2005

The chemistry of my affections

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THE CHEMISTRY OF MY AFFECTIONS

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
David Scott Smith
B.F.A., Whitman College, 1993
August 2005
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all faculty, graduate students, special students, undergraduates, and friends who have inspired me—both past and present.

I would like to give an extra special thanks to Mikey Walsh.

I would also like to thank my family for their love and encouragement. A special thanks to my father for his help installing the show.

And I would most especially like to thank Tarah Longmire for providing the Chemistry.
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Abstract

Although I have always been interested in the origins of my thought processes and the methods and compulsions that motivate my work, in past work I have avoided self portraiture, or blatant explorations into my own sense of self. With my thesis project I wanted to conduct an express exploration into the psychology of my motivations. My initial goal was to create an environment, a sense of place, where both the viewer and myself are drawn into the work, and confronted with a unique experience of personal expression. The focal point is a bath enclosed within a grotto, which symbolizes a wide range of personal issues: spirituality, sexuality, sensuality, privacy, cleansing, honesty, shame, health, taboo, perversity . . . all things that embody my sense of self and self-esteem. The bath is the center of a triptych, and each piece is embellished with imagery that reflects a system of personal mythologies. These tableaus will further expand the nature of the Chemistry of My Affections and their importance to my artistic exploration.
“The Chemistry of My Affections” is the result of a year’s reflection on the source of my motivations as a ceramic artist, but more importantly, as an individual. It is the first time I have sincerely attempted this type of work, what might be described as an “exploration of self.” Previous to graduate study I tended to believe art that relied heavily on autobiographical inspiration was very narcissistic and mostly uninteresting. What did I care about the specific experiences of a person I’d never met? I enjoyed making ceramics that had a universal appeal—objects that pleased people enough to make them open their wallets. However, my attitudes changed as I began to realize that my approach to creating ceramics was a reflection of my own personal suppression. The process of aging and the type of introspection that usually proceeds with aging has a funny way of eroding securities. Consequently I began to feel my work with ceramics was inadequate, incomplete . . . even shallow.

I realized that in the past, and unfortunately often in the present, my motivations for art-making have been to entertain others, and draw attention to myself—but in a very impersonal way. As a mold-maker, with a rich technical background that ranges from taxidermy to theater, I have been able to produce objects encrusted with a razzle-dazzle of detail (eye candy, or in theater terms, smoke and mirrors). My work was largely encouraged by enterprise, but the irony of the situation is that I’ve never been driven by money; I was mainly looking for personal affirmation, which I found fleetingly with each sale.
My approach to art-making has been very indicative of my personal life. I am a performer, sometimes the life of the party, seemingly a very social person, but I am also very private and at times very insecure. I interact well on a superficial level, but I have a hard time maintaining close relationships (except with a certain old German Shepherd). I often feel like an outsider, as if I am watching life pass by, but I am afraid to jump in and participate. I am afraid to “reveal” myself, both personally and in my art. And so I have clowned around and avoided the issues that break the surface to something more substantial. But there is something substantial—it lumbers around behind the performance and beneath the costume.

Love is at the core of my thesis—it’s all about love. Deconstructed, love breaks down into love of self: sexuality, self-esteem, personal identity. Then there is love of others, which includes euphoria, heartache, attraction, loneliness, passion, lust, shame, laughter, physical pleasure, anger, poetry, comfort, pain, tenderness, foolishness, confusion . . . it is the bitter and the sweet, the honey and the blood. Love is my connection to the divine, both God and the devil. Love is what brings me closest to the beauty of nature (although I believe the conventional human concept of nature is artificial and defiled). True love is a romantic notion I was raised to believe in, until I “came of age” and the cynical misery of experience crushed my fairytale ideals—and yet ironically I still believe in true love. In the past my work was about love too, trying to catch the attentions and hopefully the affections of others in order to bolster my precarious sense of self-worth, or self-love. But in “The Chemistry of My Affections” I want to try and depict “a sense of place” that these issues create in my life as directly as I am capable. We all have particular memories of significant experiences that form our concepts of
personal identity; each of these memories has a place, a location, a point in time, an atmosphere. I want to create a “sense of place” that is similar to a vivid memory. I am an avid lover of literature, especially fiction, and believe that metaphor is one of the strongest vehicles for carrying a message to the heart. And in a sense, a memory of an event in one’s life is a metaphor of the original experience.

