Pensively

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PENSIVELY

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 Department of Art

By
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B.A., Texas Lutheran University, 2007
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To my future wife Jessika
and all her patience,
I love you.
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ABSTRACT

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Pensively, uses toys and solar powered drawing machines to present elements of movement, time, and scale. Each of the works in this exhibition invites or implies action through automation or viewer interaction.

The works in this exhibit creates an environment of wonder and excitement that triggers memories of childhood and the pleasure of learning. The works investigate and discuss the responsibilities attained through maturation that keep us from recovering the sense of accomplishment we achieved with play.
INTRODUCTION

Memory has always been something that interested me. It becomes this mutable record that can only be changed and reordered by the creator. Even though two people might perceive the same event, their memory of that event might be entirely different with only minor similarities. The challenge in creating work that conjures memories is how to provoke a response from the viewer even when the work based on someone else’s experience. *Pensively*, is an attempt to create works that trigger memories of childhood, and create an environment where subconscious, imagination, childhood memories, and wishful thinking convene and materialize.

The root word, pensive, has two definitions: Wistful dreaming and deep, melancholic thought. The specific definitions—and its connotations—become clear only through the context in which the word is used. I chose the adverb form that describes an action, as the objects I have created for this exhibit all have or imply action. It is this use of implication, rather than the explicit instruction, that informs the viewers’ interpretation of the work.

*Pensively* explores formal elements such as movement, time, and scale. Using toys, familiar to American culture, allows the
viewer an experience that can trigger memories of childhood, which invites them to re-imagine these objects.

Each of the works in *Pensively* invites or implies action. The compositions have the potential for change through automation or viewer interaction. This impermanence is fundamental to the way each piece is viewed. The artworks seem to fit both definitions of pensive, and as the visual experience changes over time, the nuanced definitions of the word blur. Each of the pieces exists as a series of multiples, and the repetition reveals the subtle variations of each piece. Each object is only a small part of a much larger collection of others, however each one becomes distinct.

My primary source for *Pensively* has been memory and personal experience: Memory of play, investigation, exploration, the manipulation of objects, and the struggle to recapture the feelings of wonder and excitement associated with them. As my work progressed, I realized that recreating the fondness of those memories was unachievable, and they were entirely too personal to convey to an audience. However, the process of looking back allowed me to think about the toys as signifiers of a specific time and place. This became the intention for the work and allowed the viewers to respond thru their own memories and reflections. My goal was to make my audience engage an
object that may already hold a place in their memory and allow them to return to a time and place where it may have been significant. I hope that my audience will leave remembering people and places from their past and re-experience the excitement of being a kid: fearless in a self-constructed world of play and learning. Pensively takes the form of three distinct works. The visual thread running through the exhibition includes the use of recognizable objects whose scale has been increased. Each piece provokes thoughts of childhood play and personal memories.
Collemba is a scientific order within the classification of insecta. The Collemba Collection is a group of nine solar-powered robotic insects that create drawings based on the direct reaction to light. They live atop eight-inch-square, four-foot pedestals beneath an off-yellow bulb that hangs by a cord one foot above each insect. The bulb is an exposed flood, which creates a direct column of light that defines an environment, like a bell jar over a scientific specimen. Faint sounds of rustling can be heard, in short bursts, from each of the pedestals. The bionic life forms mysteriously move, pause, and then move again. The mechanisms are similar however, each one moves in its own distinct pattern. Each one is outfitted with a different marking device. On the wall behind each pedestal is a piece of paper with lines that circle, wiggle, and move off the page. Some of the marks are dark and others are barely visible. The lines are clearly the documentation of robotic insect travel. They create compositions from the repetitive movements across the page. The bugs are confined to the top of the narrow pedestals by a small piece of molding which also keeps them within range of their light source and creates a stage on which they perform. The visual element that is common to each
creature, throughout the *Collemba Collection*, is an exposed, rectangular, solar panel that innervates it. The marks vary from concentric circles to lines mimicking those of topographical maps layered one on top of one another. They suggest bugs in a mason jar or an artificial ecosystem created for them to thrive. As I look at these bionic life forms, I am reminded of memories of collecting bugs and participating in science fairs as a child. It brings to mind the eagerness to learn and the reward of accomplishment.
Plate 1: Collemba Collection
Plate 2: Collemba Collection (detail)
Plate 3: Collemba Collection (drawing detail)
Toys such as Lego’s, Erector Sets, Lincoln Logs, and Tinker Toys stimulated our desire to create the skyscrapers, apartment buildings, hospitals, and neighborhoods that fill our landscape. *Constructing* is a scaled up version of Tinker Toys. The round disks of these Tinker Toys are fourteen inches across and connect two-inch diameter rods of various lengths. *Constructing*, functions just as the vividly colored toy would by allowing the parts to be easily reconfigured to realize a limitless variety of forms. The large disks seem to anxiously balance overhead and an immediate sense of their weight becomes apparent. One person could not easily construct with these objects, contrary to the intention of the toy. Tinker Toys come in a large container with many parts and each set is compatible with another. They came with no instructions and there was no fear of failure because something could not be incorrectly built. This set appears to be the remnants or the initial construction of an archway that requires the viewer to pass under in order to proceed to the next room of the gallery. The scale change allows me to feel small, further reminding me of being a child and the lack of control I had in every aspect of life except play. The scale of Construction reminds me of the responsibility I’ve gained and
the anxiety it produces. As I mature, I understand that the desire to be completely independent is naïve and interdependence with family and community is the only way to successfully function.

