

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

MFA Thesis Exhibition

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Gustav Hamilton, MFA

I make work that reflects its position as an art object as well as my location psychologically, socially, and geographically as an artist. These reflections and references vary. In some cases a work may have a direct relationship with another object: a piece is propped up with a book that features an image of itself, or a ceramic tile may depict the work that it shares the space with. At other times the reference may be more vague: a stack of buckets becomes a “stand-in” for one of Brancusi’s *Endless Columns*, or a tile covered with saturated globs of glaze represents the overwhelming feelings I have in the studio. The content I work with comes as I alternate from actor to viewer and from past, present, and projected future relationships to the art world and my position within it. This makes room for both autobiographical and fictional information and areas where the two blur together.

Dark Helmet: Have you found them yet?

Corporal: No, Lord Helmet, they're still not on the scanner.

Dark Helmet: Well, keep looking for them.

[taking a couple sips of coffee through his helmet]

Colonel Sandurz: Pardon me, sir. I have an idea. Corporal, get me the videocassette of "Spaceballs: the Movie".

Corporal: Yes, sir.

[Corporal searches a Mr. Rental shelf full of Mel Brooks films and reading each title]

Corporal: "The Producers," "Twelve Chairs," "Blazing Saddles," "Young Frankenstein"...

Dark Helmet: Colonel Sandurz, may I speak with you please?

Colonel Sandurz: Yes, sir!

Dark Helmet: *[lifts helmet and whispers to Colonel Sandurz and himself quietly]* How can there be a cassette of *Spaceballs: The Movie*? We're still in the middle of making it!

Colonel Sandurz: Well, that's true, sir, but there's been a new breakthrough in home video marketing.

Dark Helmet: There has?

Colonel Sandurz: Yes! Instant cassettes. They're out in stores before the movie is finished!

Dark Helmet: *[in disbelief]* Nah!

Corporal: Here it is, sir! *[takes out cassette and holds it]* *Spaceballs!*

Colonel Sandurz: Good work, Corporal, punch it up!

[Corporal puts in tape and it shows an F.B.I. Anti-Piracy warning]

Colonel Sandurz: That's much too early. Prepare to fast-forward!

Corporal: Preparing to fast-forward.

Colonel Sandurz: Fast-forward!

Corporal: Fast-forwarding, sir!

[Corporal fast-forwards to the part where Dark Helmet has ignored Sandurz' warning to sit down and buckle up that leads to him denting his helmet severely]

Dark Helmet: *[about the moment where he dented his helmet severely]* No-no-no, go past this, past this part. *In fact, never play this again. [sips coffee in embarrassment]*

Colonel Sandurz: Try here. *Stop.*

[Corporal stops the tape, then Dark Helmet and Sandurz come across an image of themselves viewing the screen. As they react, the screen mimics what they are doing]

Dark Helmet: What the hell am I looking at?! When does *this* happen in the movie?!

Colonel Sandurz: "Now". You're looking at "now", sir. Everything that happens now *[indicates himself and Helmet]* is happening "now". *[Indicates the screen]*¹

The fictional product, the Instant Cassettes, provides Dark Helmet, Colonel Sandurz, and the viewers with a unique vantage point. When the cassette is played it reveals that Dark Helmet and Colonel Sandurz are merely actors. It also advances the story line, and through absurdity it provides humor to the scene. The viewing of the Instant Cassette gives Dark Helmet and Colonel Sandurz a chance to view themselves simultaneously as actor and as viewer. This allows them to alter their future actions in order to match their desired persona. The literary term for what is happening is meta-reference. Meta-reference (also known as breaking the fourth wall) is when the subjects of a work of fiction become self-aware and show acknowledgement that they are subjects in such a work.

