

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

Arti(fice)fact

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1. Preface

Much of my practice functions as a means to reflect selectively on my surroundings. This usually begins in the form of collecting, often in relationship to being an active practitioner of consumerism. I am undeniably attracted to kitsch relating to a fake rusticity or ancient motif that surfaces in the form of low brow imagery in pop culture, consumer market, or regional style. I aim to appropriate the appropriated as a means of reflecting on the first removal and any absurdity that may arise in its initial theft. My goal is to use the same tools of absurdity twice over, or to re-layer and configure the same cultural paradoxes in a manner that may point to this absurdity in all its problems and poetics. This often happens in relationship to a sign, motif, or practice that is not intrinsic to a specific area or time period but does become a type of vernacular. This balance between the extrinsic and the everyday is where my interest lies. Due to the complexity of globalization and the movements of practices and motifs cross-culturally, I choose to pull from how these issues may surface directly around me.

I view my practice first in relationship to the idea of a “game”. At times it is a rather unromantic notion of the studio artist. I engage making as a type of pop-savvy sport before it is a reverent search for anything authentic in self or in object. A game of chess taking place on a boundary less board, though its pieces do move in response to their surroundings. Each move carries a set of impacts but can only act in response to the board itself. I do not strive to make the next big strategic move, but contemplate where other pieces stand and play accordingly. I wish to position myself in part to the whole and contribute to a dialog that is specific to now but has always been apart of various subcul-

tures. Through this basic outline, my next goal is to reflect on art and culture, to hold a mirror up to the multi-facets of my surroundings. The cliché of the mirror becomes appropriate by nature as it only displays what is in front of it through its inverse, both same and opposite. I think of the artist as both creator and critic of culture.

The moves and reflections I make in my studio are a product of cultural paradox, one of Florida and suburbia. This land South of the South is a forgery made real over time, both false and sincere. Florida stands in image of an exotic land turned retirement home, a landscape more curated than natural at times. A designed aura existed there even before the first planned communities were founded: through 1920s Spanish Revival in areas where Spain was not, the image of the coconut palm and banana leaf which is not native, the lush gardens landscaped on a shallow six inches of topsoil floating above dry sand, the Hawaiian paddle board, yoga on beaches, and the totems of tiki. The sugar white sand provides us with a massive collapse of time and place but a horizon only one-hundred and eighty-degrees round. From where my hometown sits you can gaze towards Cuba or the Yucatan Peninsula, though many there imagine little of those lands (*elsewhere*).

2. Arti(fice)fact

There are moments today where the antiquated becomes re-introduced within contemporary culture, where the archaic meets a tech-savvy millennial, or when an ancient practice becomes new-wave bohemian. Paralleling the invention of Google Glass and the forward motion of virtual reality also exists a North American generation fascinated with yuppie maker culture, amateur buddhism, and urban yoga studios. What drives an individual to look outside one's own system of time and culture in search for authenticity? And why must many look toward the antiquated as a way of reflecting on the immediate now? From interior decor that embraces a faux rusticity to urban shamanism - the archaic lurks everywhere within contemporary society.

Perhaps it is simply the way that history works, to build upon itself. But it is when this basic timeline is replaced for a *non-linear* model that things become most interesting. Much like the hit TV series, *The Flintstones*, functioned as mid-century primitivism, this extreme in the cultural and technological spectrum helped then imagine its inverse: *The Jetsons*. We must imagine the extreme past to function in the extreme future. As the United States is a nation of immigrants, the concept of "elsewhere" will continue to be a useful tool as we explore a small fragment of exotica as pseudo-experience through the ages and a variety of its problems and poetics.

3. A list of Objects from TJ Maxx

a purple crystal,

a Buddha head sculpture that seems weathered,

a piece of drift wood carefully sanded,

a replica of an “African” mask that stands on rebar,

a cross section of geode standing on a gleaming brass stand,

a set of arrow head bookends,

a Himalayan salt lamp with a white USB cord,

a plastic monkey skull,

a basket,

a five piece Jungle Safari place setting (microwave/dishwasher safe),

a composite elephant tusk,

and a blue and white vase.

