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## Playschool

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# PLAYSCHOOL

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School 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 Department of Art

by  
James S. Nord  
B.A., Humboldt State University  
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## Acknowledgements

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## Abstract

*Playschool* is heavily influenced by my tactile way of learning. Each sculpture is a visual way of communicating my story. Traditionally, words are the primary tools used in learning and communication. However, from a very early age I discovered that my auditory--processing disability and dyslexia made expressing ideas through words and the written language very difficult. It was a challenge for me to understand how words fit together to make compete sentences, and I struggled throughout my education to find a successful means of communicating my thoughts and ideas about the world around me. What came naturally to me however was the ability to see and understand how the parts of an object like a clock or a toy for example assembled to make it work. I was attracted to the physicality of the materials and the mechanics that held them together. As a result, learning, for me, evolved into a visceral rather than an intellectual experience. My work is my voice communicated through the tools and materials that have become my primary language. My process is driven by the idea of play as a visual and tactile form of learning.

My high regard for process, material, and craftsmanship is exhibited through every piece I create. A past surrounded by hardworking craftsmen and laborers has also greatly impacted the imagery I use. I appreciate the personal aspect of using hand tools to create something intimate and also feel the considerable power that comes with working heavy equipment. These two ideas are at the forefront of my mind while I create-using many hand tools to construct something that often mimics heavy machinery. Many of my skills have been acquired from working with people of various trades and this greatly influences my studio practice. This hands-on type of education has played a vital role in influencing the type of work I create.

The construction I have encountered daily for the last year and a half, on the South end of LSU's football stadium has motivated many of my current works. My sculptures were drawn from the perpetual transition that happens on the construction site and the endless lines that appear in the scaffolding equipment and rebar-concrete supports. This three-dimensional line quality is translated into my work constantly with the stacking and layering of square wooden dowels and steel square stock. I use the density and structure of the lines alongside the kinetic aspect to draw my viewer in for a closer look and give the viewer a tactile way to view the nature of my work.

## Introduction

My childhood years spent watching my father and grandfather tinker and work on their hobbies informed the artwork I now make. I grew up with a mechanic as a father and woodworker as a grandfather; both had large influences on where I am in my life today. For a hobby, my father would build and fly radio-controlled airplanes that he assembled on the dining table every night after dinner. I would sit there watching him carefully cut out each piece of balsawood with precision. I learned that if any of the many pieces were cut incorrectly, the plane would not fly. This seemingly simple task has had an effect on the way I work today as I carefully and meticulously drill, cut, and sand each area or piece of the sculpture so that it fits just so. I also spent a lot of time with my grandfather in his woodshop and train room. He had spent the last 20 years building a large model railroad. Seeing my grandfather bring life to his own imaginary world, and also getting to be a part of the creation, allowed me to look into his distinctive imagination. I find commonalities with this in the way I create miniature cranes and imaginary skyscrapers and in the way each sculpture has moveable parts. I was mesmerized by this small world that seemed to transport me from my everyday life. This combined idea of miniaturizing a large machine and creating a toy out of it has become a common theme in *Playschool*.

In a letter written to me by my grandfather, he explained, "Letting my mind journey back in time, it arrived at my first and only formal woodworking instruction while I was in Junior High School. This beginner's class was limited to the use of hand tools. The appreciation of the skills, traditional methods, and craftsman-ship made a lasting impression on me." My grandfather carried with him the skills he learned in junior high, later passing them on to me. Learning from him and working with him, I was like an apprentice to a master craftsman, learning the trade of my future and being inspired by the world around me. Spending time with my grandfather and father I got to see their hobbies take them away from their reality and into a world of play. The sculptures that I create not only reference the miniature worlds that my father and grandfather would create, but also are a type of play for me. Assisting both my father and grandfather working on their projects helped me to develop direct knowledge and respect for tools and a love for wood, the primary material they both used. As a child, I would take all of my toys, my father's wood scraps, and anything else I could find and start taping them together. I called the objects that I made, "my inventions". I would spend hours constructing my inventions, allowing my imagination to fuel the function of my creation. Each invention would feed into the next idea--every object taking on its own life inside of my mind creating a continuous narrative. This process is still true to the way I work today. The processes, tools, and materials that I learned over the course of my life have helped transform my inventions into the art I now create.

