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Reservation for Two

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RESERVATION FOR TWO

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
Brian Patrick Dieterle
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Table Of Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
List of Photographs	iv
Abstract	v
Searching For Meaning	1
The Effects of Experience	4
Design and Ideas	6
Presentation	22
Conclusion.....	25
Vita	26

List of Photographs

<i>Holy Mess</i> 2008	7
<i>Holy Mess</i> - Detail of the Cup, Bowl, and the Plate	8
<i>Bipolar Reflection</i> 2008	9
<i>Bipolar Reflection</i> - Detail of the Cup and Bowl	10
<i>Aerial Vantage</i> 2008	11
<i>Aerial Vantage</i> - Detail of the Plate and Bowl	12
<i>Angled Rectangle</i> 2008	13
<i>Contortion</i> 2008	15
<i>Contortion</i> - Detail of the Cup and the Plate	16
<i>Two Notches</i> 2008	17
<i>Two Notches</i> - Perspective from the Chair	18
<i>Strings Attached</i> 2008	19
<i>Strings Attached</i> - Detail of the Complete Set	20
<i>Reservation for Two</i> - Image from the Exhibition #1 2008	22
<i>Reservation for Two</i> - Image from the Exhibition #2 2008	23

Abstract

Reservation for Two is an investigation of the ceramic dinner set and search to unlock its simplistic mystery. Most dinnerware settings available on the market satisfy and facilitate the action of eating, but they do not provide an experience to remember or a chance to fully taste the meal in all of its complexity. To challenge the participant and to produce a memorable experience, I have begun altering specific fundamental decisions within the traditional place setting attempting to create stimulation beyond physical gratification. Each of my experiments question specific design criteria that format the majority of dinner sets on the market. My goal is to take the experience of eating to a higher level so that this and other moments of our lives have substance.

Searching For Meaning

Open your eyes and look at all of the individual objects around you. Picture everything hiding in the cupboards, drawers, and closets. There are bottles, pens, pencils, sofas, laptops, rubber bands, glasses, windows, lamps, books, cleaning supplies, socks, junk mail, coffer makers, plastic dinosaurs, videocassette tapes, blinds, etc. We are a society who craves to own everything. We surround ourselves with eclectic combinations of these objects. Some are made to assist us in our daily lives, while others provide forms of entertainment. Some are designed to help in a quick pinch, while others blatantly steal our money. Everything we know and love is designed to fulfill a specific need we have. Outside of our perception, these forms are constantly being redeveloped to perfection. They proceed through radical transformations of style, color, shape, and even name, always reinventing themselves for the consumer. It is always the same, a new look for old need. If we stop for just one moment and ask ourselves if any of these objects truly make us happy, what is the answer? Do they provide a more interesting way of life, challenging us to mature as intellectual individuals, or do they distract our need for growth?

We should be allowed to use any item or activity throughout our day to stimulate a particular response. With the lack of time and the pressure for productivity, our personal needs have been compromised, depriving us of our desires to relax, socialize, and contemplate different interests we may have. Habits have developed echoing this perceived accountability and altering the ways we could be indulging ourselves. The art of cooking has been reduced to five minutes in the microwave and a plastic tray of steaming slop that conveniently warms our laps as we sit on the lazy-boy recliner. The passenger seat of our cars and the flashy interiors of many fast food restaurants are replacing our homes as the new location to eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

What happened to the traditional gathering to share dinner at five, followed by desert? Are we, as individuals within a society, destined for isolation or can we regain our composure?

The concept *Reservation for Two* was developed to begin answering these fundamental questions, searching to discover hidden utilities within common objects that could provide new stimulation. My body of work attempts to transform a person's experience as they engage in the act of nourishing their body. This new experience offers incentives beyond physical gratification. Each dinner set challenges the participants to redefine their own perception of ceramic dinnerware, forcing them accept an unconventional design, interact with it, and contemplate their reaction to the experience. I believe the meal is a sacred ritual with an intimate connection to each of our lives. My dinner sets attempt to revive this sacred character through re-establishing the importance instilled within a shared a meal with another individual. Through subtle changes within this new format of eating, I have returned the complexity and meaning to this essential activity for anyone willing to participate.

