

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

Jolene

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The transition from my small hometown in Arkansas to pursue my Bachelor of Fine Arts in Kansas City, Missouri, developed a feeling of misplacement within me. I felt the drastic difference between growing up in the South and the ancestral privileges of my peers. Learning that the concrete floors of my childhood home contrasted with the extravagant amenities of my colleagues intimidated me. The exposure to extreme urban wealth inspired me to commemorate my personal history. Gloves, slingshots, the invasive Kudzu, and tools for labor are suspended in a state of disbelief that question sexuality, social class, and material impossibility. I render ceramic objects that are emblematic and characteristic of southern culture; Dark humor, transgressive thoughts, desires, and impulses are evoked by articulated objects that reference and subvert the pastoral.

My practice stems from the complicated emotions that come to surface when the line between attraction and aversion become blurred. That peculiar hunger is a common experience in the queer community, when one realizes they're attracted to the same sex. The first time I fell in love felt like watching bugs in the light of a ceiling fan. I was a little grossed out but curious, I wanted to know how they got there and why there were so many crawling around. It made my eyes burn. By sculpting clear and articulate imagery out of clay and arranging found objects, I create situations in an effort to express that emotion.

A thimble is used as the ammunition for a kiss in my piece titled "Pucker Up." Permanently frozen in time on the wall, the sculpture operates as a sentinel directed to a passerby's mouth. Simultaneously the object itself could be read by picking apart the contemporary symbology, its historical link in terms of the re-representation of weapons, and its absence of the figure. I

consider all of these themes, connections, ideas, and the viewers interaction with the work, but to be transparent, they are secondary. Similar to how this paper is structured, my work is inspired by my personal narrative. It is a cathartic process and is how the image comes into reality. There's a sense of satisfaction after I render an object whose initial purpose was to satiate an internal craving. Post firing, drying, or even the next day, is when I enlist my research, theoretical ideas, and formalism in an effort to extend beyond the objects autobiographical origin.

Creating sculptures that are representational allows an opportunity for the viewer to acknowledge what it is and have to account for the emotions that arise when encountering the work. They're objects that we have some sort of familiarity thus allowing for a viewer to feel comfortable enough to come closer for moments of intimacy. "Representation can be a versatile tool for subverting the status quo, for provoking and counteracting established perceptions and legends. Representation can be a provocateur and counteragent; it can spread a story that attacks established reputations. Reality is proposed through visual imagery. Proposed not stated. Creating illusion through representation."¹ We learn to see something and name it so that it can be understood and gain some foresight as to how it operates.

When we view images of tools or while shopping at Lowes, we have a mental understanding of how that object functions. A two man saw is used by a pair to cut a tree down, an axe handle is coupled with an axe head to chop said wood, and a shovel can be used to pry the stump out. We can clearly imagine ourselves using them. By hiding the axe head within wheat, flocking the

¹ Bailey W. Douglas. Prehistoric Figurines: Representation and Corporeality in the Neolithic. Rutledge, 2005

shovel, and casting the two-man saw out of rubber, their joined traditional function for cutting a tree down is now subverted. They're now actively telling an audience "no", I am something else, please reconsider me as something other than as a tool for labor. Twisting the logic of these functional objects allows me the opportunity to question our learned pattern for naming and presuming. I'm sensitive to how these objects are culturally understood and want to stay true to their purpose. Though now with my process of transforming, covering, and replacing, they become more precious and are accessed differently than their cousins at the hardware store or in your shed. Once hard is now soft, instruments that are characteristically masculine are now presented effeminate. I'm trying to influence a viewer to assert themselves as the user of the tool and as subject within the space.

Beauty, attraction, and seduction within contemporary art practice is a difficult beast to tackle. I think of beauty in the same way I feel about certain aspects of religion. The word religion itself makes one think of mystery, movement, like listening to a live orchestra, catholic choir, or when Dancing Queen by ABBA comes on the radio. Experiential beauty in music and art allows us to surrender and be present. In terms of beauty represented or evoked by objects I'd like to delve into the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan concerning his idea about object-cause of desire. "The object which is not the thing we desire but the thing which activates and sustains our desire: the thing which, due to its illusiveness, makes certain objects desirable...the object-cause of desire is so potent, driving us to extreme limits in our attempts to appropriate it."² I relate this quote to the process of mimicry. Mimicry can be a methodology used to better understand something through perfect re-representation, a way of finding a personal or theoretical connection. Though as a process in my practice, it's related more towards what Lacan is theorizing. I utilize the process of

² Hewetson, Owen. Lacanonline.com, 2010.

mimicry and beauty as a seduction tactic, in an effort to activate desire in a viewer. It is the feeling of desire that they leave the gallery space with, not necessarily a desire for the objects themselves.

Society subliminally and overtly teaches us what is beautiful, but, we also recognize beauty instinctually. Elaine Scarry writes in her book “On Beauty and Being Just” that beauty teaches you justice, morality, and being wrong.³ I think that situation is probably one of the most universal and relatable, that moment when you realize that something you once thought was beautiful actually isn’t at all, and vice versa. That intuitive response to beauty, desire, and that peculiar hunger I mentioned before is an emotion that I explore and chase after in all of my work. For example, I organized a visual puzzle by pressing a club on a ring bearers’ pillow, crowned it with a purple bow, and sprigged the object with little Roman faces. The studded club is a symbol that’s just as emblematic of primal courtship as its Neolithic Caveman wielder and is quite the opposite of anything traditionally beautiful. If anything, visually it’s quite violent with a touch of camp. An object that challenges societal norms by queering institutionalized symbols of masculinity. Which makes its presence essential in a room of elegance for a discussion on beauty perverted, or corrupted. A peculiar beauty that deviates, and transgresses societal norms. These disparate objects within the space urges a persistence to reevaluate our process for naming.

