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stillNoticing

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stillNoticing

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Roberta Ann Massuch
BFA, Northern Illinois University, 2005
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Abstract

The installation *still/Noticing* contains ceramic still lifes and drawings that illustrate and bring permanence to ephemeral and fleeting moments. The work is an attempt to share my experience of being captivated by the phenomenon of light affecting the perception of objects and spaces. These moments are often found in familiar spaces, with familiar objects. Each work addresses a particular type of looking: one in which the act of noticing an object transforming from one moment to the next becomes a silent, almost meditative experience.

Introduction

"Now, too, the rising sun came in at the window, touching the red-edged curtain and began to bring out circles and lines. Now in the growing light its whiteness settled in the plate; the blade condensed its gleam. Chairs and cupboards loomed behind so that though each was separate they seemed inextricably involved. The looking glass whitened its pool upon the wall. The real flower on the window-sill was attended by a phantom flower. Yes the phantom was part of the flower for when a bud broke free, the paler flower in the glass opened a bud too."

-Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

I am constantly noticing.

Noticing moments when light shifts across a room, uniting objects through shadows and reflections. These moments silence everything around me, quiet my thoughts, and draw my attention away from whatever held it before. I become quiet.... contemplative... still. I want to investigate, try to figure out why the objects resonate beyond themselves. How, though physically none of them touch, objects affect one another and the spaces around. I lose myself in these moments, focusing completely on this phenomenon. But then, the light shifts, and what I noticed disappears as quickly as it appeared. I want to share these moments that capture my attention, knowing they will have already passed.

The work I have created for my thesis exhibition breaks these captivating moments down into three elements: form, color, and light, illustrating how each component is inseparable from the others. The still lifes and drawings are my way of visually encapsulating what Virginia Woolf is able to do with words: show others the phenomenon of light and color affecting objects, affecting the perception of each thing. I hope to reveal to others the silence and stillness present in the moment of noticing—a moment that will eventually fade away.

Still, I continue noticing.

I am still, noticing.

1

Home

My objective in creating this body of work, *stillNoticing*, is to give ephemeral and fleeting moments permanence and to share my experience of being engrossed in the phenomenon of light's affect on objects and spaces. The still lifes and drawings I have made originate from moments I notice most often in familiar spaces, with familiar objects. These spaces are typically in my home. It is in the domestic space that I find calmness and feel most connected to my surroundings.

This familiarity is the reason I distinguish home as the place where I look for ideas, where the work begins. After making functional objects for many years, I questioned why these objects held my interest. I realized that it is not the individual objects I surround myself with that gives me a sense of home. Instead, it develops in the process of organizing my belongings (functional pottery, knickknacks, or books), arranging them into small still lifes and compositions. It is a quiet and reflective process, one that brings me a sense of satisfaction once all of the elements are in the 'right' place.



Image 1. Example of a collection of objects in my home.

In researching human perception, I came across the book *The Sense of Space* by David Morris. I am interested in applying his ideas to my work by dissecting how I exist in and perceive the world around me, specifically the lived space.

"When we do not merely move through place, but move *in* it, *dwell* in it, perhaps place senses our movement, that is, place gives our movement a sense, direction, in the way that a partially completed puzzle gives pieces a sense that helps us fit them into place. When we dwell in a place we connect with it in a different way, and that connection makes us re-sense our sense of space. I call space of this sort dwelling space..."¹

¹ David Morris, *The Sense of Space* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 181.

Dwelling space is a place to live, but I consider it to also be moment of concentration. By studying objects and the dwelling space I am able to establish how I perceive things. I notice the moments when objects seem to merge due to overlapping shadows. I dwell on these moments, and as a poet will feel the stillness and mystery in these intersections and express the feelings in words, this body of work is my way of sharing my noticing with others.

The installation, *stillNoticing*, contains drawings and sculptural still lifes that illustrate how light and color give rise to subtle shifts in the surfaces of and spaces between objects. Each work addresses a particular type of looking: one in which the act of noticing an object transforming from one moment to the next becomes a silent, almost meditative experience.



Image 2. Installation view of *stillNoticing*.

I study the relationships that develop between objects, especially in the shadows cast by functional objects. Each noticing moment becomes a puzzle that I need to solve. Questions such as these arise: How is the color from one object changing the object next to it? Where is the light coming from that is creating this or that shadow, and why is it that color? How do I visually represent these fleeting moments so that others can experience this phenomenon?