To understand how my dinnerware could add a new experience, I began investigating industrially made ceramic dinnerware. A common thread throughout nearly all of the ceramic dishes available on the market is a generic, "one size fits all" quality they all exhibit. In order to perfect these dinner sets, industrial designers approach each piece with specific guidelines that allow the dishes to accommodate different types of food and their presentations. Because of this decision, industrial dinnerware lacks the ability to offer anything other than a standard, non-conceptual surface to carry our meals. This small facet presents an opportunity to redesign these everyday objects to create a new experience while fulfilling its original purpose.

I want each individual to experience the act of eating unlike anything that has happened to him or her before. Each of my dinner sets test our willingness to look beyond the underlying function of the form. At first, these new dinner sets will appear extremely awkward. There will be a reluctance to participate by many people, as they question and place themselves within a context of using my dinnerware. With something that appears so foreign to anything we have ever imagined, I hope a curiosity to explore each of the dinner sets occurs as my audience gazes at the presentation. Over time, the dissonance will fade as the reward of figuring out the challenge outweighs each person's frustration. With opportunities to investigate our emotions and reactions to these experiences, we can begin reclaiming our sensitivity to appreciate and enjoy all that is around us.

The Effects of Experience

Each and every one of us has opportunities to venture outside of our immediate comprehension of reality to experience new and different ways of interpreting the world. As we do this, our personality, character, and frame of mind matures, generating and projecting a more encompassing perspective to those around us. Whether major or minor, these experiences etch themselves into our subconscious, further driving our curiosity to explore the unknown. Given only so many unique opportunities, the need to respond to these moments when they present themselves is critical in order to find new activities that stimulate our mind, as well as our bodies.

Reservation of Two provides this sort of challenge. By removing the comfortable reassurances provided by industrial ceramic dinnerware, each dinner set within my body of work forces the individual to adopt new techniques to engage the meal. Breakfast, lunch and dinner have been transformed from passive moments of our day, to intense, confrontation periods of examination, requiring full participation by the audience. My body of work creates a sensory overload as the food receives new levels of attention enhancing its flavor, aroma, and texture. The challenge does not only exist on the table. Each of my dinner sets presents an equally puzzling question to the cook in the kitchen. With my specific alterations to the designs of these dinner sets, the cook must decipher a particular composition of foods that responds to the work. In this way, the cook lends a hand in the overall challenge.

Another major element within the conceptual evolution of my work is the need to participate with another individual. Although most of the stimulation occurs personally, observing and responding to a person sitting across the table heightens the entire experience.

The quality and character of the meal changes as the two participants determine methods to interact with the work. The two share the challenge together, able to discuss, contemplate, and react to their own understanding the experience as partners and as individuals. They begin to choreograph movements, passing items, and other essential accompaniments that create the dining experience. With only one participant, the energy and enthusiasm is lost, returning the state of isolation I am attempting to undermine. The second participant is vital to re-establish the idea of community and the need to participate with other intellectuals.

Designs and Ideas

Redesigning ceramic dinnerware is the essence of *Reservation For Two*. By composing new looks for familiar forms, my goal is to direct the participants' focus onto the food by offering an enigmatic environment to transform the dining experience. By fabricating new forms, I have begun the move away from the traditional dinnerware that we currently utilize. Industrial ceramic dinnerware produced by Pfaltzgraff, Mikasa, Wedgwood, and others, perform their function to the highest level, but do not offer anything other than a simple uniform structure that stacks well in the cupboard, displays all of its contents cleanly, and by no means whatsoever, distracts from the task at hand. They are functionally perfect, never allowing anything else to happen. In order to accomplish my goal and make a decisive move away from this format, I focused on certain aspects within these ceramic forms that helped to define and project to this idea of perfection that they strive for. By reversing one or two criteria used to complete these industrial dishes, I have been able to develop new qualities in the dinnerware that bring value to each of my forms, and allowing the challenge to begin.