Old habits die hard: you will still find the razzle-dazzle of eye candy encrusted in my thesis. But this need for creating elaborate visual ornamentation represents another aspect of my character which I am allowing myself to embrace. I used to joke that I made things for myself that I could never afford to buy. I’ve also joked that my love of decadence and ornamentation and excess indicates that I was probably a homosexual in a previous life. (I don’t mean to make broad, sweeping generalizations, but I do have an appreciation for “gay aesthetic,” and in fact most of my best customers were gay couples.) But basically I think there is an element of fantasy in my work that wants to break free of traditional social and gender roles. I come from a modest, “woodsy” background, but I have a desire to make objects fit for kings. I am also a heterosexual male, with a desire to “create pretty” that would make Liberace blush.

There are three pieces in “The Chemistry of My Affections,” and I intend them to be viewed as a triptych. Their titles are: Bobo, The Grotto, and The Honey. Originally, when I first proposed the project, I was focused solely on the idea of building a grotto, but as my ideas progressed I felt I was trying to cram everything into one possibly confusing and conflicted environment. I felt a triptych would create a continuity of ideas with a stronger narrative element.
Bobo

“You can take the bear out of the woods, but you can’t take the woods out of the bear.”

Often in my work you will find that I utilize the same characters playing different roles. My approach to ceramics is very theatrical, and I have tried to emphasize this in my thesis. I often think of my work as a string of tableaus, or scenes stuck in time. I am fascinated by theater or cinema, when it is able to convey so much emotional expression in one brief scene or moment. (I’ve found this even in some television commercials or music videos.) For me, the characters I utilize represent various components of my psychology (perhaps even the ideals of my psychology), and I will create a situation for them just to see what transpires. In a way, it’s not unlike the stock joke: a man, a hooker, and a giraffe walk into a bar. What happens? I’m never sure what will happen until I create a situation that depicts an interaction between characters at the height of dramatic tension.

What are the true identities of each character? I’m not entirely sure, but I rely on my compulsion to create them again and again as evidence that they are significant and substantial components of my work. Often there is a clear gender assigned to a particular character (I think of birds as female, the pig-cherub as male/myself); however, even these lines are unclear at times, and I am certainly not trying to imply a set system of gender roles. In some scenes a specific character may appear dainty and sensitive; in another it is vicious and menacing.

For my thesis I thought it was important to introduce a new character. He is a clown. He is also a bear. He is the circus bear, the dancing bear. Bobo is not necessarily intended to be viewed as a tableau, although I have depicted him in the midst of
temptations, whirls of imagination, and love’s delicious distractions (bears love berries, and this bear loves girls). The bear is of course a metaphor for how I view myself, and for this reason I have chosen *Bobo* as an entry into “The Chemistry of My Affections.”

Originally *Bobo* was intended to be life-size, but I believe the necessity of time and technical difficulties turned in my favor. As a child growing up as a taxidermist’s son I was always intrigued by an animal head hanging on the wall. You have to understand, I don’t have the morbid fascination most people have with taxidermy. I don’t think of taxidermy as a kitschy cultural novelty. For me, a wall mount represents an experience, a powerful memory. Oil tycoons who pay thousands of dollars to shoot a grain-fed, farm-raised trophy are complete idiots. My first whitetail buck that hung on the wall was a representation of a wonderful experience—I shot that deer 400 yards across a rugged Idaho canyon in the middle of winter, and I butchered that deer with respect and carried it a mile on my back straight up a mountain. I was sixteen years old. Years after, when I looked at that deer hanging on the wall, it inspired my confidence and imagination. It was somehow a testament to the strength of my identity and abilities.