The 90's television series *Seinfeld* employs a similar type of self-reference without Dark Helmet's self-awareness. The show follows the life of the character Jerry Seinfeld who is an up-and-coming comedian, played by the comedian/actor Jerry Seinfeld. The show is famously said to be about nothing but in reality it is a show about how Jerry discovers new comedic material and retells those stories to an audience as part of his stand-up act. Season four of

¹ Brooks, Mel. *Space Balls*. Los Angeles: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures, Inc, 1987.

the show introduces another layer of narrative when the characters George and Jerry pitch a show called *Jerry* to NBC (the company that produced *Seinfeld*) for a show based on Jerry's life (the show within the show). The show within the show creates three layers of story telling: in reality Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David writing *Seinfeld*, in the show *Seinfeld* Jerry Seinfeld and George Costanza writing *Jerry*, and in the fictional show *Jerry* Jerry Seinfeld living his life and doing stand up. The character Jerry is cast as Jerry in the show within the show. Jerry exists in all three realms and becomes a reference to reality. George Costanza (played by Jason Alexander), who is a stand in for the co-creator of *Seinfeld*, Larry David, is replaced by an actor in the show within the show. Casting Jerry as Jerry, and Jason as George, functions to emphasize and confuse Jerry's reality with the fictional depiction of his life.

Jerry1: Reality
Jerry Seinfeld
Larry David

Jerry2: The show *Seinfeld*
Jerry Seinfeld
George Costanza

Jerry3: The show *Jerry*
Jerry Seinfeld
Unnamed Actor

Gustav Hamilton
The Work

Gustav Hamilton
The Work about the Work

Gustav Hamilton
The Work about the Work about the Work

The Bookend (Jerry1-Reality)

The work created within my studio that does not respond to other works of mine can be understood like Jerry1. I start by accepting that I am an artist, therefore I must make art. Creating work functions to keep me occupied, busy, and entertained in the studio, as well as affirm my role as artist. In this case I will

speaking directly about the bookends. The bookends were created out of a moment of frustration. I was alone in my studio, and became overwhelmed by everything that I could make. I was searching anxiously for something to make because I want to continue being an artist, therefore I must continue making art. Often what is created in these moments is a rather pedestrian object, bookends, cups, and small tiles are reoccurring. In making these objects my hands meet material and my artist-ness is reassured.

The Books about the Bookend (Jerry2-The Show *Seinfeld*)

The work that is created in my studio that is in direct response to other works I have created can be understood like Jerry2. If the bookends are Jerry1 then the books about the bookends are Jerry2. The books exist to give the bookends a function, and although it may be done in a self-deprecating way, the books provide the bookends with a sense of importance. Jerry2 is not the same as Jerry1, but instead it is created based on a reflection of what came before. The making of the bookends confirms that I am an artist, and the books about the bookends give the bookends a reason for being and gives me affirmation that making the bookends was important. When I am making it feels as if I am participating in a call and response, things are created, reflected upon, and responded to. Often things feel as if they need to be justified, why did I make a clay shrub? Because it was worthy of being shown at the Walker Art Center. Why did I make a cup? Because it was worthy of its own series of books. Why did I drop glaze on this tile? Because it is so seductive.

The painting of the bookends and the book (Jerry3- The show *Jerry*)

The work that references the bookend and the book can be understood as Jerry3. Jerry3 becomes the second reflection on the original object. Once the work is made and reenters the studio it becomes fair game to be referenced again by another piece and the cycle starts again. It functions to give another layer of narrative and to give me something to do. Jerry3 is as far as I will explain the situation but for some work it could continue on indefinitely and others may never reach this point.

Seinfeld and *Spaceballs* differ in that the characters in *Spaceballs* break the fourth wall and acknowledge that they are filming a movie. This never happens in *Seinfeld*. But in neither show do the actors break character, even as Dark Helmet views himself on the "Instant Cassette" he continues to play his character and never acknowledges that he is the actor Rick Moranis portraying the character Dark Helmet.²

As an undergraduate student I spent two years I working in the University of Montana's Art Resource Center. During that time a copy of the painting *Las Meninas* hung on the wall next to my desk. The painting *Las Meninas*, 1656 by

² A further example of this is 30 Rock. The show 30 Rock goes further and gives the viewers a moment where one of the characters points out that he is an actor that is fully aware of our daily reality. In season 6, the character Tracy Jordan (played by the actor Tracy Morgan), refuses to take his medication and seemingly goes crazy. He can be heard in the background during one scene shouting, "We're on a show within a show, my real name is Tracy Morgan!" This line is similar to the act of me introducing the art books into the space, it breaks any suspended disbelief and says "I'm an art object in an art show, Gustav Hamilton made this!"

