

2013

Without words : an exhibition of functional objects

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WITHOUT WORDS: AN EXHIBITION OF
FUNCTIONAL OBJECTS

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 Art

in

The Department of Art

by
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August 2013

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ABSTRACT

At the core of my artwork lie two essential goals, to make objects that convey my understanding of beauty, and while doing this, to preserve the objects functional qualities. The materials that I select to build with, primarily wood and porcelain, are renowned for their durability and longevity, resulting in objects that become a permanent fixture in the life of the user. Through utility, the things that I create infiltrate the lives of those around me and provide an entry point for a conversation between myself and the user via the object. Newly developed technological methods are an integral component of my process for 3-Dimensional visualization and fabrication. The act of making objects has become a means of self-understanding. Looking back at the collection of objects that I have produced provides me with a record of my journey as a maker and affords me vision of the road to come.

WHAT AND WHY

Did you ever wonder who designed your toothbrush? In all likelihood it was a group of people, but some person or group of people made each decision that was required to produce every object that you use each day. Although their function is relatively simple, toothbrushes have evolved to become complex dynamic objects. What started as a stick with a brush on the end now contains five or six separate materials with a squishy grip that conforms well to almost anyone's hand.

I am a firm believer that if you want to understand someone you should look at their life's work. I do not simply mean their occupation, but rather their Work; an undertaking that they are invested in. This could include their occupation, but often the more telling evidence is found in their hobbies and how they spend their free time. Is this person meticulous? Do they have trouble finishing things that they started? Are they efficient? Proud? Egotistical? If so, you will see evidence of these traits in the things they care passionately about.

One of my motivations for making objects is to understand myself more clearly. All of the objects that I make are components of a whole, which, together give evidence as to who I am. In many ways, if someone wanted to get to know me, it would be faster to use one of my pieces than to speak to me. These objects, when viewed together, are a sort of accidental biography of my life, views, tendencies and characteristics. Often, these objects have served as a timeline that I can reference as a reminder of where I have been and what I have done.

Since I was old enough to do so, I have had a compulsion to build things. It was not until I enrolled in graduate school that I realized where this compulsion originates. I am constantly engaged in a conversation with my audience through the objects that I make, and these conversations teach me more about my prospective of making objects. One question that I have repeatedly asked myself is, who do I make work for? In some ways, my work is a selfish endeavor. I design and make as a means of self-discovery. However, I also see designing and making as a way of connecting with those around me. Complex relationships are formed between myself (maker), the object, and the world (user). As the objects that I create become the property of others, new relationships are formed.

My interest in function began when I was very young, but it became my focus when I formed my first clay pot. While this pot did not look very beautiful or work very well, the act of making it unearthed a series of questions revolving around practicality, luxury, beauty and utility. Why did I make this pot? Is it well made? Are handmade objects still relevant or necessary in our society? Is that rim going to crack the first time it bumps into another object? Is this object ugly? Will anyone else want to own or use it? Do I want to sell it? Questions like these remain as constant thoughts throughout my designing and making process.

As it pertains to object design, I realized very quickly that there is a tension between the visual qualities of an object, and how it works, and that every designer must discover as well as apply his or her own priority standards. Visual cues serve as suggestions about what an object might be used for. Such as, how it should be held, where it might be stored or what objects should ac-

company it. Skilled designers are able to provide these suggestions in a way that will enhance the utility of an object while avoiding an over-obvious solution, which might negate the need for the user to further explore the object. One part of the design process that I greatly enjoy involves discovering new ways of embedding, in the object, considered solutions to these questions.

As objects interact with us in our homes, they move from room to room and as they do, they enter into a cycle of function and become a component in the self-identity of the user. Often, we personify objects; forming strong bonds with the ones we surround ourselves with. The things we acquire must meet a certain criteria; they must affirm the image of ourselves that we hope to project to the rest of the world. Objects that fulfill these criteria enter our lives, and act as a kind of sounding board on which we can affirm our self-image. When we see an object for the first time, our minds form assumptions based on innumerable factors ranging from what material it is made out of, to who is interacting with it, to what color it is, and these assumptions inform us whether or not the object fulfills our criteria and has a place in our life.