## Artist Influences

Artists such as Martin Puryear (Figure 1), Mark di Suvero, and Peter Shire have played a notable role in influencing my graduate work. These artists are significant to my art in terms of the forms, materials and processes they use. Puryear's fine craftsmanship, Suvero's monumental steel structures, and Shire's bold use of color all have had a profound impact on my current style.



Figure 1. "Hominid," Martin Puryear, 2007 – 2011.

Martin Puryear first inspired me when I saw his work in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Walking around Puryear's beautifully handcrafted objects changed the way I thought about and created my own work. His work is the outcome of a thoughtful consideration for his raw materials, and constructed in a minimalist style using traditional craft with a simple design. However, the work is far from simple. Puryear uses mainly hand tools to create his work and this is evident throughout every piece he makes. His volumetric forms give a grounded feel of a strong foundation that can support much weight. In a similar fashion, in many of my smaller works I use a large volumetric form to give the work a grounded look, but I playfully add stilts to question the feel of its balance.

The angular and linear forms in my work are inspired by the work of Mark di Suvero. His use of weight, movement, and balance, along with negative and positive space has motivated me to push these ideas in my own work. Di Suvero's work (Figure 2) is built on a monumental scale, towering over its audience like a precariously perched mechanical animal.



Figure 2. "Figolu," Mark di Suvero, 2005 – 2011.

Like Di Suvero, I use and reference the same materials that are found on construction sites. My sculpture titled "Sledge" (Figure 3) uses similar ideas of balance, movement, along with negative and positive space to make a large kinetic looking sculpture that grabs my audience's imagination.



Figure 3. "Sledge," Jimmie Nord, 2014.

In 2013, I was given the opportunity to work one-on-one with Peter Shire, an artist formally a part of the Memphis Design group. My interaction with him played a role in the addition of color to my work. Shire's use of color and shape seem to reference toys, which gives his work a playful and humorous feel (Figure 4).



Figure 4. "Obelisk," Drawer, Peter Shire, 1981.

I have adopted some aspects of Shire's work in order to portray playfulness in the toy-like sculptures I create. I use primary colors, which are the building blocks of all colors, and this simple color palette gives my work a playful feel (Figure 5). This gives my work a colorful, asymmetric whimsy that hints towards toys of my youth such as Legos. Working with Shire enabled me to observe how he approaches the meticulous design and fabrication found in his work. I am fascinated by the way Shire takes in the world around him. He observes buildings, classic cars, construction sites and the equipment found there, and even small mundane objects like toilet paper dispensers. Peter pulls shapes and colors from his observations that feed his work. This skill of observing his surroundings struck a cord with me and made me analyze more closely those things that interest me. For example, I have observed the construction of the south end of the LSU football stadium going up from the beginning. To see the construction of the building was magical to me, and something I may not have taken much interest in otherwise.

Shire's influence on me inspired my interest to study the Memphis Design Movement of the 1980's to further my research of color and the configuration of form. Peter has a playful feel about his work that I enjoyed the most. He takes simple utilitarian objects and morphs them into colorful unusual forms that gesture to the function of each piece. Shire is quoted in the Los Angeles Times saying, "I am a maker of things, a hand-skills guy... there is no separation between art and craft. They are all one, and a daily living experience is worthy of aesthetic consideration" (Shire, *L.A. to LA*, 2013.) As a result of my experience working with Shire, I have adopted this sentiment as my own.



Figure 5. "Impression," Jimmie Nord, 2014.