Diego Valezques exists in an ambiguous space between fiction and reality. Valezques intentionally confuses the viewer by raising questions about what is real and exposes layers of narrative. The painting depicts Valezques working on a painting, possibly the painting that we are currently viewing. His outward gaze could be focused on his own reflection in a mirror or toward the viewer. This informs us that we are looking at a replicated scene and gives Valezques the ability to view himself much like when Dark Helmet watches the “Instant Cassette”. Hanging on the back wall of the room is a mirror that shows the reflection of the king and queen. During the Spanish Golden Age the mirror was used as a reference to reality. The mirror refers to reality but because it exists within a painting it raises questions about whether we can accept it as truth or as fiction. The thought of Valezques peering around his canvas over and over to check his own reflection reminds me of moments I have had editing my website or posting on Instagram. Valezques paints his own portrait stroke by stroke much like I paint my own post by post.

When I enter my studio I keep these examples in mind, contemplating the borders of reality and fiction. I act as if I can view myself and my career via “Gustav Hamilton” the instant cassette, while developing layers of my practice that emulate those within *Seinfeld*. I make work that reflects on my studio practice, my life story, my insecurities as an artist, and the artwork of others. Biography enters as sculptures I made as a child or a painting made by my uncle, in the same space as fictional books and false gallery windows. The fictional content comes as I alternate between wanting to be successful, and

wondering if I even know what successful means. The self-deprecating jokes that have been a staple in my interactions with people throughout my life invades the work in order to provide humor and give me an emotional buffer as I explore my apprehensions about being an artist.

The ceramic material is handled in a range of ways, large tight flat tiles, smooth clean cups, and rough pinchy warped tiles sit together throughout the space. The technical skill present in the work is not immediately available for those without a ceramic background but hours are spent carefully building directly up, freezing glaze at the perfect point of melt, grinding and refiring glaze, and carefully keeping large tiles from warping. The approach to material varies depending on what is appropriate for each piece. The bookend features a cow-pie-like texture that pokes fun at its own provenance, where as the duck and the dog employ a more earnest touch.

While the globs of glaze stimulate me visually they frustrate me conceptually. The alluring saturated color captivates my attention like visual candy, and similarly to candy they are full of empty calories. They seduce me but when I try to assign meaning it falls flat and instead provides me with a starting point for a future art piece. My desire to create something cool leads me to a mix of references. Imagery is pulled from art history, my history, and contemporary art. The edges of the tiles are left unglazed, along with the backs, and often large areas of the front.

The abundance of art on social media, specifically Instagram, has heavily influenced my work. At one moment I am standing with material in hand, actively

pressing it, throwing it, pinching it, or bending it, feeling the weight, the moisture, and the plasticity, moments later I am sitting, phone in hand, scrolling through what seems like an endless list of weightless digital images of contemporary art³. Although I am in a rather small town in Western New York I never feel out of touch with the larger art world. Much of the work I make is flat or of rather low relief and generally full of saturated colors that are easily understood digitally. This did not happen consciously because of social media although it was influenced by it. When the work is moved to a gallery the hierarchy between objects is flattened. The historically significant works are viewed amongst my autofictitious works a story similar to *Seinfeld* emerges about my process of discovering things to make art about and the process of making and sharing that art.

³ My current favorite Instagram accounts include: Hallofmeatscooters, Tomsachs, Guy_yanai, Davidkordanskygallery, Petermorgan, Frieze_magazine, Grincontemporary, Jonasbrwood, Evanpaultrine, Aianews, Nasa, V_over_m

Technical Statement

Movies watched while in graduate school (listed in order)