The first set I designed is titled "Holy Mess." My initial idea was conceived by envisioning the act of consumption as a sacred and ceremonial activity. Based on personal experience and visual research, many people disregard the stimulation provided by the act of eating by attacking their meals with voracity. Attempting to consume the entire dinner within moments, the individual lowers eating to its primal state, a state of chaos and gluttony. "Holy Mess" is a direct response to this style of consumption. By reducing the amounts of food and liquid, each piece within this set immediately changes the apparent value of the sparse portions

of food forcing the person to savor each bite. Due to the limited areas to present certain types of foods, the forms require innovative approaches to resolve the precarious presentation.



Holy Mess 2008

Slip Cast White Stoneware, Baltic Birch and Yellow Poplar Table, and Ikea Chairs

The large openings within each piece serve the purpose of creating a tension between the food, the dish, and the consumer. With this sense of tension, the composition unfolds as a beautifully choreographed performance for the participants. This dinner set was made to stop the inner animal from digesting everything it sees, and allows the cosmopolitan to introduce his or herself to the world around them.



Holy Mess - Detail of Cup, Bowl, and the Plate

After evaluating the design in “Holy Mess,” I noticed a lack of attention was given to the presentation of the food. My design put too much pressure on the preparation aspect, forcing the cook and the kitchen to resolve all of the issues before the food was served to the table. The design appeared overly aggressive as my first attempt to redesign dinnerware. Striving to redefine the tension I wanted to instill in the work, “Bipolar Reflections” appeared on the drawing table. Working off the information I had gathered from the “Holy Mess” and a previous experiment I created three years ago, I began experimenting with the ideas of placement and presentation. Immediately, the traditional surface of the plate was split in half allowing two different areas to display the food. This format transferred to the bowl and cup forms, creating



Bipolar Reflection 2008
Slip Cast White Stoneware, Baltic Birch and Yellow Poplar Table, and Ikea Chairs

physical divisions with two extremes. Sleek in their design and finish, “Bipolar Reflection” projects an idea of modernity, of a simple and elegant form, raising the level of one style and sophistication. It questions the reason for its own divided surface, suggesting that the location of

a specific food might contain qualities unlike those in other areas. It is puzzling to participants as they attempt to understand the forced separation.



Bipolar Reflections - Detail of the Cup and the Bowl

Although the design appears to hinge on this aspect, an added level of tension is present as the bowl and cup forms perch on their balancing points. The participants must contend with the danger of spilling the contents of these forms as they rationalize the unfamiliar presentation that sits before them.

The anxiety of spilling the contents generated from “Holy Mess” and “Bipolar Reflection” began to compromise the integrity of the forms and scare off potential participants.

Deciding to allow each individual to indulge and move beyond these fears, I designed a set that promotes an inability to control the situation. This experiment is titled “Aerial Vantage.”



Aerial Vantage 2008
Slip Cast Porcelain, Baltic Birch and Yellow Poplar Table, and Ikea Chairs

Thinking about ways to challenge the participants in a more subtle direction, I inverted the plate’s concave surface to facilitate a slow, meandering movement across its surface. My goal was to allow gravy, juices, and other liquids to flow off the dinnerware in an elegant manner, hiding its final destination. I realize this creates a large mess upon the surface of the table, but

there is nothing wrong with that. Etched into the surface of the dinner set is a texture produced from an aerial photograph.



Aerial Vantage - Detail of the Plate and the Bowl

This texture is added to enhance the movement of the liquids by providing obstacles to direct their flow, while subconsciously hinting toward a more encompassing perspective. From our place at the table, our vantage perceives these forms as a distant world below. The goal was to allow the participants to feel removed from the familiar dining experience, and placed at a table without any rules. With this frame of mind, the dinner set encourages the participants to play with their food while enjoying the food's interaction with the forms. This set no longer resembles traditional dinnerware. Instead, it redefines each piece within the set, offering a unique

format for the participant to interact with. Although the anxiety may still be present, the addition of the kinetic motion on the surface accentuates the experience of dining.

“Aerial Vantage” was exciting and different, but it still tended to be a stressful participation. For some reason, an uncomfortable tension continued to resurface throughout my experimentations. Not wanting all of the dinner sets to project frustration, I decided to step back and try to remove some of the pressure. Instead of challenging the participants with obscure forms and forcing them to learn how to use them, the dinner set, “Angled Rectangle” would simply emphasize presentation.