*Bobo* is an important step for me; this last year I have been confronted with the realization that technical ability, or a strong aptitude for craft, is not the main component of a successful work of art. As I’ve questioned both personal motivations and my motives for working with ceramics I’ve come to the conclusion that *to be “good” at something, you need to be doing it for the right reasons.* That statement sounds simple and vague—it is both—but I can apply it to almost everything: relationships and love, art-making, teaching, lifestyle, etc. The tricky part is *knowing* when you are doing something for the right reason, and this requires a commitment to personal introspection.
Bringing myself into my work is a reflection of my desire to move into a realm beyond purely demonstrating feats of ceramic virtuosity, to work that explores real life issues, a statement on the human condition. I do not promise to provide answers, or clarity—I place strong emphasis on the word exploration. In fact, stumbling through personal confusion is the very heart of my thesis, and I believe many will identify with me.

Image 1: Bobo, Installation View, Stoneware, 2005
Image 2: *Bobo*, Detail of Figures

Image 3: *Bobo*, Detail of Bear
Image 4: *Bobo*, Detail of Hand, Plaster

Image 5: *Bobo*, Detail of Bird Girls and Strawberries
Grotto

It’s all about love.

As already mentioned, when I first started working seriously with ceramics, I used to joke that I made things I could never afford to buy myself. You can take this both literally and metaphorically. In the literal sense, I was taught at an early age how to make the things I wanted, or at least use my imagination. When I was a child my family was not poor, or rather I never knew we were poor until I got old enough to realize we were poor. Luckily, by the time I realized my situation in life, I’d learned to use my hands and imagination.

I have always created my sense of self-worth with my hands. I’ve been wearing the same clothes for years, I drive a beat-up truck, and my apartment is the epitome of function and bare necessity—but when I build with ceramics, I have a desire to build for royalty.

When I began the grotto my principal motivation was to create something special for myself; I viewed my thesis show as perhaps the only time I would have to disregard the usual anxieties of a working artist. I’ve become jaded about the process of creating objects inspired by the hope of notoriety or a cash sale. I know artists who have “made it” in the art world, but who still can’t pay their bills. And I know artists who can pay their bills, as long as they produce the same assembly-line crap that brings in the business. For my thesis I wanted to avoid these pitfalls—I wanted to make something for myself that was special but honest (not a narcissistic tribute), something that enabled me to explore my own personal expression in a way I had not allowed myself previously.
I wanted to make a bath. Water has always fascinated me and inspired my imagination, whether it is the sea, a lake or river, or the streetlights reflecting on a flooded parking lot. I love fishing, swimming, snorkeling, and diving. The two times in my life I came closest to death I was in water. The only time I am truly confronted with my physical self is each day in the shower. Water has many culturally symbolic connotations, but my foremost goal was to create something that made me feel special, an experience I could immerse myself in—this was my starting point, and the rest would be an exploration. I was not born with a body that will ever adorn magazine covers, and I have never enjoyed life as a member of the upper class, but in my bath I wanted to feel both comfortable with my physical self and confident that I have created something only the very rich might enjoy.

Constructing the bath involved great attention to detail and a great deal of time—time I spent reflecting on my motivations for the project. During this period I re-explored my compulsion to decorate the objects I make with layer upon layer of detail. I think this has roots in an underlying love of elaboration and a distrust of simplification. I feel that most simplified objects are uninteresting, because variation and diversity are the essence of all that surrounds me. I think too often humans simplify to build systems of meaning, which can create a false sense of security and eventually lead to bigger problems. I did not want to depict chaos in my bath; I wanted to depict complexity.

The glazes and tile forms I chose for specific reasons. Many of my surface and glaze treatments are considered to be clichés within the ceramics community, and I suppose there are good arguments for this. Reduction-fired copper reds have been around a long time, and thousands of crappy pots have been treated with this glaze. Crystalline
glazes often have a kitschy association, and there are also thousands of lousy pots covered with this glaze. However, I feel it is important for the ceramic artist to objectively view a surface treatment for the visual information it presents, utilize it appropriately in a thoughtful context, and not conform to typical “ceramics conventions.” For example, I think copper reds are beautiful, and the variations that reduction firing provided were perfectly suited to my tile forms and theme.