Batman begins	For Your Eyes Only
Batman the dark knight	Diamonds are Forever
The Darjeeling limited	You Only Live Twice
Rushmore	Thunderball
Planes trains and automobiles	Octopussy
There will be blood	Goldfinger
The future	Dr. No
Swiss family Robinson	Moonraker
Terri	From Russia with Love
Dogville	Being John Malkovich
The Go Getters	Argo
The Dreamers	Birdman
The Dark Knight Rises	Gone Girl
What About Bob	The One I Love
The Jerk	Jersey Boys
The Factory Girl	Another Earth
Charlie Wilson's War	Skeleton Twins
Thank You for Smoking	The Royal Tenebaums
Jerry McGuire	American Beauty
The Assassination of Jesse James	The Interview
Full Metal Jacket	22 Jump Street
The Tracey Fragments	McConkey
Moon	The Homesman
The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo	Killing Them Softly
3:10 to Yuma	Golden Eye
Easy Rider	On Her Majesty's Secret Service
Gummo	Bad Words
North by Northwest	A River Runs Through It
Red Dawn	The Lego Movie
Less	The Aviator
Fantastic Mr. Fox	The Departed
Days of My Youth	Wise Guys
Blues Brothers	City Island
The Ghost Busters	Fargo
Say Anything	Little Miss Sunshine
The Astronaut Farmer	Sunshine Cleaners
The Place Beyond the Pines	The Perfect Storm
The Lady Killers	Hunger Games: Catching Fire
Millers Crossing	Neighbors
Me and You and Everyone We Know	Fox Catcher
Brewster's Millions	The Graduate
Dancer in the Dark	Reservoir Dogs
Get Low	Straw Dogs
Bottle Rocket	Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas
Inglorious Bastards	Lost in Translation
Never Say Never Again	

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas
Spring Breakers
16 Candles
Adventureland
The Fall
A River Runs Through It
American Hustle
Birdman
Pitch Perfect
Away We Go
Burn After Reading
Deliverance
The Shining
The Sixth Sense
Wish I Was Here
A Clockwork Orange
Good Will Hunting
Ex Machina
The Grand Budapest Hotel
Wet Hot American Summer
Scary Movie V
Lone Survivor
The Family
The Born Supremacy
Let's Be Cops
The Monuments Men
Wish I Was Here
Imitation Game
White House Down
Walk the Line
Fury
Dallas Buyers Club
Neighbors
Black Hawk Down
Django Unchained
Side Effects
Apollo 18
Catfish
The Departed
Defiance
Goodfellas
Night Crawler
Batman: The Dark Knight
Batman Begins
Batman: The Dark Knight Rises
The Kingdom
Ides of March
Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close
There Will be Blood
The Company
Everything is Illuminated

Antichrist
The Perks of Being a Wall Flower
Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark
Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom
Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade
Star Wars I: The Phantom Menace
Star Wars II: Attack of the Clones
Star Wars III: Revenge of the Sith
Star Wars IV: A New Hope
Star Wars V: The Empire Strikes Back
Star Wars III: Revenge of the Sith
Star Wars VI: Return of the Jedi
Spaceballs
Spaceballs
Inception
Donnie Brasco
Inherent Vice
Fury
World War Z
The Lego Movie
True Lies
Lord of War
We Need to Talk about Kevin
Mission Impossible
Mission Impossible II
Clear and Present Danger
Enemy at the Gates
Trailer Park Boys the Movie
Patriot Games
The Sum of all Fears
Witness
The Score
K-19: The Widow-maker
Garden State
Stranger than Fiction
Dogma
Top Gun
Back to the Future
Back to the Future II
Back to the Future III
Steve Jobs
The Hudsucker Proxy
Palookaville
Trace
Mulholland Drive
Lethal Weapon
Lethal Weapon 2
Lethal Weapon 3
Lethal Weapon 4
Beverly Hills Cop

Beverly Hills Cop 2
Beverly Hills Cop 3
Lethal Weapon 4
Lethal Weapon 3
Lethal Weapon 2
Lethal Weapon
On Her Majesty's Secret Service
Casino Royal
The Comeback Kid
Star Wars VII: the Force Awakens
Bring It On
Spectre
Major League

Hardball
The Ten
Tears of the Sun
Half Baked
Birdman
Black Hawk Down
Hot Fuzz
The Full Monty
Swingers
Training Day
Pulp Fiction
Full Metal Jacket

Advanced Glaze Coil Technology

The Advanced Glaze Coil Technology (AGCT) was developed in response to a research project given at Kansas State University. Although the desired consistency is putty-like in order to achieve fully saturated and evenly spread color, AGCT is created by mixing EMAW ^6 Glossy to a pudding-like consistency and then drying on a slate table. What is produced can be rolled into coils, or flattened to create images. I prefer the look of the AGCT fired to ^01 (high sheen, saturated color, slight undercut) although it can be fired as low as ^03 (dry surface, slightly desaturated color, high undercut) and up to ^6 (glossy surface, saturated color, begins to lay flay, will run if very thick).