Functional objects live their own lives. Each one has a job to do, and as they perform their daily functions they move throughout the world. For example: a vase might be stored in a cabinet in your pantry. A friend visits and brings you flowers, so you remove the vase from the cabinet and it sits in the sink briefly while you fill it with water. Next, you arrange the flowers and place them on the dining room table. After about a week the flowers have wilted, they are discarded and the vase is then carried back to the kitchen. It is emptied, rinsed out and allowed to dry in the dish rack for the evening, after which you returned it to the cabinet in the pantry. Other adjacent

objects also play a role in this use cycle. For instance, what happens if the kitchen cabinet is too small to serve as storage for the vase. Alternative storage must be considered. The combinations and interactions between a set of numbers of objects, while vast, are finite. A skilled designer can suggest and encourage specific interactions, while at the same time, leave room for improvisation.

The function and aesthetic of an object is another factor in this cycle. Therefore, as the one who defines the objects physical characteristics, the designer or maker, has some responsibility and control. However, after the object leaves the studio or the factory, much of that control changes hands. When the user enters the equation an exchange begins. It is a gradual and continuous conversation that takes place through all objects in our world, in which, often no words are spoken. Throughout these conversations there are defining, perpetuating moments. The user may discover a thoughtful detail that had previously gone unnoticed. Or, the maker observes an unintended application for one of their objects. The work that I create is an invitation for others to engage and experience these moments. In the end, I provide an entry point in the conversation and the user takes the dialogue to his or her own set of conclusions. The user is the catalyst – the unpredictable and infinite variable.

One common goal of many artists and designers is to convey a message or experience. The message and methods of doing this are often very different. Many artists present their viewer with an experience that engulfs them. Through excess of scale and decoration, and the use of bright colors, loud noises or luxurious ornamentation, the viewer is faced with a comparatively brief experience, which has the potential to impact them in a profound way. In con-

trast to aims such as temporary and overwhelming, my goals are more akin to tenacity and subversive.

Objects can have a powerful presence, with the potential to dominate the user. I once heard a very talented musician say, “The most important notes are the ones that you don’t play.” Restraint is one of the most valuable, and most challenging skills for any creative person to master. One of my primary goals is to create work that can exist with the user by allowing them visual space and to sustain a line of interaction between the user and maker through the object. An object must contain enough visual influence to be a presence in someone’s life, while leaving room for the user to exist. Daily use objects must have the characteristics of a welcome companion. My goal is not to overwhelm, but to accompany, and the vehicle with which I have chosen to do so is function. People need functional and beautiful objects to survive and because of this we are constantly searching for them. We form a dependency on them, and because of this, functional objects are a powerful and direct path to the user.

In the last fifteen years, designers have been faced with difficult questions about how to produce goods more efficiently and responsibly. The two ways this is attainable are by 1) making objects that have a long life-span or 2) making objects that last only as long as they need to but are easily recycled and re-purposed. One goal in my current work is to create objects with longevity of function and beauty. Evidence of this is found in both the materials and the mode in which my objects are built. This body of work is composed solely of wood, porcelain, with the exception of some appropriate hardware. All materials and processes used are renowned for their longevity

and durability. If an object is meant to last 70 years it must be able to physically last that long, fulfill its' function and hold its' beauty.

Also, there is a question of fashion. Each designer must decide for his or herself how important it is that their work follows current trends. Objects that impact my designs adhere to similar qualities that I instill in my work, whether or not these objects are accepted as fashionable to the rest of the world less important to me as other traits. For instance, I am influenced by work that is built with materials that age well and produced with a level of craftsmanship that allows them to outlive the trends of the time. One example is the work of a Danish designer, Finn Juhl (1912-1989). Juhl's is well known for his elegant use of wood and upholstery in his furniture designs. Many of the objects that Juhl designed still exist today and are used daily.

Like many fields today, the boundaries of art and design are expanding rapidly and overlapping with those of other fields. The image that comes to mind when we think of art or design have evolved rapidly in the last 10 years. Artists' and designers' expertise often crosses over boundaries that were previously established. They may collaborate with specialists from any given field. Advancements in technology have been a major catalyst for this growth. New methods for creating and visualizing three-dimensional forms have profoundly impacted me, and I utilize several of these techniques in the design and building of my objects. During the production of my objects, I assume the role of artist, designer, craftsman and beta tester. Fulfilling each of these roles during an objects conception and production gives me the latitude to allow both the initial ideas and the tangible object to grow and evolve. During In the early stages of my design pro-

cess, I alternate between three means of visualization tactics: hand drawing, computer renderings and constructing physical models. I find that this combination of interaction during the process to provides a deeper degree of insight, and this acquired understanding allows me to evaluate and experiment with the object I am trying aspiring to build before I begin its construction. In the end, this approach saves me time and materials while assisting to clarify my visual and functional intentions.