## Process and Material

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The relationship between process and material in my sculptures is a look into a handcrafted history that helps form my ideas. Through my process and the materials I use, I transform these ideas into my work. The process becomes the story, and the materials are the words. Every wooden dowel, piece of wood, and steel rod is cut and attached one at a time like words pieced together to form a sentence. I spend time with each part measuring, sanding, and grinding them individually. I get to know each part one-on-one and form a relationship with each piece that makes up the sculpture.

I am especially drawn to working with wood and metal. While wood is warm, soft, and beautiful, it is an unforgiving material, easily splintering and breaking. Once it is cut, it cannot reintegrate into itself structurally or return to its original organic beauty. On the other hand, metal is cold, hard, and dirty, but forgiving as a material. Metal can be bent to change its form and welded to create strong fluid bond. The cuts that I make through the wood become the story of the process I used to craft the form. The way I finish the surface of my work --polishing, sanding to an extremely smooth surface-- glorifies the surface of the wood. I leave marks of the tools in order to leave behind traces of the process.

## Work

My sculpture titled “Sledge”, made of wood and steel, refers to the history of tools. The idea behind the base of the sculpture is from the theory of how the great pyramid of Giza in Egypt was made through a system of sledges, logs, and tracks. Similarly my piece grows upward into a labyrinth of steel, wire, and pulleys, which give the appearance of function and movement.

I find clocks fascinating because of the mechanical parts and the weight systems that have to be designed with precision to make them work. “Cuckoo Clock” (Figure 6) is made of wood, casters that are used for sliding doors, and tar string. This piece is kinetic and the casters are painted in such a way that when you pull down on the weight system they spin so the viewer can interact with the work and see how the mechanics operate.

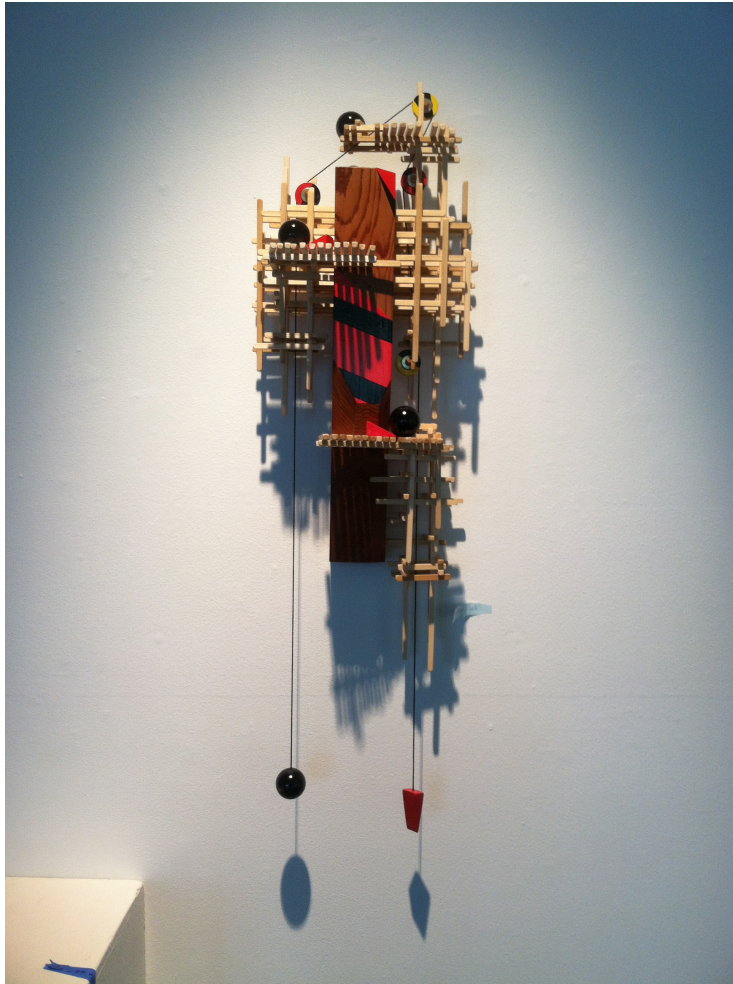


Figure 6. “Cuckoo Clock,” Jimmie Nord, 2014.

