and the world of culture”²

My approach to sculpture has been that of a traditional object maker. I make objects with an eye towards their interrelationships, and I keep older work and works in progress visible around my studio. As I began this project, my intention was to make a multitude of gestural forms that echoed “the physical nature of life, growth and quest by beginning with a single point and swelling outwards in a gesture of continuation”. To some extent that has happened, and at the same time, the numbers of objects and their relationships have fused some of them visually. The dynamics of space and multitude have become a backdoor into installation.

The brick structures were purposefully approached as a site-specific installation, in order to alter the physical environment of the white box gallery. The physical qualities of the brick I have collected, cleaned, stacked and re-stacked are visually effective only en masse. They are not individual objects; rather they are a collective and rely on installation. Islands of brick unite and provide context for individual or related sculptures, transforming them into collective installations.

Transforming the gallery through installation affords the opportunity to physically guide the viewer through space, as well as creating a total sensory environment. In order to enter the gallery, the viewer must physically pass through a curtain of rope and then confront a brick wall. Light and sound are both controlled. The gallery is arranged with a series of individual sculptures, a single large brick *Altar*, a smaller *Salt Shrine*, three distinct installed groups and two benches which invite the viewer to participate.

By recreating a pseudo-natural environment in an organic fashion inside a highly cultured space, the boundaries between the natural and artificial worlds are blurred. The materials presented are primal, distinct and maintain their integrity. I am left able to tell a very specific, but individual narrative, and the viewer is invited to determine their own role.

² jagodzinski, p.157

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VITA

Bill Wolff was born in Camden, New York, in 1971. A self-taught woodcarver, Wolff exhibited work throughout New York State between 1995-2000. Wolff began exploring other sculptural and drawing media while attending Binghamton University in Binghamton, New York. His free time was divided between reading, hiking in the Catskill Mountains and carving wood. He graduated with his Bachelor of Fine Arts in sculpture in 2000. Wolff spent the next year teaching English near Tokyo, drawing, painting and traveling in Japan and Asia. He returned to the United States and enrolled in Louisiana State University to complete his Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture. Wolff's work has been heavily influenced by the subtropical climate of growth and decay that is prevalent in Louisiana, by the massive live oak trees and the constant tension between synthetic order and natural entropy. His wood and metal sculptures have been featured in a number of national juried exhibitions, and he has held a series of solo shows. Wolff's thesis exhibition, *Elemental*, held in 2004, consisted of thirty wooden sculptures assembled from parts of live oak trees, over a thousand feet of manila rope and four tons of used brick. His work can be viewed at www.billwolff.net.