When I am making work to be slip cast in clay, I use three main methods of fabrication for the original model, rapid prototyping, CNC milling operations or hand construction from MDF. Each method has its benefits and I select the most appropriate one for the object I am building. Both rapid prototyping and CNC milling have the potential to achieve nearly perfect accuracy which I take advantage of if the object I am creating has components that fit together. However, these methods of construction are far more expensive than building by hand. Another concern is the mark that is left by the process, or a lack of mark. CNC milling is a reductive shaping process in which a metal cutter, much like a router bit, is spun by a machine and used to cut away material. This method leaves easily identifiable lines in the surface of the object as the machine sends the cutter through the material. Occasionally, I incorporate these machined lines in my work, as seen in the base of the cutting boards in this exhibition and in the image in Figure 1.

Rapid prototyping, or 3D printing is an additive building technology. Two common printing materials are plastic and plaster, although rapid prototyping machines have been set up to print in materials such as metal, glass and chocolate. The 3D printer that I use prints in a plaster powder. The surface of the final object contains unique striations from the building up of material. In the



Figure 1

past I have experimented with allowing this surface texture to remain in the final ceramic object, although often it is not desirable in my work. Building by hand is the least expensive technique that I employ. While I cannot achieve the machined accuracy as seen in rapid prototyping or 3D printing, I find that having such a direct touch with the material allows me to build more intuitively and provides me a degree of flexibility as I build. In short, all of the fabrications techniques that I employ have a place in my process, and I select the appropriate technique for the project I am building.

Empathic design is a sector of design in which the products are made for individuals with disabilities. Designers who work in this field are specialists in understanding the potential limitations and they develop sensitivity to the needs of the user. The skill of empathizing with the end user/viewer is invaluable for any designer. It is a mode of thinking that I embrace. Empathic design relates especially well to designing functional three-dimensional objects. If a designer has the ability to see their object through the eyes of the user and feel it through their fingers, then this information can all be taken into account as the decisions are made for an objects production.

My work is useful, and my desire to maintain a high level of functionality influences every decision that I make. I consider each shape, edge, texture and color and assess how these factors will impact the object's ability to fulfill its purpose. For example, the trays in the exhibition, Without Words and also in Figure 2 of this document, require a handle or other solution in order to pick them up.



Figure 2

My solution was to remove a portion of the edge bands, which provides both a foot and handle for the tray. In addition, I angled the edge where the tray is to be handled slightly downward which makes the object easier to grip. The weight of the tray is also an important factor, as it is for most objects that I design to be made from wood. I wanted it to be large enough to carry an entire dinner, dishes and all, but light enough to carry the meal to the living room or dining room. Because of this, there was a limitation to how thick the material could be, which ended

up at ½”. My desire to maintain the usability of these two designs plays an important role in defining everything from its size, to type of wood, to how much an edge slopes.

While my personal sense of beauty is a quality that I also hope to capture in my work, I do so under the pretense that beauty is subjective and complex, and therefore not easily definable. For me, beauty in objects is intrinsically tied to how useful the object is. Some other qualities that relate to my definition of beauty and that I therefore instill in my work are simplicity, elegance, honesty, resolution and innovation. These values shift in importance and priority as the object is considered and during the making. Beauty is a difficult phenomenon to describe with words. I prefer, rather, to capture beauty in the things that I make, in order to convey my understanding of it to others as they use the things that I create.

At the core of my artwork lie two essential goals, to make objects that convey my understanding of beauty, and while doing this, to preserve the objects functional qualities. The materials that I select to build with, primarily wood and porcelain, are renowned for their durability and longevity, resulting in objects that become a permanent fixture in the life of the user. Through utility, the things that I create infiltrate the lives of those around me and provide an entry point for a conversation between myself and the user via the object. Newly developed technological methods are an integral component of my process for 3-Dimensional visualization and fabrication. The act of making objects has become a means of self-understanding. Looking back at the collection of objects that I have produced provides me with a record of my journey as a maker and affords me vision of the road to come.

VITA

In 2005, Paul received an Associate of Applied Science in Visual Communications from Sinclair Community College. He went on to earn a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Ceramics from Ohio University in 2009. The following year, as a post-bachelor student, Paul attended The University of Alaska Anchorage, in Anchorage, Alaska. In 2013, Paul is expecting to graduate from Louisiana State University with a Master of Fine Arts in Ceramics.

Paul's work focuses on functional object making. It touches on both one-of-a-kind, hand-made pieces and works intended to be mass produced for a larger audience. His strong background in design plays a key roll in his visual vocabulary, without overshadowing the natural beauty of the materials.