4. Decorative Diversity

It is important to think of this facet of the decorative interior in relation to the idea of Cabinets of Curiosity and the history of collecting. Also known as wonder-rooms, cabinets of wonder, or Kunstkabinett, these collections of European aristocracy were the precursor to museums and how westerners understand the lineage of time, culture, and natural history. These collections were not organized by geographic location, specificity to natural phenomena, or reverence to any chronological order. When encountering this boundary-less method of collecting, the experience becomes a tornado of all things worldly and exotic and is often described as a “theater of the world”. Viewed by the contemporary world as a useless and antiquated way of organizing history and culture, still today these methods surface through a variety of low brow imagery, hybrids, and appropriations. How does this “theater of the world” survive today? Much like Cabinets of Curiosity the list of objects from Tj Maxx presents us with a hodgepodge of cultural and natural representation, giving us a very condensed version of not only time but place. This collapse of time when combined with the delusion of elsewhere will help us navigate the coming pages.

What lurks in our shopping malls, hotel and home interiors, and cinematic sets is often an extraordinary display of diversity in culture and location as decor. Reducing the complexities of culture to a single hollow trope or pseudo-experience quickly becomes problematic. The list of objects from TJ Maxx is an inventory that one could encounter rather casually and almost anywhere but is tied to a much more complex, colonial canon. Much like Napoleon’s estate, department stores and online shopping provide us with

a cross section of an image of worldly antiquity through its facsimile, a little bit from everywhere: a souvenir, a trinket, a symbol of status, and an image of understanding and ownership. It is curious, the connection between the home of the traveler and that of a more imperial time, one of aristocracy, where these original wonder-rooms may have been found. Although in the case of TJ Maxx, we have not travelers but more so “Arm-chair Explorers”¹, lazily accessing the imagery of elsewhere however possible and with little concern for legitimacy. Complicating the scenario is the obvious fact that this list is made up of replicas, representations, impostors, and parodies. But still, like cabinets of curiosity, this list places the idea of faux artifact near that of natural history specimen, the made near the found, and functions in a non-chronological or geographic organization.

There exists a variety of this breed of department store, supplying a diverse and exotic spin to suburban homes everywhere. To name a few, there is *Pier 1 Imports*, *World Market*, and *HomeGoods*. Likely in a more shabby but near by strip-mall exists the more low-brow, but equally exotic counterpart: your local suburban head shop, complete with a variety of Hindu, Islamic, and Buddhist inspired tapestries, hookahs, incense (Nag Champa, of course), and a variety of Rastafarian necessities. On the *World Market's* website, under the “about us” section, is something of a mission statement:

“We bring the beauty and excitement of global bazaars to you. Our selection is always changing, and, like favorite mementos from your life, each item has a story worth sharing. From Balinese baskets, pottery from Portugal and collectibles from Africa to scrolled artwork inspired by Spanish artifacts - each store is a treasure trove.”²

¹The Air Conditioned Eden . UK: BBC, 1996. February 21, 2017. Accessed April 11, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZYEKq1xRrQc>.

²About Us | Cost Plus World Market
<http://www.worldmarketcorp.com/about-us/?ab=footer%3Atext%3Aaboutus>

The replication of worldly things being presented as worldliness may at first seem contradictory but perhaps not. In terms of authenticity, maybe there is a truth to this worldly image, but only in terms of cultural simulacrum. What is more worldly than a stylistically African mask, made in China, and bought in the United states? However common this condition of global trade may be, the mission statement by World Market is pure sabotage to the integrity of many cultures. Jean Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* poses a question almost identical to *World Markets* advertising strategy:

“What lies behind the persistent search for old things - for antique furniture, authenticity, period style, rusticity, craftsmanship, handmade products, native pottery, folklore and so on? What is the reason for the strange acculturation phenomenon whereby advanced peoples seek out signs extrinsic to their own time or space, and increasingly remote relative to their own cultural systems.”³

Baudrillard begs the very question and seeks answers *The World Market* reverses for the use of capital: Instead of “What lies behind the persistent search for old things, native artifacts, etc?”, we are confronted with “You *must* search for worldly artifacts as a signifier of your cultured self”. Like most things found in shopping malls, these interior decorations are meant to reinforce a personal identity through commerce and ownership. A problem arises, however, when the object-owner relationship moves out of the sphere of personal reverence or understanding of culture in an attempted to create a more palatable yet false experience.