EMAW ^6 Glossy is my glaze of choice but others can be used. For example DJ Lyds No Craze ^1 can be used by following the same steps and firing between ^08 and ^03. If testing a new glaze recipe start by underfiring by approximately 4 cones.

I generally use my hands to alter the material so I opt for non-hazardous mason stains and avoid anything that is water-soluble and could be absorbed through the skin.

Glazes

EMAW ^6 Glossy

EPK-20

Silica-20

Wollastonite-20

G200-20

Frit 3134-20

Add

Stain-12

My glaze of choice for AGCT. Accepts color well, is food safe and stays in suspension for long periods. Easy to mix due to all of the ingredients being the same amount. Works as AGCT at ^01

EMAW Matte ^6

Frit 3124-35

EPK-34

Wollastonite-26

Silica-5

Add

Stain-12

Accepts color well, is food safe and stays in suspension for long periods. Works as AGCT at ^01

DJ Lyds No Craze ^1

Neph Sy-18

Frit 3124-70

EPK-12

Add

Stain 10

Very glossy at ^1, will run if applied thick. Does not brush well. Small bubbles sometimes appear on the surface. Works as AGCT at ^03

Metallic Mirror ^04

Frit 3134-30

Frit 3195-45

EPK-25

Copper Oxide-10

Manganese Dioxide-15

Vanadium Pentoxide-5

EXTREMELY TOXIC! Only to be used with proper personal protective equipment. Vanadium Pentoxide is water soluble meaning that it can be absorbed through the skin and the water used to clean your brush cannot go down even a hazardous materials sink.

Large Tile Making

Most of the large tiles are approximately 24 x 36 inches. This size tile is not convenient for making or firing, although it seems appropriate and therefore must be done. To make this I use a range of clays although the greatest success rates come with the Murrey Stoneware. The Murrey Stoneware has a large percentage of grog that keeps the clay from shrinking as much as a regular clay body would, this helps with warping while drying. Some type of fiber (I generally use nylon fiber) adds strength while the tile is still green and therefore helps to keep cracks from forming while the tile shrinks.

The base layers for what the tile will be built on are extremely important. I like to start on one of my slate tables due to its sturdiness and ability to absorb moisture. On top of the table I apply a thin layer of sand so that the tile can slide with minimal effort. Placed on top of the sand is a piece of drywall that is at least 3 inches larger on each side than the desired tile size. Next is a layer of sand with two pieces of newsprint on top (or canvas if you prefer that texture).

To make a 24 x 36 inch tile you will need roughly 75 pounds of clay. I then take small balls of clay ranging from foosball to cricket ball size and throw them as hard as I can at the paper. This direct hit and irregular pattern avoids giving the tile a memory that can lead to warping found with traditional slab making methods. Working my way around the surface of the paper I slowly fill the entire surface until no paper can be seen. Then using a large paddle I begin to compress the irregular surface until it is completely even. It is important to make the tile large by a few

inches on each side and then cut it back to the size you want to avoid the uneven compression that is found on the edges.

The tiles are dried with a piece of newsprint and then a piece of drywall on top. Drying a large tile can take well over two weeks to avoid cracking. Patience is your friend.

Clay Bodies

Murrey Stoneware ^5-10

Hawthorn Bond-30

Om4-12.5

Redart-12.5

Custer Feldspar-10

Fine Grog-5

Medium Grog-30

Nylon Fiber-18 grams

Very short, very little shrinkage, can be fired to a number of temperatures. Rather inexpensive and remarkable green strength. Created by Shawn Murrey.

EMAW ^Everything Clay

Hawthorn Bond-60

Om4-50

Custer Feldspar-14

Silica-8

Works well for handbuilding. Nylon fiber can be added for extra green strength. Given to me by Amy Santoferraro.

Matt Wedel Paper Clay ^04-10

Hawthorn Bond-30

Neph Sye-20

Om4-10

EPK-5

Bentonite-2

Talc-2

20 Mesh Grog-20

35 Mesh Grog-20

4 Rolls of paper pulp per batch

Works well for coil building. Very plastic and very strong while green. County Fair brand toilet paper works well. Given to me by Matt Wedel.