Angled Rectangle 2008
White Stoneware, Baltic Birch and Yellow Poplar Table, and Ikea Chairs

Imagining myself as the food and drink, I envisioned wanting each piece within the dinner set to create a peaceful and secure sensation. Buildings or architectural structures seemed appropriate to fabricate this sense of security while offering an exquisite means of presentation. Working with the shape of the rectangle, I was hoping to set the focal point solely on the food within a protected area. The serving areas in the plate and in the bowl would gesture toward geometric compositions being placed inside, common for some types of food and foreign to others. By highlighting shape and form, the individual's eye for detail allows them to examine the food's texture, flavor and aroma as they enjoy their meal. Also, the color scheme was designed to resemble a reflection pool. With a cool blue interior, each form invites the participants to dive in and begin enjoying the meal.

Shortly after finishing "Angled Rectangle," I realized that I removed the energy inherent within my challenge. "Angle Rectangle" provided some new qualities for presentation, but it seemed to be lacking the charge the previous sets exhibited. I needed to return to the act of challenging my audience by providing a fully engaging group of objects that questioned their assumptions about dinnerware. Thinking back to "Aerial Vantage," I began investigating tactile sensations and the privileges associated with hand held forms. Previously, all of my dinner sets allowed the participant to pick up and move each of the forms. Focusing on this aspect, "Contortion" was set into motion, altering the way we handle our dishes by removing the ability to lift the plate and the bowl. To create this isolated interaction, each piece was tethered to the table by using anchors and cords to give the design a physically-manipulated appearance. Done in a manner not to suggest painful connotations, this characteristic emphasizes the changing of a design from a once recognizable group of objects. Each viewer can relate to the pressure exerted on the pieces, allowing the dinner set to further develop as new evolving entity.



Contortion 2008
Slip Cast White Stoneware, White Stoneware, Baltic Birch and Yellow Poplar Table, Ikea
Chairs, and Cord



Contortion - Detail of the Cup and the Plate

Feeling energized with the statement “Contortion” was exhibiting, I felt the need to continue being more direct with my challenges and the amount of tension surrounding each dinner set. Re-evaluating my responses to industrial ceramic dinnerware, I began to question why a new design had to distance itself from industrial norm. Why not alter the traditional format in such a way that the design appears to be simplistic and straight forward, but as the

participants look closer, the dinner set flaunts its dynamic and complicated character. Wanting to keep this design contemporary with the emphasis on specially prepared foods, “Two Notches” offers a visually quiet surface for the presentation of the meal.



Two Notches 2008
White Stoneware, Baltic Birch and Yellow Poplar Table, and Ikea Chairs

Like “Holy Mess” and its ceremonial attribute, “Two Notches” controls the amounts of food and drink, elevating the value of each to new levels of importance. Due to the location and size of the perforations in the forms, only specific meals can be served in them, limiting the number of unique combinations.



Two Notches - Perspective from the Chair

Puzzling with its soft, delightful essence, and dysfunctional orientation, “Two Notches” presents the participant with a somewhat conventional format highlighting the importance preparation and carefully selected compositions of foods.

Closing with what may be the most obscure of all of the sets, I offer “Strings Attached.” It seemed appropriate to take the dinner set to new heights by removing our attachment to the table altogether.



Strings Attached 2008
Slip Cast White Stoneware, Baltic Birch and Yellow Poplar Table, Ikea Chairs, and Cord

This dinner set is suspended from the ceiling by a number of cords creating an independent, floating system. Free from the flat plane of the table, this set presents yet another challenge for the user to master. These pieces respond to any action applied to them.



Strings Attached - Detail of the Complete Set

As the participant reaches for something with his or her fork, the plate responds, retreating off in the same direction. This system is kinetic for all of the wrong reasons. Similar to the “Contortion,” each piece has been physically altered to respond to the manipulation of the cords. Naturally, the forms gravitated toward a pierced and draped style, echoing the culmination of conceptual evolution this body of work had achieved. I have included the table to keep the viewer’s perception along the same line of thought, projecting “Strings Attached” as dinnerware and not another type of utilitarian object.