The textures, forms, and surfaces I chose are meant to reflect metaphoric chemistry. Human chemistry—lover’s chemistry. For the copper red glaze I constructed rounded oval and kidney shapes—organs, blood, internal jewels. I worked from molds I made of ornamental beads and jewelry. I worked with molds made from snakeskin, prehistoric fish, leaves, shells, fruit, tree bark, exotic fabrics, lace, etc; I wanted to depict analogous detail, a continuity in the complexity of the textures that hold my fascination.

In keeping with my commitment to “honesty and personal exploration” with the project, the textures and surfaces I utilized were chosen to create an atmosphere that moved beyond the purely ornamental and lavish. There is an element of sin and the sinister to the bath. It is both Aladdin’s cave of treasures and a grotto of horror. The surrounding canopy and environment is intended to be circus-like and theatrical. Creature “actor characters” that inhabit the grotto symbolize a mutation of human and animal, of idyllic and carnal, of heaven and hell.

I had an interesting epiphany in Louisiana about a year ago that inspired my aquatic jesters. I was fishing on the pier with friends, and the fishing was spectacular. We had at least a half dozen giant redfish lying on the concrete of the pier, and several of them were “drumming.” (When they are distressed, the fish emit a deep boom-boom
noise.) It occurred to me suddenly that these fish were toys, an adult’s playthings. True, we were fishing for food. But any person with an aptitude for math could have told us we spent more money on our trip to Grand Isle than we would have on a trip to the grocery store. Fishing is fun, and that was our main motivation. Catching these animals—even watching them flop and die on the pier—was a primal form of entertainment.

For years I have had recurring variations of the same dream: I am hunting or fishing for an animal, and after I have wounded it and tracked it, I find a human. The person is often a friend or family member—they speak to me, and I feel shame or embarrassment. I still do not understand the significance of these dreams, or even if they are significant (I do not share Freud’s view that all dreams are inherently significant), but the frequency of these types of dreams lead me to believe they are important.

I have come to believe my anthropomorphic actors and performers are symbolic of my process of art-making, or I should say the ethical dilemmas I confront with the methods I utilize. I make molds of anything I find interesting or intriguing, whether it is tree bark, a toy, a dead bird, or an insect, and will usually combine these objects in any way that suits my imagination. I believe in my heart that I have respect for all flora and fauna, and yet I do feel I may be using this respect as a justification for presenting imagery in any way I choose. Amateur biology was a trendy hobby a hundred years ago, and many would-be ornithologists collected specimens of rare birds by the thousands, which filled curiosity cabinets for display and amusement. In my grotto I have shaped fish and snakeskin impressions into tile forms suitable for human comfort and pleasure. I have combined turtles, crabs, and fish with doll parts and appendages—sometimes,
mainly for amusement. I this art, or am I more akin to Frankenstein working on his monster?

In the grotto I have created a lavish environment where I hope to find an affirmation of my self and my abilities, a place that exists outside of social restrictions where I can experience myself, both as I am, and as I truly would like to be. But I also do not want to delude myself, or become too comfortable within that space. I want to confront and explore an aspect of the horror that corrupts my ideals—something closer to the basic “nature” of my psychology—and include it in the space I call myself.

If heaven were truly heaven, what a boring place it would be.

Image 6: *Grotto*, Installation View, 2005
Image 7: *Grotto*, Detail of Inner Chamber and Bath

Image 8: *Grotto*, Detail of Bath
The Honey

Underlying my main theme of love—in *The Honey* mainly sex and sexuality—I have tried to incorporate my views on our culture’s concept of “nature,” because I believe the conventional mindset on nature and sexuality is very analogous. Our concept of nature is highly romanticized.