Plate 4: Constructing
Plate 5: Constructing (detail)
As a child playing with toy soldiers, my goal was to be the hero and defeat the bad guy. Every day was a new battle and there was always a plan that ensured victory. Plotting occupies the entire backroom gallery. The viewer is immediately confronted with a colorful rug that is roughly thirteen feet in diameter. Piled in the center of the rug are shiny, green, army toy figurines. The half-scale Army Men are posed lying, prone and standing. The relative proportions of the installation make the viewers feel smaller. This creates a sense of wonder as they explore the space. The surfaces of the toy soldiers are marred with dents, defects, and bubbles. There are no distinguishable features on any of the figures, making them anonymous. By placing one of the figures on the outside edge of the rug, I encourage viewers to step on the rug and play with the Army Men. The size and the weight of the figures are not proportional and once that is discovered, the idea of repositioning or playing with them does not seem implausible. It is my thought that this composition will change as people engage, retreat, and as a new person enters. Allowing the audience to rearrange the figures accomplishes two goals: One is to create an immediate connection between the viewer/participant and the object. The second goal
is to allow for endless compositions to evolve. As I’ve grown older, these figures have transitioned from toys to representations of my friends and family members in service. These thoughts are now in conflict with those of the five-year-old in me who wants to embody one of the soldiers and defeat the bad guy, whoever that might be.

Plate 6: Plotting
Plate 7: Plotting (detail)
Plate 8: Plotting (detail)
CONCLUSION

All of the works in Pensively challenged my technical aptitude and formal sensibilities. Using recognizable toys allows me to immediately connect to my audience and changing scale allows them to explore the feelings of wonder and solace that these objects create. Together the sculptures begin to investigate more than just toys or memories. They discuss the responsibilities attained through maturation that keep us from recovering the sense of accomplishment we achieved with play.
Kenneth Lee Lantz was born in Austin, Texas, and raised in Rio Medina, Texas, just west of San Antonio. Being raised in a small community allowed him to be involved in everything from fine arts and plays to robot competitions. His fascination for investigation of art and technology led him to Collins College in Tempe, Arizona, to study computer animation. Longing for physical creation he transferred to Texas Lutheran University in Seguin, Texas, where he majored in both fine arts and public history. The time spent closely with faculty there left him longing to further investigate his love of art. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in May 2007 and moved immediately to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where he is pursuing a Master of Fine Arts degree from the School of Art with focus on sculpture.