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Know, known, kNew

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Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Sherry Lane
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ABSTRACT

I have special appreciations for my education, the ability to read, comprehend, and communicate. These appreciations have led my curiosity to issues of education and how we sometimes take important necessities for granted. Advances in technologies are changing social interactions, perceptions, and the ways in which we communicate. I have become intrigued at how these changes affect the ways in which we are taught today, verses how we were taught in the past and I am especially concerned of how the future will be influenced by what we are learning. When I speak of how we are taught and what we are learning, not only am I referring to educational institutions, but also of what we absorb from daily social exchanges. As we process information, it is stored into our memories. This is how we learn and will take place regardless of the location. Remembrance is an important element in comparing the past to the present and plays an important role in this body of work.

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I attended a university for the first time at the age of thirty-one and now, seven years later; I am completing a Master of Fine Arts Degree. Because my educational pursuits did not come to fruition until later in life, I have special appreciations for my education, the ability to read, comprehend, and communicate. These appreciations have led my curiosity to issues of education and how we sometimes take important necessities for granted. Advances in technologies are changing social interactions, perceptions, and the ways in which we communicate. I have become intrigued at how these changes affect the ways in which we are taught today, verses how we were taught in the past and I am especially concerned of how the future will be influenced by what we are learning. When I speak of how we are taught and what we are learning, not only am I referring to educational institutions, but also of what we absorb from daily social exchanges. As we process information, it is stored into our memories. This is how we learn and will take place regardless of the location. Remembrance is an important element in comparing the past to the present and plays an important role in this body of work.

Some of the most important things learned in life, take place in the home. The experiences and beliefs of my family were one of the main influences that helped to shape my views of life, especially those of education, pride in one's work, and respect for others. These events are embedded in my memory and have guided my conceptual and aesthetic choices.

My parents grew up on farms during an era when educational opportunities were not readily available to those lacking abundant finances and even if money had not been an issue, receiving a high school education was thought to be more than sufficient at that time. More importantly, they held a sense of duty to honor their families by working on the farms and getting jobs as soon as they were of age, to help with financial burdens. In the past few decades, attitudes have changed about continuing education after high school to keep up with the demands of society. High school diplomas have become stepping-stones for many young people today in the completion of their educations, instead of resulting in the final product. We have not dismissed the importance of education, but it does not hold the same weight in the twenty-first century as it did in the earlier part of the

twentieth century, because attending college has become expected or routine, not an honored privilege as in the past.

It is a natural occurrence for ideas and traditions to change as societies become more advanced, but these transitions should be carefully considered. Today, fewer individuals are involved in specific crafts or trades, as large companies that de-emphasize the pride taken in one's craft and an appreciation of work ethic are manufacturing more products. Lifestyles have become set at a faster pace deeming quantity over quality. Fast food, microwave dinners, manufactured and disposable everything has become a way of life. We are besieged by information coming at us in every direction from all types of media, and computers are becoming a necessity for survival in our homes, offices, and schools.

The advancement of technology has been amazing, offering tremendous opportunities, but at the same time limiting the amount of social interaction. We communicate through answering machines, automated services, fax, and e-mails without ever physically speaking to another individual or touching an object that they have touched. We aren't paying the same amount of attention to our surroundings to show common courtesies to those around us because we have become self-absorbed in our own little worlds of cell phones and pagers.

These innovations are replacing faces with numbers, screens, and automated recordings, which are depersonalizing communities. It has no longer become a necessity to have social exchange to purchase materials or render services. We no longer go to a bank or service station when making transactions and develop a relationship with the employees that work there; we slide cards and push buttons. When we do interact with individuals, we become impatient and disgruntled with the least bit of delay. I question how all of these things affect the ways in which we communicate and the messages we are receiving, although greater emphasis was placed with the use of computer technology for my investigations of this thesis.

As a studio artist, I stayed away from computers as long as I could, but a couple of years ago I decided to jump into the twentieth century with the purchase of my first computer. Initially I believed it would aid my endeavors to acquire large amounts of information with great speed. I soon realized that computers, with the use of the Internet,

provide many communication possibilities such as e-mail, instant messaging, a variety of sights with message boards, and chat rooms. Finding these new methods of communication intriguing, it started to become clear that my new tool would become one of the subjects of my research and I began observing how we communicate with these machines. These observations are one of the components that helped formulate my thesis ideas.

Online users have developed their own language by creating a shorthand system consisting of endless abbreviations, acronyms, and emoticons (keyboard symbols arranged in different ways to resemble faces that represent different emotions.) As explorations of this new technology continued, it became apparent that proper spelling and grammar is not emphasized in computer communications, and conversations are not as in depth. Many users remain anonymous with the use of various screen names, which seem to encourage bolder statements, sometimes to the point of being rude. There is a larger risk of miscommunications with online conversations or messages because there are no facial expressions, body gestures, and fluctuations of voice to help clarify ideas.

Clearly, we behave differently when using the computer in social exchanges and this machine is only one of many technological innovations that are changing our perceptions of communication, time, and acceptable actions. We are learning to accept these behaviors by practicing them. I understand that the personal use of a home computer has different associations and directives to those used for business or educational purposes, but this machine is becoming commonplace in all areas of life. It is influencing communication practices, and possibly diminishing necessary social skills.

Graduate school has offered an excellent opportunity to encounter another side of the learning experience in addition to presenting prospective time to observe current social attitudes. Of the many students that I have become acquainted with as an instructor, with the average age ranging from eighteen to twenty-six, only a small percentage possessed excessive incentive or took advantage of the many resources provided by the university. This not only occurred in the classes that I taught, but also in the classes that I attended as a student myself. A large number of students seem to have a lack of respect, not necessarily towards instructors, but towards educational institutions in general and expressed the attitude that an education was owed to them, rather than a

privilege. Common courtesy and respect for others and their belongings during classes that I taught required constant reminders, as if these were new concepts not yet learned. I do not believe that these behaviors were intentionally insensitive, but have been enforced through changing societal values.