From those observations, I pinch clay forms; purposefully distilling the shadows into planes that will accept directed light in different ways. I choose to leave the wiggly surface of pinching and finish each new object with subtle shifts in texture/matt-ness/whiteness for the same reason. By using the ceramic material, I concretize shadows into three-dimensional forms, creating tension between permanence and impermanence. Once the shadow space has been manifested in the ceramic object, I turn my attention to setting up a composition—one that will stage an approximation of the initial ephemeral moment. The primary elements used to reveal this, light and color, are strategically placed and directed to affect the ceramic object. The light resonates color from behind, from the side, or within the forms: perpetuating the way the viewer perceives the surface color of the ceramic objects. No longer is the form a solid white shape. Each plane shifts in tone, a film of color lays over top, reliant on the amount or absence of light on its surface.



Image 3. Noticing, # 1935.

The drawings tend to more directly reference the objects I have chosen: glassware, stacked and arranged in the bands of light streaming through blinds or windows. Setting these objects near or onto handmade paper stretched over ceramic frames, I wait for the moment when the light is just right to record the shadow. These shadows and the empty spaces between objects become a place for the eyes to rest, but also a place where layers of translucent colors, in light and shadows, force the eye to shift constantly, causing static objects to appear to wiggle. It is this movement, this lack of clarity, and this distortion, which drives the drawings and ultimately all of the surfaces of the still lifes- the clay, paper, and concrete. I want to create a sense of vibration with each surface.



Image 4. Noticing #102 to #165.

I find a kind of meditation in the process of creating this work. My mind becomes still in the first noticing moment and this state carries on throughout the formation of the components and the arrangement of the composition. Like when deciphering a puzzle, I quietly study and respond to each

pinched clay form, making decisions on how light and color could be introduced later to represent a moment of noticing. I play with the objects, switching the configuration until each ends up in the 'right' position, where the color, light and objects become an illusion of the first noticing. And each work included in *stillNoticing* is a variation on this theme: a moment that has been studied so intensely that the meaning of the object is lost; shadows have been broken down into planes; a relationship develops in the spaces between the objects.

2 Light & Color

In my home, sunlight filters in through windows and blinds, dispersing a layer over painted walls, and reflecting onto the objects in the room. The colors change and shift constantly, as clouds pass in front of the sun, a storm moves by, or dusk sets in. This shifting light directly affects the way I see and experience the objects in my lived space. Physiologically speaking, "Light and color are, in a way, the raw materials of vision. The perception of an object in space would be impossible if we were not sensitive to the light reflected from the object and to the brightness and hue of this light."² I study the effects of subtle shifts in light and shadow on both functional and decorative objects in the home, and am enchanted by the relationships that develop.

An object in the home occupies physical space, but the shadow cast from it extends into a larger area that covers other objects, diffuses into other shadows. Sometimes, other forms block a cast shadow: distorting, reflecting, and expanding the original object. Shadows are not permanent; they are vague and sometimes unclear, adding multiple layers of shapes and lines to the areas between objects. Therefore, a shadow caused by shifts in light becomes a constant redefinition of an object.

A shadow is a hole in the light. By definition, it is a local, relative deficiency in the quantity of light meeting a surface, and reflecting from that surface to the eye. There are three types of shadow: cast (or projected), attached (or self), and shading (slant/tilt shading). All three types of shadow exist as a different layer of color information that reaches the eye—in warm light these colors will appear cool, in cool light, one sees layers of warmth. Each shadow on and around the object creates subtle variations of color.

It is the subtlety in the layers of transparent colored light that builds up in the shadows and the spaces between the objects that is most interesting to me. Joseph Albers defines this translucent light as film color:

"The sun is glaring white at daytime, but it is full red at sunset.
The white ceilings of houses surrounded by lawns or the white-painted
eaves of a roof on a sunny day appear in bright green, which is
reflected from the grass on the ground
All these cases present film colors.

They appear in thin, transparent, translucent layer between the eye
and an object, independent of the object's surface color."³

In researching color and shadow, I found that my interest lies in observing where transparent layers of color cause domestic objects to become involved with one another. For example, the light that is blocked by a vase on the shelf causes the teacup next to it to appear darker in the shadow, and the color seen is a combination of the surface color and translucent reflected light from the vase. These observations of the subtle layers of information are the starting point for each piece I create.