³Baudrillard, Jean. *The System of Objects*. London: Verso, 2005.

5. A Lingering PoMo Predicament

It is most useful to understand Baudrillard in context of Post-Modernism and many of its key traits. Although the time period seems amorphous and with foggy boundaries, it is generally associated with the ironic and playful treatment of a fragmented subject, the breakdown of high and low culture, the undermining of concepts of authenticity and originality, and an emphasis on image and spectacle. With this buffoonery in mind, how does this influence on cultural identity affect the way we view ourselves and others? If modernism proposes a truth (Primitivism: Picasso, Gauguin, Brancusi), often about far away lands and peoples, then its counter part must propose the opposite: the lie. If these traits defined our architecture, design, and fine art for some thirty years, how do the bodies between them become affected?

We make spectacle of ourselves and our cultures, much like Las Vegas does with its impossible pastiche of the global or ancient design. Here, we see it all at once: The Egyptians next to Frank Gehry, Jean Baudrillard near an Aztec casino, Hunter S. Thompson at the tiki bar, and Fred Flintstone in Paris. Again, we experience a very condensed form of not only time but place. History is both evoked and denied through gaudy and irreverent representation of culture, much like Disney's Epcot. More interestingly, Vegas provides us with Epcot's more adult counter part - with enough sex, drugs, and gambling to last a life time.

When navigating the idea of cultural "copies" one can encounter on any given day, it is important to consider how a practice, motif, or style transforms through appro-

priation, and with what intentions. These three terms can help when a question arises pertaining to authenticity or originality...

6. The 3 P's: Pastiche, Parody, and Paradox

Pastiche

1: a literary, artistic, musical, or architectural work that imitates the style of previous work; also : such stylistic imitation

2a : a musical, literary, or artistic composition made up of selections from different works : potpourri⁴

b : hodgepodge

Parody:

1: a piece of writing, music, etc., that imitates the style of someone or something else in an amusing way⁵

2: a bad or unfair example of something

Paradox:

: something (such as a situation) that is made up of two opposite things and that seems impossible but is actually true or possible⁶

⁴"Pastiche." Merriam-Webster. Accessed December 6, 2016. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pastiche>.

⁵"Parody." Merriam-Webster. Accessed December 6, 2016. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/parody>

⁶"Paradox." Merriam-Webster. Accessed December 6, 2016. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paradox>

These terms allow us to navigate ideas of appropriation as a means of understand an initial theft and its intent. Thievery does occur with reverence, though more likely than not, a simple cultural copy quickly becomes an unfair example, hollow representation, or exemplifies pseudo-accuracy.

7. ArmChair Explorers.

This brings me to many other key points in American phenomena that truly exemplify these traits, one of which being the American tiki culture and its architectural and design counterpart Tiki-modern. The movement goes hand in hand with the rise of suburbia and surfaced in the form of basement cocktail lounges with the most extravagant of drinks, backyard luau parties, and experiential dining complete with bamboo and palm decor. Based purely off of a delusion of what the Pacific Islands may be like, American Tiki grew into a small cult still existing today. It is useful to consider the darker side of this movement and its connection to Post-War America. Only after American Soldiers were deployed to a variety of these Pacific Islands in WW2 did the Fantasies on the mainland develop. Fueled by postcards, native women, and the idea of a tropical lawless land, an image of a place arose on the mainland with little regard to local populations, cultural accuracy, or any form of authenticity. Ultimately an offensive, yet imaginative movement, Tiki Culture became an emblem of white suburban escapism typically associated with the middle class.

As mentioned above, Tiki-Modern functioned as the architectural and design counterpart to this cocktail culture. Often associated with the construction style of hotels,