Presentation

For the installation, I have placed these dinner sets inside a gallery to highlight this dramatic shift away from the traditional format of ceramic dinnerware. If my body of work had been installed in a restaurant, a home, or some other traditional venue, the initial mental interaction I am searching for would not have happened. Instead, the audience would demand answers to the problems and wonder why no food is presented on the work. Here, the gallery is dictating its own set of rules, not allowing the presentation of food to be an option for specific experience I want to create. At this stage, I want the individual only to imagine the potential interaction he or she may have with the work.



Reservation for Two - Image from the Exhibition #1 2008

To achieve this goal, each dinner set is placed on a table without the presence of food. In addition to the table, two chairs help to facilitate an invitation to anyone who needs a more intimate distance to engage the work. By having two chairs facing each other, I am attempting to invite two viewers to experience this concept together, creating a bond between them and opening new potential interpretations of how each piece might be used. At this point, I have completed seven dinner sets, all with their own design, emphasis, and character challenging the participant's concept of ceramic dinnerware. They are arranged in a manner that is similar to a restaurant so that the gallery environment retains some familiar aspects to it, encouraging participation.



Reservation for Two - Image from the Exhibition #2 2008

I want this installation to transcend the physical brutality that occurs during the meal, and shift the intensity on to the experience one gains through answering the challenge and enjoying meal with another individual. This exhibition promotes a new way of thinking about our involvement with the objects in each of our lives and how these subtle changes affect our moods and the experiences we all encounter.

Conclusion

While I have been working on this concept, I have questioned my own understanding of why it is so hard to let go of the comfortable and familiar objects that surround my life. I have grown close to specific forms due to the amount of time I have spent with them, their history within my family, and their usefulness, helping me on a daily basis. Deep down, I can accept almost anything for what it is, but when there is no emotional connection, I feel it. I feel a void when objects do not challenge my mind in some way. I am no longer satisfied with mediocrity and surrounding my life with it. I yearn for something new that is not one layer deep, hiding behind a false façade. My goal was to create a body of work that would extend beyond its first layer of function, and begin altering our perception of everything else around us. *Reservation for Two* is a challenging experience that alters our assumptions of form and function, causing an unsettling feeling to most people at first, but then, creates an opportunity for a real and meaningful personal discovery. I chose dinnerware as my focus because of its unthreatening character and proximity to all of us. Everyone can connect at some level to these objects regardless of their new appearance. Because of this inherent quality, we can share these experiences freely with other people. Each design offers a different experience to everyone who is willing to engage these sets. Throughout the process, I used each dinner set to help direct my thought process, generating different ways of addressing the challenging aspect of my concept. I know these dishes are not going to stop a hungry individual from driving to the closest fast food restaurant when they need to, but I hope they do cause someone to contemplate what they are missing.

Vita

Brian Dieterle was born in Fort Knox, Kentucky, and raised in the metropolitan Detroit area. Growing up near Lake St. Clair, his curiosity for invention and discovery flourished throughout his younger years by taking apart old machines, and tinkering in his grandfathers' basements with photography and wood working. Graduating from Northern Michigan University, located in the Michigan's Upper Peninsula, Brian found a passion for living off the land and allowing his hands to create useful objects for everyday life. Dreaming of owning forty acres and his own pottery, he stayed one year after graduating to help a close friend build a wood kiln, and start the friend's pottery. After shoveling snow for the long extended season, he decided to return to Detroit in hopes of earning the money to start his own pottery. Shortly after returning, he was hired at Pewabic Pottery, one of the last remaining historic potteries still in operation. Immediately, Brian became their kiln room manager and a vessel maker. After working two years at Pewabic Pottery, Brian applied for graduate school, and was accepted at Louisiana State University. Before moving to Baton Rouge, he married his beautiful girlfriend of three years, Dana Toy, and they began the next phase of their development as artists. Working hard for two years, Brian submitted his thesis proposal to his committee and was given the green light to commence on his project. After eight long months, his exhibition was installed at the Alfred C. Glassell Exhibition Gallery where it received praise and admiration. Currently, Brian is planning the next stages of his career, looking for opportunities where ever they may exist. At this moment he is working for Tim Berg as an artist's assistant.