These teaching experiences introduced a new perspective to my views of education and assisted in understanding the importance of personal guidance needed for instruction and the responsibilities that are placed on educators. There is a saying that I have always been fond of, although I do not know its source: “I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand.” It implies audible, visual, and physical actions to arrive at comprehension. Sharing an experience with another person accentuates memories associated with that experience. Learning requires a repetition of actions, using our senses in various combinations. Some people are visually inspired, whereas others respond better to audible information, or the act of doing. My first grade teacher taught me how to tell time among many other things. She did this by showing an example of a clock with moving hands, speaking of how the hands move around a clock face and what they represent. She then went around to everyone in my class one by one, and physically took our hands to move the hands on the clock to a specific setting. It was at this point that I remember understanding time and its relationship with memory.

My work has always had several common factors: the use of various materials, repetition, an emphasis on process and craft, and to create objects and environments that encourage remembrance. Although much of this thesis research includes observations of new technology and social values, the visual images for this installation were purposely chosen to represent the past and passing present. This was done with the intent to present viewers with visual imagery that will lead to their own memories of learning and experiences they associate with those times. Because memories are products of only the past, we naturally compare our present situations to those recollections and perhaps contemplate what our views of the present, will be in the future. The goal of this work is to encourage others to have recollections of a specific subject, which is how we are taught, and in doing so think of how their experiences compare to the changes that are taking place today.

Initially, I knew that book forms and texts of some sort would be used to create this work, and felt that found objects, especially those that had personal associations, should be included because their histories would enhance an environment for remembrance. As a graduate student, I have had the benefit of observing university hallways for some time now, and a common sight I have noticed is the many wooden one-piece desks that have been a standard in classrooms for years, sitting in hallways, storage areas, or university surplus, waiting to be discarded and replaced with new versions. I became fascinated with their imagery and repetition, and started collecting and dismantling them. It was at this point that I decided to use the imagery of these desks in a repetitive way for the main portion of this show.

There are twenty-six desks in this installation; the quantity correlates to the number of letters in the alphabet. This choice was made because I believe that communication is the key to teaching, and language is the main basis for communication. The desks are arranged in a configuration that is similar to that of a computer keyboard to refer to the technology in use today. In addition to this, these forms symbolize the presence of a figure, the lack of the presence of a figure, the memory of an object, and an object of the present, that will soon become one of the pasts.

Wanting them to appear ghost-like and fragile, yet still be standing and stable, I chose to make wooden armatures of these forms, which are warped, and some appear to be ripped. They then were covered with a mixture of paper pulp, which includes printed text that has been thrown away, by the Louisiana State University Library and hand written memos of my thesis research. The text, including my personal writings as well as those from the library books, is also representative of materials that are being replaced, as society is converting printed-paper copies of materials to digital media. Objects such as books, writing utensils, and educational tools were pressed into the desktops, leaving impressions to create a history and encourage memories. The surface of the paper and the impressions left from objects create an interesting texture that I find visually pleasing in combination with the use of repetition of these forms

It was important to have some part of the actual desks in this installation, because I believe that objects hold memories and exude a presence of their past. The back panels of the desks, that had been previously been dismantled, were chosen to symbolize

support. These were manipulated and installed on the gallery wall facing the fronts of the desks, in such a way that they become shelves, which appear to sag from the weight of the objects that are placed on them. The idea of weight is to reference the weight of knowledge or the importance that it holds, not a physical weight. There are seven shelves and each holds one object. The number of shelves and objects does not hold as much significance as the number of desks, but was chosen for its associations with things that are special or cherished. The objects that rest upon the shelves represent my own memories and associations of education and are covered in paraffin wax as an act of preserving them in time. These objects consist of: pencil shavings, an old clock, handwritten notes from my thesis, an apple, a Shorthand book from 1914, personal childhood letters, and an eraser with pieces of chalk that I used to teach my first class.

The atmosphere for this work is of great importance to the success of creating a mood to encourage those that encounter the installation to move through the space and reflect. Light is cast directly downward onto the tops of the desks, but is somewhat dimmed to create dramatic shadows and the shelves and objects are illuminated with soft spotlights that bring quiet attention to their presence. As one moves through this environment, sounds of today's technology play quietly in the background, almost to the point of being inaudible. The sound is the only part of the show that is representative of technology and is a subtle hint to compare past associations with the present.

This work is my way of persuading people to take a closer look at their surroundings, to reflect, and to compare. As technology continues to develop, it is crucial that we pay attention to the impact it has on society and question what we are learning from new practices, especially those in communication. Today's emphasis on production and speed to create more convenience in life may be an innocent attempt of improvement, but we should question what qualities are lost in these transitions. This is why remembrance of our past is important, because it initiates the need to compare our present experiences and consider our future. This installation encourages this remembrance with visual imagery that focuses on education; a subject that is so common its importance is easily forgotten, but should never be taken for granted.

1. know, known, kNew, Sherry Lane 2002
(installation view)



2. know, known, kNew, Sherry Lane 2002
(installation view)



3. Present Passing A-Z, Sherry Lane 2002
(detail)



4. Series of Seven Supports, Sherry Lane 2002
(detail)



VITA

Sherry Lane was born in 1963 in Shelbyville, Kentucky. She received the degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts in studio art from The University of Kentucky. In August 2002, she will receive the degree of Master of Fine Arts in studio art from Louisiana State University.