Course over ground

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COURSE OVER GROUND

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
Requirements for the degree of
Master in Fine Arts
In
The Department of Art

By
Kyle Bauer
B.F.A, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2007
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Abstract

This exhibition, *Course Over Ground*, cohesively combines a metaphorical reference to maritime navigation with sculptural forms that convey balance, tension, and control. My mixed media sculptures are conceived with an adherence to the formalist perspective of objects. Each sculpture exists as an honest form. The work, and my intention in making it, is evidence of the process of breaking down selective images or objects into what I understand to be their purest representational forms, such as a squares, cylinders, pyramids, and rectangles. I allude to themes and the metaphor of a journey, which coupled alongside my continual quest for self-discovery, has been manifested into sculptures that aid the viewer as they navigate the gallery space.
Formalism

Since entering my mature art practice, I have looked to minimalist art and formalism for inspiration. The formalist foundations of my sculpture focus on compositional elements such as color, line, shape and pattern. My sculptures are constructed with a minimal and methodical selection of objects, using only what is essential to the work. I have studied the ways that artists such as Dan Flavin used color and composition to break up or disrupt a room’s space. For example, in his sculpture, *untitled (to you, Heiner, with admiration and affection)*, 1973, Flavin installed four-foot square sections of green fluorescent light fixtures in a repeating pattern, integrating them into the architecture of the space, while also using the forms to create barriers. Through the placement of my sculptures, I also reference the manner in which Donald Judd’s vocabulary of forms—stacks, boxes, and progressions—and Robert Morris’s installation at the Green Gallery in 1964 use form in space to highlight the relationship between the viewer and the room.

My mixed media sculptures begin with an adherence to a formalist perspective of objects. Each sculpture exists as an honest form. The work, and my intention in making it, is evidence of the process of breaking down selective images or objects into what I understand to be their purest representational forms, such as a squares, cylinders, pyramids, and rectangles.

My idea of “purest representational form” is directly tied to the investigation of Utopia and Utopian society. In his article, “Of Other Spaces,” Michel Foucault defines Utopia as “sites with no real place.” They are sites that have a general relation to direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a
perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces.” (Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” Heterotopias, 1967.) In many ways, a gallery filled with my sculpted forms becomes one of these “fundamentally unreal spaces,” somewhat minimal in tone and only slightly rooted in actual reality. My longing for the innocence of childhood is the conceptual link between the minimalistic compositions and my adherence to formalism. In addition, the repetition of bright primary colors reflects both the playfulness of my still youthful personality and recalls the colors and patterns of navigation, another significant reference point for this body of work.

A conscious understanding of navigation inspired me to use specific imagery as metaphors in this body of work. By establishing a connection between the literal meanings of navigational signs and their conceptual reference to journey, I make use of both a metaphoric and symbolic association. With this body of work, I have embraced formalism as well as symbolism and metaphorical associations.
Process

“Ideal parts of a system are not in themselves important but are relevant only in the way they are used in the enclosed logic of the whole.”

Dan Flavin

Process, material and construction decisions are rooted in my personal esthetics of “Utopian Formalism.” I use primary colors, solid craftsmanship, and strong visual structure. The presentation of my work is fundamentally focused, highlighting color, balance, control, and tension. Together, these create visibly striking compositional arrangements.

My construction methods visibly reflect the principal materials used in the trade of home construction. I use these primary methods of building, along with separately cast objects and their inherent imagery because it relates to what I interpret as being a “home.”

When combining images and objects, I trust my instinct to determine what is paired together and in what relationship they exist. The decision-making and logic in my art is rooted in intuitive thinking, paired with compositional intention, both of which rely on formalist aesthetics. I play during the construction process because to me, playing is an honest means to obtain an understanding of self and work.

The colors and patterns of my sculptures are directly related to and have been influenced by my appreciation for the graphic quality of navigational signs and symbols. Such signs are not intended to blend in with the natural world, but are meant to stick out so the information and directions they convey can be seen and properly observed. Their designs, colors, and patterns utilize bright, primary, and reflective colors that reference childhood and navigational objects.
Balance is evident in the construction and presentation of my sculptures and is used metaphorically to represent my desire to achieve balance in my everyday life. I have realized this through the imagery and connotations associated with a two-sided balance scale. I consider the placement of objects in relation to how they might apply to decision-making if it could be visibly shown—the weight and scale of a decision on one side could vary depending on what it is paired up against on the other side of the scale.