The real world objects, animals, and figures I sculpt in clay perform a similar function, though with different dialects. In all of my material choices I rely on the process of mimicry but, it’s never to fool or trick a viewer. It’s important to me that the audience feel like these objects are real materially in space not just illusions. For example, a hand made, ceramic, roughly glazed

³ Scarry, Elaine. On Beauty and Being Just, Princeton University Press, 2013.

dunce hat becomes a metaphor for shame rather than an illusion if it were represented two-dimensionally. The object is tangible and is both literally and visually heavier than its paper ancestor. It isn't about elementary classroom punishment anymore. It's been supplanted into a gallery space and actively asks to be reconsidered. Placed on an actual stool, a viewer can easily imagine themselves wearing the dunce hat, feeling that weight. Similarly, a pair of aluminum crutches is used to support us when a part of our body is injured in some way. Three ceramic crutches strobing against the wall confronts the viewers own physical body. We understand how these objects are used experientially but through its odd number and fragility, they simultaneously ask the viewer to consider the name crutch in other terms. These sculptures are performance artifacts that are extensions of the body which, for me as the maker, allow me to recognize, and acknowledge an action, or an emotion that is felt, and then transmute that into something that can be placed physically into space and critically accessed.

I question our natural affinity to make judgement and name things. As I'm making the work, I consider how a viewer approaches the object, what will the sculptures reveal, and how an audience will re-assess a piece after encountering another. From afar we assume that the piece titled "Swing Low" is a broom, just inverted to rest on its handle and float on the wall. Then coming closer we see that the pole is an axe handle and the axe head is camouflaged within a bundle of wheat. Seduced to come closer by the only warm color tone within the space, and then retracting when realizing the object has the potential for violence. A figure covered in Kudzu hovers the same distance from the ground as the broom, creating a tension and relationship between the two pieces despite their visual differences.

William Faulkner suggests that the South is not so much a geographical place as an emotional idea.⁴ That emotional idea is connected to events related to a long history of violence, prejudice, socio-economics, beauty, and a longing for an imagined ideal. Small towns that make up the forgotten parts of the U.S. evoke a mixture of tension, beauty, suppression, and stillness that I carry into my work even as I physically move further away from my hometown. Being a product of the culture of honor, I rely on a value structure that maintains an aura of tranquility which veils the content of the work. Similar to certain Southern colloquialisms such as, “bless your heart” or “I’ll pray for you,” ingrained politeness, contradictions, and my own sensitivity is reflected in the work. I feel that everyone who is from a provincial space has an intuitional connection with their origin despite the prejudices permeating its setting. I believe we inherit not only our parents genetics, but also their transgressions, and the ideals of the society we were raised in. For myself as a queer artist making work that reflects certain aspects of Southern culture there’s an internal conflict surrounding right and wrong. I’m creating objects that carry with them, whether they be modeled, arranged, or casted, a feeling of conflict. Artifacts that perform as contradictions, meditations, and proclamations that serve as evidence for a muddy history.

The question, “What is your relationship with the South?” isn’t an easy question to answer. I asked my mother the same question. She writes, “Living in the south is what it means... though it’s more how I see others view it, not how I view it...the whole bless your heart culture. Well I love being southern for the natural beauty, slower pace and authentic manners. It’s the ‘backwoods bullshit mask smile’ that drives me crazy. It’s also a fear based culture in many ways.” For myself, I would have to say I have a toxic relationship with the South. I go back and

⁴ “Home” Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. <https://nasher.duke.edu>

forth feeling seduced by familiarity and beauty but as I navigate that setting, an unsettling feeling of fear and violence become palpable. The south is famous for its courtesy, but the highly refined concept of honor that largely produced its manners helped to make the region the most violent in the country. As the old say goes, a southerner is gracious and friendly until he is mad enough to kill you.⁵

“Jolene” the title of this show is made famous by a Dolly Parton song where she describes a beautiful woman coming in-between the narrator and her lover. The song itself is inspired by a fan asking Dolly Parton for an autograph and when she heard her name she thought to herself, “That name would make a great country western song.” Dolly is just describing Jolene in the song, not saying anything actual about her. Everyone who has heard the song reacts differently when hearing that name, and this is why I am attracted to it. A friend, when asked, “Do you know the song Jolene?” Responded instantly with “Yes, that bitch.” Others laugh and begin to sing the tune. I like how we all begin to imagine our own Jolene, whether we see ourselves or someone else. The sculptures in my thesis show, like the name Jolene, are desirable in their rendering and beauty. Upon closer inspection these objects are unnerving, simultaneously humorous, ours and not ours.

⁵ Schwartz, Benjamin. *The Idea of the South*. <https://theAtlantic.com>. May 12, 2019

Technical Report

Paper Clay Recipe Cone 04-10

Custer Feldspar 12

Talc 5

GoldArt 15

OM4 25

Tile 6 30

Pyrax 15

Add 2 rolls of single ply toilet paper per 100 lbs

Kelly's Shino Revision Cone 04

Lithium Carbonate 29

Neph Sy 70

EPK 11

Rutile Light 6

CMC .5

Zircopax 5

Underglaze Recipe Cone 04-6

Stain 15 up to 70

EPK 20

Neph Sy 10

Veegum 6

CMC 6

Ruth's Satin Base Cone 6

Gerstley Borate 10

Custer Feldspar 47

Dolomite 10

Whiting 14

EPK 19

AMACO Velvet Black Underglaze

Potter's Choice Saturation Metallic

Potter's Choice Palladium

Western Ceramics Supply Aztec Gold

Western Ceramics Supply Silver Ore

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