From childhood all the way into adulthood I’ve spent a great deal of my time in the outdoors. I was fortunate to have two fathers (Dad and Step-dad) who were both taxidermists, who both hunted and fished almost every week, and who both felt my time with them was more important than school (as long as my grades were adequate). I almost literally did not graduate from high school because I was absent from school over a month beyond the legal amount. I’ve hunted, fished, camped, and backpacked in Washington, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Alaska, Oregon, Canada, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Maine, and now Louisiana. For me, spending time in the woods was spiritual bliss. And I grew up with a belief in the purity of “un-touched” nature—I believed that nature took care of itself, and it would always be as it was.

Once again time, age, and experience have betrayed my innocence. I realize now that most of the forests I frequented as a boy were second-cut stands of replanted timber that hardly resemble the original “un-touched” forest. The Northwest that I grew up in has been devastated in less than a hundred years—it looks almost nothing like it did before the settlers arrived. There were many species—everything from wolves to wildflowers to amphibians and insects—that had disappeared only a few short years before I was born. What I had previously believed to be a healthy natural environment
was actually more like an artificial park or tree farm. There were deer to shoot and fish to catch, but “nature” was not pure or untouched, and certainly not enduring.

I could go on about problems that infect every inch of the globe, but I would only be redundant. I have tried to imbue the characters of *The Honey* with as much life as I can (because even in a nature that is corrupt, artificial, and defiled, life persists with vicious vitality and energy), but I have purposefully portrayed my characters in a type of “Museum of Natural History-esque” environment. As a taxidermist, I was constantly posing birds, mammals, or fish in “realistic” positions on driftwood. For some reason driftwood, even if it is sawed off at the ends, is the most marketable way to portray a stuffed animal. In *The Honey* I wanted to portray a savage garden, because life and nature are still savage, but I also wanted to include a strong presence of the artificial.

Traditional conventions of love are artificial. Love, sex, and sexuality are concepts that infinitely fascinate us yet remain elusive and indefinable. Why are most popular songs on the radio about love? Why is pornography such a lucrative business? Why is the subject of love so prevalent in the self-help section at the bookstore? Why do some people abhor the idea of gay marriage, even though every species of mammals exhibits homosexual behavior in a portion of the population?

Why are relationships with others, particularly sexual relationships, so complicated, irrationally emotional, and at times infinitely frustrating? Isn’t sex our most “natural” behavior? Our basic needs—food, shelter, safety, etc.—may seem to be foremost concerns to the rational mind, but I have seen whitetail bucks, completely emaciated from starvation, whose primary concern was chasing a doe instead of eating. I have been that buck.
I positioned Bobo so that he would be looking straight at The Honey, because these questions plague me on a personal psychological level, and fascinate me intellectually. Whether we admit it or not, I believe sex is our main motivation for almost anything we do, and our personal sexuality is the cornerstone of self-identity and self-esteem. Bears crave honey, but do they know why?

With The Honey I wanted to create an environment that was brutal and unforgiving—a sexually charged atmosphere of eat-or-be-eaten. But I also wanted it to be exquisitely compelling and beautiful. I want the viewer to ask, “what is the honey?” Is it pure chemistry, pheromones, an ideal, a fantasy? What compels us to endure the pitfalls of love, again and again and again? I don’t believe it is pure sex. I think it is sex and something else. I think it is something “natural,” a truly pure aspect of nature that cannot be eradicated from our biology. I would say love.

The Honey is my current version of the Garden of Eden. I am not a creationist, and I do not believe original humans sprang from the first Adam and Eve. But I do believe the biblical story is an apt representation of the human predicament (especially if you omit the sexist overtones). We are animals plagued by temptations, most of which we do not fully understand. What is healthy, what is not? What is “natural,” and what is societal conformity?
Image 11: *The Honey*, Installation View, 2005

Image 12: *The Honey*, Detail of Hive and Figures
Image 13: *The Honey*, Detail of Hive

Image 14: *The Honey*, Detail of Hive
Image 15: *The Honey*, Detail of Figures

Image 16: *The Honey*, Detail of Figures
Image 17: *The Honey*, Detail of Figures
Conclusion

I can only make a modest attempt to tackle such questions as “What is Art?” or “Why do we make Art?” and doing so would probably only lead to broad generalizations that I believe have plagued our field of study for too long. Therefore, I must explore my own personal motivations, which are sometimes dubious at best. As I stated previously, I have recently come to appreciate art that stems from a deeply personal, individual experience. While there are many types of art that provide valuable insight into our culture (craft-based art, design-based art, academic art, etc.), specifically autobiographical art provides an opportunity to examine concepts that extend beyond established societal conventions. We may have a herd mentality, but there is usually some individual leading the herd. Ideas and philosophies change, and often at the forefront of these changes you can find distinct personalities with unique visions.