I use the physical effects of tension to imply that my objects are in a state of opposition with each other. I see the forms within the sculptures pulling and pushing at one another, fighting for the upper hand, or having to rely on each other for existence. Each piece is arranged in the gallery to complement the others in relation to their given space. My intentions for this work have been fulfilled when someone comes to, moves around, and engages with my work in the gallery space. In this sense, the pieces exist in an energetic state, while at the same time, frozen in place. The static state of each sculpture is not directly related to a specific moment in time, but instead refers to the physical and mental sensation of being pulled in different directions.

I strive for the ability to control every aspect of my work, from material choices to my belief in quality craftsmanship that is clean and crisp. My work is a combination of porcelain slip cast forms, jointed woods, and paints, finished to have an almost factory-made or industrial look. This aesthetic has evolved during my time at graduate school. I strive to achieve an industrial look and a beautiful composition of forms that is pleasing to the eye. The industrial aesthetic of my work acknowledges contradictory forces and functions. My intention in using this industrial aesthetic is dependent on the viewer
seeing the pieces as a complementary team that is working toward a common goal—the singular, resolved form.
Color

Color is important to my work because it has complex associations that leave room for viewer interpretation. The use of primary color and pattern in my sculpture is the icing on the cake. The juxtaposition of these colors with pattern provides the smooth, clean, and industrial aesthetic I so greatly desire.

The color red means to stop, but I also visualize it as a designator along a path that returns to port or home. The use of the color green indicates that I have a desire to embark on a journey. When I see this color, I know I am heading out to open waters with an uncertain future, in search for a place to call my own. Using red and green together further strengthens my conceptual tie to balance and tension.

Finally, the colors black and white, when paired together, warn that a non-visible obstruction lies ahead. This is an obstacle that interferes with or prevents safe passage or timely progress. I use the colors black and white because they prompt a warning and induce a feeling of tension.
Conceptual Framework

“At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is, But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity, Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards. Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point, There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.”

-T.S. Eliot, ‘Burnt Norton’

The conceptual framework of a journey and my affinity for navigating greatly inspires my work and is the model from which I formally compose and arrange my sculptures within the gallery space. I envision life as a journey, where we are all allowed the freedom to map and chart our own paths. As I undertake my journey, I am pulled in opposite directions, balancing my personal desires and conforming to cultural and societal norms. Everyday one comes upon crossroads, and whether they are big or small, one must make a decision about which path to take. I present myself with new challenges everyday; some are heavy and burdensome, while others are as simple as deciding to take an alternate route. My individual pieces reference significant crossroads and experiences that I have encountered. They are not firmly rooted in the past, but instead, are now part of my present and future. I learn from the outcomes, consequences and victories that are met at these crossroads, so I therefore see life as a continual journey with the only definitive conclusion being death.
Conclusion

My sculptures reflect formalist composition and my determined investigation of object making and personally significant forms. I have an obsessive approach to craftsmanship, an interest in primary color, and an intention to expand engagement with the gallery space through the arrangement and installation of my sculptures.

The sculptures I make are simultaneously a personal study to understand who I am as a person in today’s society and an artistic endeavor. The work is my attempt to understand the world I live in, through the conceptual, constructing, and installation processes. Objects particular to navigation and familiar materials have informed my work’s imagery and formal compositions. These works are a reflection of the lifestyle and social condition of me, the maker.
Image 3: Balance, Foster Gallery, 2011

Image 4: Tension | Control, Foster Gallery 2011
Vita

Kyle Bauer was born in 1985 in Salem, Illinois, as the New Year’s Baby of Marion County. He is the third of four children and had the privilege of growing up in an active and exciting household. At the age of nine, he moved to his father’s hometown of Benton, Illinois, where he graduated from high school. In 2007, he graduated from University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign with a bachelor of fine arts in Sculpture. While there, he studied under Ron Kovatch who introduced him to the ceramic process.

In 2008, Kyle moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to pursue a Master in Fine Arts in ceramics at Louisiana State University. He is a candidate for this degree in the fall semester of 2011. Upon completion of his graduate program, Kyle accepted an artist-in-residency position at Baltimore Clayworks, and is moving to Baltimore, Maryland, in the fall of 2011.