² James J. Gibson, *The Perception of the Visual World* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1950), 3.

³ Joseph Albers, *Interaction of Color* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), 45

I chose to include only bold, warm colors in the work created for my thesis. The reflected color becomes a glow of warmth extending from the surface of walls over to the objects/spaces, bringing that feeling of comfort I find in the home into the gallery. I am making a direct reference to Luis Barragán, a Mexican architect whose structures were built to deal specifically with light and color; how the two can play together to create a warm, welcoming environment.



Image 5. Installation view of *stillNoticing*

Having never experienced one of his buildings in person, I have only photographic images to show me how he strategically placed vibrant colors to illuminate hallways and courtyards. Transparent films of light are projected from bright yellow brickwork or hot pink doorways, transforming the space throughout the day based on the direction and intensity of sunlight. His buildings were designed in a modernist approach, minimalist and planar to allow for the interaction of light and color—knowing these interior spaces would be constantly changing. The color is strategically placed so to envelope the occupant in a variable and never definitive state.

Barragán once stated, “don’t ask me about this building or that one, don’t look at what I do, see what I saw.”⁴ This is what the work in *stillNoticing* is all about. Like Barragán, I want people to see what I saw—the way color and light can transform our perception of objects and the rooms in which they exist.

⁴ Luis Barragán, talking to students, from René Burri’s, *Luis Barragán* (London: Phaidon Press, 2000) 23.

3 Still life

The focus and stillness that occurs in the noticing moment is present in the process of creating this work. As I pinch the forms, my thoughts are clear and meditative, knowing that the ceramic object will give permanence to a fleeting observation. I set up possible compositions in my mind as my hands move, concentrating on where color and light might radiate over the new form, how I might juxtapose each element of the still life to create silent exchanges between the objects.



Image 6. Noticing, # 1655.

Still life has an innate ability to show balance and capture calm. Often, objects in still life can act as symbols for other things or hold unseen content, but for me it is a formal observation of an impermanent moment, suspending reality. Noticing, and then visually representing the way I see objects interact with one another in the lived space through drawings and sculpture. Exposing the relationship that develops in the spaces between, and becomes a place for the eyes to rest. But in that resting space, if one focuses hard, nuances can be found; in the constant shifts in shadows and the layers of color created by reflected light. Albers describes this connection:

“We are able to hear a single tone.
But we almost never (that is, without special devices) see a single color
unconnected and unrelated to other colors.
Colors present themselves in continuous flux, constantly related to
changing neighbors and changing conditions.”⁵

⁵ Albers, *Interaction of Color*, 3.

Objects are always standing still, while light and time passes by, constantly changing our perceptions of those things and the spaces they occupy. The sculptures in *still/Noticing* are three-dimensional still lifes; ceramic forms juxtaposed with concrete and colored paper, paint or polymer clay—focusing on the relationship between objects and how everything can be connected through light and shadow. Materials bring with them ideas of permanence, freezing each noticing moment into a still, un-shifting composition.

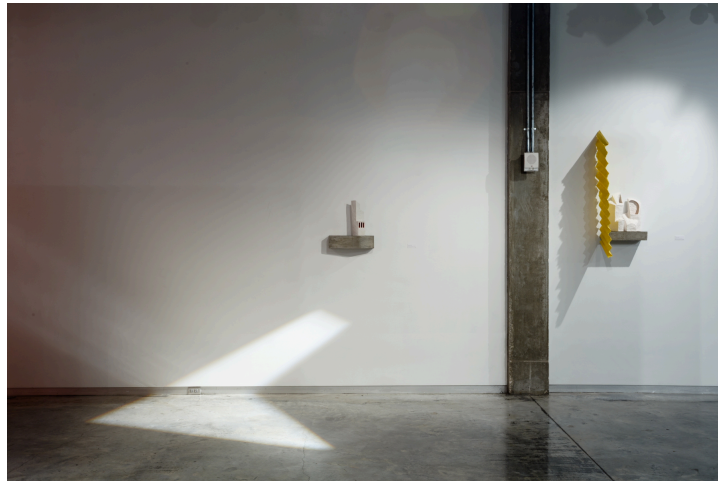


Image 7. Installation view of Noticing, #185-2X (left) & Noticing # 1235 (right).