“Damasas” (Figure 7) is the combination of the hand drum that you spin between your hands and the scaffolding of a construction site. This piece is made from wood casters

and tar string. I find the sounds that are generated during construction become the heart-beat that makes up the building.



Figure 7. "Damasas," Jimmie Nord, 2014.

Growing up around the Redwood Forest engrained a life-long attraction to wood as a material in my artwork. "Excavation of Redwood" (figure 8.) is made from wood, steel, and tar string. The main mass form of wood is Tiger stripe Redwood. The stripes come from burls that are large growths that are found on old growth trees. I left the wood unfinished to highlight the unique look of the wood.



Figure 8. "Excavation of Redwood," Jimmie Nord, 2014.

## Conclusion

In the last three years, my intention was to study material, form, and process, and while doing so, my work has taken a turn-from having put so much weight on processes and letting the narrative slip away to finding my voice through the processes and the materials I use. My tactile way of learning and my grasp for material, sculpture is the way I communicate myself. This visual way of communicating offers a glimpse into my imagination. My final sculptures pushed my ideas for *Playschool*, a hands-on learning style that was not just educational, but a type of play for me.

These final pieces of *Playschool* started with “Inshired” seen on the left in Figure 8. It is a crane that rises out of a stone that grounds itself. The vertical column that supports an active top gives the appearance of movement. This movement in a steel form led me to the next piece, “Constructed Movements” seen in the middle of Figure 9, which grew from a stump I cut to shape and placed a log under it to play with a visual balance. From this base, two support columns are angled out as the viewer walks around the columns to give the appearance of movement like two dancers. Next it rises into an imaginative crane that also uses color to help give a whimsical, kinetic feel. “Sledge” seen in on the right of Figure 8 is the end result of my graduate studies, the outcome of artist research and the many sculptures that I have fabricated over the last three years. The sculpture is placed on a sled that was inspired by the Egypt sled system. The idea spurred from the “Constructed Movements” base. This base helps “Sledge” have the look of moving forward and assists the rest of the piece in colorful array of movement. These three steel sculptures, alongside the smaller, playful, hand-built wood pieces, show the time and energy brought on by a tactile learning style, history of craftsmanship, and my formal art education.



Figure 9. Playschool Exhibition.

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## Vita

Jimmie Nord, an artist from Northern California, was first recognized for his two public sculptures that were commissioned by the city of Arcata, CA. The first commission, "Torsos", a white concrete sculpture that represents the community and core ideas of the city, was placed next to the Arcata plaza. The second commission he received "Grasp", a sculpture of two life-size figures that are helping one and another up. The "Grasp" is made of bronze and was set next to the Arcata fire department. For seven years, Jimmie was involved in the World Championship Kinetic Sculpture Race as an artist, racer, and art judge. He built six human-powered machines that raced a 42-mile track through road, beach, mud, and water. Jimmie spent some time working for the U.S Forestry Service as a fire fighter and worked as a behavioral aid for children with disabilities; these two jobs influenced his work in his undergraduate. After graduating from Humboldt State with a BA in studio art Jimmie applied to a MFA program and is currently in his final semester at Louisiana State University, teaching three-dimensional design and a beginning sculpture class. He has helped start and run the artist collective, Elevator Project that puts on shows around Baton Rouge, La. In the spring of 2013, Jimmie assisted an artist Peter Shier an artist from Los Angeles California. Jimmie help build a dance set that Shier designed for Of Moving Color a dance group from Baton Rouge Louisiana. Jimmie is currently working on his Thesis and is planning on finishing up the LSU Masters of Fine Art program in August of 2014.