My awakening to the benefit of art that conveys strong personal expression has only been recent. When people are in art school they see a lot of art, both good and bad, and the subjectivity of developing a societal art criterion is a hot topic of debate. I am constantly intrigued by the variety of individual responses to art, and I believe it is indicative of a system of values that is unique to each person. Our individual value systems begin at birth, with whatever genetics we bring to the table, and they continue to form as we experience and age, right up to the present moment. Our value systems may have strong foundations in childhood, but the details are constantly in flux throughout our lives. Therefore, art that speaks to me may seem uninteresting to another, and vice versa. Technical virtuosity with a medium or material may elevate some art to a higher level, but a strong sense of conceptual content comes from beyond sheer skill. Where an artist
comes from, who they are, what their vision is—if these elements are utilized strongly in the work, an individual with a similar system of values will respond to or connect with the art.

I know that I’ve wandered out-of-bounds into the realm of “what is art,” which I specifically implied I would try not to do. But to understand my thesis you must know that I have seriously wrestled with the question, “why is it important to share intimate aspects of my psychology?” There is still the opinion, deeply rooted in my system of values, that tells me art is not a valid vocation, it is a hobby, it is a way of pissing away my time—unless I can validate my work through a monetary exchange. Society demands of me a standard of worth and I have previously measured myself within respected conventions. By the standards I was born and raised with, anything else implies I am overly sentimental or a hippie or gay. Why should I explore deeper, personal issues?

The answer is simple: my work will be stronger. Expression of personal vision is synonymous with a strong sense of self-esteem or self-worth; my work with ceramics reflects my view of self. It is a simple concept, but one I have taken a long time to embrace. But the risk of exposure—whether it is making a new friend, embracing a new lover, or creating art—is a leap of faith, and a leap of life. Exposure is a symptom of vitality. New thoughts and ideas are what charge and motivate the human heart. Hopefully our visions move us in a positive direction if they are sincere and thoughtful—if we are doing things for the right reasons.

For the first time I would like to try and share my personal vision, although it may seem to be an expression of confusion and uncertainty.
Image 18: *The Honey and Grotto*, Installation View
Vita

David Smith was born in Spokane, Washington, and received his Bachelor of Arts in English literature from Whitman College in 1993. Shortly after undergraduate study he began working as a claims processor for a large health insurance company. When he was not at work, he started making ceramics in his basement, as an alternative to heavy drinking. By late 1995 he no longer worked for the insurance company; his hobby had grown into a small part-time business, Foolish Fish Studio, which specialized in table-top fountains, tile, lamps, and other decorative nonsense.

In 1996 he followed a girl to Connecticut, where he continued his business, and also worked as a technician for several theaters and a puppet company. In 1999 he briefly attended Rhode Island School of Design until he ran out of money, tucked his tail between his legs, and moved back to Washington State. In Washington State Foolish Fish Studio continued to flourish, and David was soon lured into gainful employment by Northstar, a company that specializes in ceramic equipment (slabrollers and extruders). For several years David worked for Northstar as an instructor, warehouse manager, retail sales associate, ordering and accounts, delivery chump, etc. until he realized this wasn’t much better than an insurance position, and he missed an academic environment. In August 2002 he was admitted to Louisiana State University as a graduate student in ceramics, where he has been for the last three years, until they just recently forced him to graduate.

David now hopes to stay in Louisiana until: a) he has wrestled an alligator, b) he tires of fishing the Gulf; d) it becomes apparent nobody wants him here. In addition to ceramics David also enjoys puppies, long walks on the beach, and ice cream.