When I stop and study an object, I dwell on its form and constantly shifting surface. This is a specific type of looking, when instead of looking for something spectacular to happen, I concentrate on observing the subtleties in my surroundings, is when a quiet falls over me. I feel privy to a kind of magic, where all else in the world dissipates and I am able to focus on a singular, momentary phenomenon. In his book, *Looking at the Overlooked*, Norman Bryson states,

“[...] Still life loves the ‘so what.’ It exactly breaks with narratives scale of human importance. The law of narrative is one of change; characters move from episode to episode, from ignorance to knowledge, from high estate to low or from low to high. Its generative principle is one of discontinuity; where states are continuous, homeostatic, narrative is helpless. But still life pitches itself at a level of material existence where nothing exceptional occurs.”⁶

In the moment when nothing exceptional occurs, there is still something happening. In still life, objects do not exist singularly; instead relationships develop regardless of subject: in the spaces around and between the objects, in the color and light. The painter Giorgio Morandi knew this well. He depicted the same simple objects over and over again. Studying bottles, cups and bowls for years in such an attentive way that the objects became separated from themselves. They were no longer functional objects, instead just forms. He once stated, “The only interest the visible world awakens in me concerns space, light, color, and form,”⁷ And, there is a sense of stillness in his paintings, room in between the objects to rest, to dwell on, to focus.

⁶ Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked* (Cambridge, MA: Yale University Press, 1990), 61.

⁷ Quote by Morandi in *Living, Thinking, Looking* by Siri Hustvedt, (New York: Picador, 2012), 237. As quoted in Gottfried Boehm “Giorgio Morandi’s Artistic Concept” in *Morandi*, ed. Ernst Gerhard Guse and Franz Armin Morat (Munich: Prestel, 2008), 15.



Image 8. Noticing, #1788.

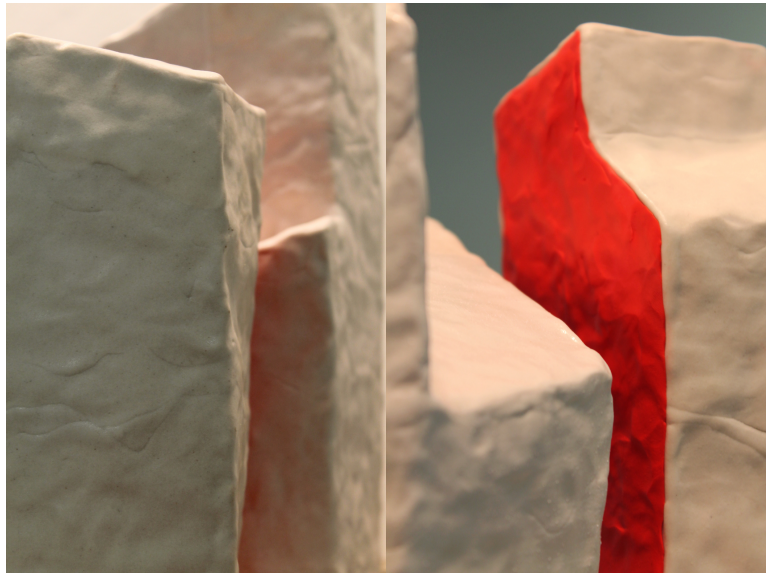


Image 9. Details of Noticing, #1788.

Like Morandi's paintings, I am attempting to depict objects based on their essential qualities, not what each object represents or means. The objects I choose begin as functional or decorative objects and are abstracted using observations on light and shadows to create new form. Compositions are developed through the silent study of the relationship between the invented objects. I place the ceramic forms on concrete shelves, a structural material shaped specifically to complement the form but also to act as a place for the invented objects to dwell. The arrangement of these components allows me to transpose a fleeting moment into a static visual experience that entices the viewer to slow down and look closely, to become engrossed with the phenomenon.

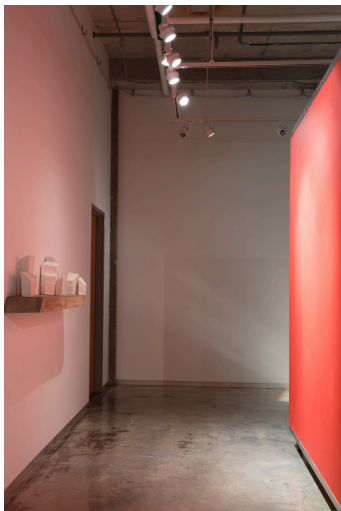


Image 10. stillNoticing, #1795.