bars, and restaurants, the style merges ideas of the origins of architecture's primitive hut with the forward momentum of modernism. Imagine this: a sleek space aged 1950's diner with roller skates and all. Instead of neon and reflective surfaces, imagine bamboo accents, carved wooden ornamentation, and thatched palm leaf roofs with little change to the architectural forms of the time themselves. In music too, we examine a facet of the culture that emerged in the lounges of hotels and bars nation wide. Martin Denny is known as the post-war father of "exotica", a musical genre also described as "Pagan Pop". He performed from the 1950s well into the 1980s, touring the world to popularize his brand of lounge music which included exotic percussion, imaginative rearrangements of popular songs, and original songs that celebrated tiki culture. Denny states "My music is fictional, but it's based on different ethnic sounds and instruments. It was sort of a make-believe type of thing. It's what people think the islands might be like - in your own mind"⁷. Through these words, we see how Martin Denny fueled a mid-century psychedelic and escapist culture for the suburban household, relying more on the imaginative than any reverent depiction of the complex and multifaceted cultures of the Pacific Islands. This dated movement continues to have a foothold in almost every oceanside city in the United States and aligns perfectly with the growth of American leisure. Ultimately, tiki culture functions as a middle class release for those bending under the weight of capitalism, suburbia, and the nine to five job.

⁷Air Conditioned Eden. England: BBC, 1996.

8. Western Yoga Culture

Perhaps with the same absurdity as American tiki culture disguised with the image of reverence, is the craze of the western yoga practice. Currently there are far more yoga practitioners in the Western hemisphere than in the East. For a practice over five-thousand years old, this alone calls for the examination of how this idea of “practice” can arise in a variety of ways throughout the world. In a place where tiki and yoga collide, we have the greatest of fantasies, appropriations, and hybrids of all: paddle boarding yoga. This hybrid developed, of course, in California and has grown into the latest craze amongst the coastal privileged almost everywhere in the United States. On a morning drive in Florida, you may see a group of smiling practitioners floating in the lagoons, bayous, and bays all in the resting asana (pose) of “downward dog”, floating on an epoxy or fiberglass paddle board. The merging of ancient Hawaiian and Hindu practice comes into form in a place such as Florida or Southern California: a new type of spiritual land, with a new mystic and coastal yuppie vibe.

Bikram, or hot yoga, also provides us with an interesting hybrid that arises in the form of new Americana too. Although created by an Indian man, Bikram Choudhury, the practice was developed and popularized in 1970s Los Angeles, later to become a patented version of the ancient spiritual practice of yoga. Bikram Yoga is modeled after traditional Hatha Yoga, though uses climate controlled temperature and humidity to mirror that of Calcutta, India (where Bikram was born). Booming in Hollywood by the 1980s, what is most interesting is Bikram yogas’ ability to translocate practitioners through climate control and practice. Translocation can be described as the relocation of ones self by any

means to any where. Whether this can occur on the same level as it does in a shabby cocktail lounge, a hot yoga class, or in the city of Las Vegas, all examples interact with the idea of the imaginative relocation of ones self.

9. Conclusion as Exhibition Statement

Armchair Explorers navigates moments in contemporary North American culture that provide us with a collapse of both time and place. This arises through a variety of practices, motifs, or regional styles that stem from global flows, appropriations, and hybrids. I am simply curious about ones ability to access imagery cross-continentially and how this intertwines with a pursuit for authenticity that arises in the form of New Americana. From opening a history book, wandering on google street view, or meandering through a local emporium, one can easily experience a flattening of both time and place in reference and imagery. In these moments anthropology becomes suspended between the real and imagined and it is here that I aim to give shape to a new exoticism, one that perceives itself in real time and anticipates both its problems and poetics. It is not my goal, however, to revisit a type of twenty-first century primitivism, but to acknowledge how the archaic enters our contemporary language with little reference to origin though still in search for the authentic: simultaneously truth and lie.

“America is neither dream nor reality. It is hyperreality. It is a hyperreality because it is a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved. Everything here is real and pragmatic, and yet it is all the stuff of dreams too. It may be that the truth of America can only be seen by a European, since he alone will discover here the perfect simulacrum - that of immanence and material transcription of all values. The Americans, for their part, have no sense of simulation. They are themselves simulation in their most developed state, but they have no language in which to describe it, since they themselves are the model. As a result, they are the ideal material for an analysis of all the possible variants of the modern world. No more and no less in fact than were primitive societies in their day. The same mythical and analytical excitement that made us look towards these earlier societies today impels us to look in the direction of America. With the same passion and prejudice.”⁸

- Jean Baudrillard

⁸Baudrillard, Jean, and Chris Turner. *America*. London: Verso, 2010.

10. Bibliography

The Air Conditioned Eden . UK: BBC, 1996. February 21, 2017. Accessed April 11, 2017

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“About Us”. Cost Plus World Market

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Baudrillard, Jean. *The System of Objects*. London: Verso, 2005.