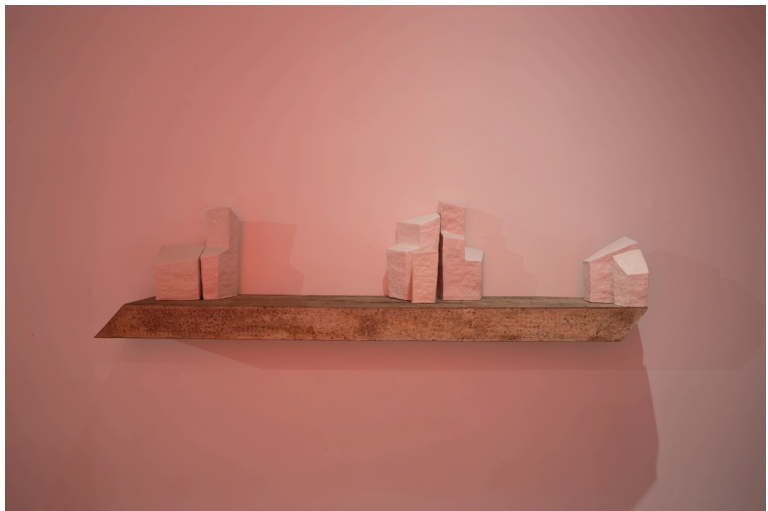


Image 11. Detail of stillNoticing, #1795.

Conclusion

In creating this body of work, *stillNoticing*, it was not only my intention to compose a collection of moments, but also to share the experience of noticing with the viewer. Each still life or set of drawings illustrated a specific phenomenon, one in which light and color affects the perception of objects. But more importantly, the gallery space was chosen specifically to facilitate this experience. The space and individual works became unified, through material, color, and light. It was transformed through the use of warm, bold colors, which enveloped the viewer in transparent light, while panels of bright white light led viewers through the space. The installation process was illuminating, as I was surprised by the unexpected moments of noticing that occurred within the gallery space. Shadows became more dramatic, often causing the viewer to question whether they were real applied to the walls with paint.

It is my hope that viewers were captivated by each moment I composed. That they were enticed to look a little longer, a little harder, and notice the subtleties that occurred due to the phenomenon of light and color over the forms I created.

But ultimately, that they left the space and were still, noticing.



Image 12. Installation views of *stillNoticing*.

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Artist statement

I am intrigued by the way shifting light in a room affects how one perceives objects in the home; reflections and shadows cause relationships to appear between two (or more) surfaces and the spaces in between. Objects are inextricably involved; the surface of one will always affect the perception of another due to shifts in the intensity and direction of light covering the forms. My intent is to illustrate and bring permanence to these fleeting moments, while sharing with the viewer the experience of witnessing an entrancing phenomenon: light constantly affecting and changing familiar spaces and objects in the home.

The forms and surfaces I create arise out of these observations. Empty and often overlooked areas between functional and decorative objects are transformed into architectural ceramic forms and arranged into still lifes; juxtaposing each form with adjacent, brightly colored surfaces that coat each plane with a film of reflected light. The shadows created from the compositions become almost as important as the objects, allowing the boundary of the physical form to extend into the space around. Drawings become a record of the light and shadows that force the eye to shift constantly, causing static objects to appear to wiggle. It is this constant movement, this lack of clarity, and this distortion, which drives my studio explorations and reveals how I perceive and create relationships between the objects in the lived space.

Vita

Roberta Massuch has lived in fifteen different houses & seven states during her thirty years of existence. *stillNoticing* is Roberta Massuch's final show as an MFA candidate at Louisiana State University's School of Art & Design. Massuch received her undergraduate degree from Northern Illinois University in 2005, and was awarded the 2009 Jerome Artist Project Grant from Northern Clay Center in Minneapolis, MN. Some recent exhibitions include: "Rendered Motives" at Charlie Cummmings Gallery (Florida), and "In the Mix: Contemporary Practices in Ceramics" at Crimson Laurel Gallery, Bakersville, NC. She is an active member of local artist collective, Elevator Projects, presenting work in "Fluxswitch" and the interactive work "dreamfort" at this year's Surreal Salon at Baton Rouge Gallery.