Baudrillard, Jean, and Chris Turner. *America*. London: Verso, 2010.

Marriam-Webster. Accessed December 6, 2016

11. Exhibition Works

1. *Bedrock Stack*



The piece is a reflection on the history of stacking rocks as a near universal and ancient form of sculpture. This cross continental sign system can denote a variety of meanings from ancient to current. The practice surfaces as an inherent need to claim that “One was Here”. At times, a stack of rocks acts as a trail marker as to not lead one astray from a path. Within Inuit cultures, the practice arise in the form of Inuksuks often in the form of a figure. In this case, however, we have reference to *The Flintstone’s* home town of Bedrock.

2. *Carne of TJ Maxx*



This piece is in relationship to *Bedrock Stack*, though houses a variety of faux artifacts from TJ Maxx. From fake Buddha head sculptures to plastic elephant tusks, a viewer can decide whether or not these artificial artifacts are encaged and held hostage or being discovered within an archeological scenario.

3. *Hawt Yoga*



Hawt Yoga explores the idea of ancient Hindu spirituality in a more extreme, patented, and commercialized state. How does our current relationship with yoga reflect on its origins and with what intentions? In the case of Bikrim, or hot yoga, we have a mode of practice that surfaced in Los Angeles, and with undeniably commercial endeavors. This North American pursuit for authenticity uses the ideas climate control and heat to mirror the environment of Calcutta, India to “translocate” western practitioners closer to the land of the practices origins.

3. *Nag Champa*



Another Hindu obsession that arose in a type of new Americana is the idea of Incense, in this case specifically the brand *Nag Champa*. Surfacing along with 1960's counter culture, the scent can be encountered at grateful dead concerts, your local marijuana distributor's living room, yoga studios, or act as a compliment to any psychedelic experience. A once spiritual catalyst surfaces in the form of low-brow culture and "chill" instances and imagery. More interestingly, The brand's mascot, spiritual leader and guru Sai Baba, is involved with a series of underage sex scandals, magic tricks to manipulate the masses, and a hybrid of mysticism stemming from islamic, hindu, and buddhist ideologies.

4. *Tiki Touch*



Tiki Touch further explores the idea of translocation in the suburban backyard, outdoor cocktail lounge, or beach front luau. These experiential gatherings claim and distort a variety of polynesian motifs and practices in the name of post-war leisure. This exotic spin found both coastal and inland acts as an emblem of suburban escapism for those bending under the weight capitalism, the 9 - 5 job, and the once bland mid-century dining experience.

5. *Makapansgat Shower*



A play on North American capitalist tendency to appropriate motifs from a variety of time periods and cultures only to surface in mundane and ultimately flat-falling gestures. The Makapansgat Pebble has been regarded as one of the earliest records of Human symbolic thought. Found in a cave with the bones of earlier hominid *Australopithecus africanus*, the pebble resembles a human face but was formed by natural sources. When discovered, the pebble was many miles from its original mineral deposit and it is speculated that

Australopithecus africanus may have recognized it as resembling a human face. If so, the Makapansgat Pebble could arguably be the first ever record of hominid symbolic thought, deemed important some four million years ago. In many ways this is not unlike the idea of found object or ready-made sculptures.

6. *Leaf Stack (stairway to heaven)*



Leaf Stack explores the idea of a man made landscape and is influenced by the non-native foliage of Florida. Stairway to heaven as a sub title is a reference to the thought on florida “where those go to die”.

8. *Gauguin Cruise Line/Artifall*



A tryptic juxtaposing a ceramic Air Conditioning unit in reference to the BBC documentary *The Air Conditioned Eden*, A scan of a printed out advertisement from Gauguin Cruise Line, and a more formal composition of scanned maps and artifacts.

12. Technical Stament

Supply Resources: [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), Dollar General, TJ MAXX, World Market, HomeGoods, Society 6 (for custom prints).

Matt Wedel Paper Clay

hawthorn 40 - 30

Neph sy - 20

OM4 - 10

EPK - 5

Bentonite - 2

Talc - 2

Fine Grog - 20

VC Opaque White

Frit 3124 - 91

EPK - 9

Zircopax - 14

Add 2 - 12% colorant

