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Reckless Hope

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Virginia Commonwealth University

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Reckless Hope

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture + Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University

By

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Master Of Fine Arts Virginia Commonwealth University, 2012

Director:
Kendall Buster, Professor, Department of Sculpture + Extended Media

Virginia Commonwealth University
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“Most often I am in the very darkness of my desire; I know not what it wants, good itself is an evil to me, everything resounds, I live between blows, my head ringing: estoy en tinieblas” (I am in the shadows). “But sometimes, too, it is another Night: alone in the posture of meditation (perhaps a role I assign myself?), I think quite calmly about the other, as the other is; I suspend any interpretation; I enter into the night of non-meaning; desire continues to vibrate (the Darkness is transluminous), but there is nothing I want to grasp; this is the Night of the non-profit, of subtle, invisible expenditure: estoy a oscuras (I am in the dark): I am here, sitting simply and calmly in the dark interior of love.

-Roland Barthes

For my Dearest: Ann, who serves as a constant reminder that I am Alive.

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Abstract

Reckless Hope

By Jesse Potts, MFA.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture + Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2012.

Director: Kendall Buster, Assistant Professor, Department of Sculpture + Extended Media

This thesis is an approximation of several years spent in the studio. It represents an equitable exercise of memory and speculation.
Part I

Introduction

I make multimedia installations that combine constructed and found objects, printed image, video, light, performance and sound. These foundational and fundamental elements are combined with kinetic and interactive components to exist at once as objects and action. They operate as the residue of my meditations on our inextricable relationship to time, sensory perception and mortality.

In many ways my work is straightforward. I simply spend time sifting out the raw potential of mundane or routine actions, mining for opportunities where a slight shift of focus or subtle intervention pushes the needle from the everyday to the sublime. My approach to my work is revealed through a delicate sensibility toward material phenomena and a hand that identifies and builds upon familiar actions like the tick of a clock or the spin of a DVD. I attempt to heighten the physical interactivity within my work by hybridizing symbolic actions with the provenance of a given object. My aim is to translate our fleeting proprioceptive sense into brief events that elicit a lucid connection with the physical world.

General Ruminations

In my two years in the Sculpture +Extended Media MFA program I have come to understand that slowing down my process of making encourages a calculated sensibility both in the physicality of fabrication and the psychological presence of the work. I find myself continually engaged in a solitary debate over what is absolutely essential to the spirit of the work and what is peripheral glare. It has been a strenuous two-year exercise in reduction and restraint.
Formally my work has changed greatly in this two years time. The work now coming out of my studio operates with a steadier posture arising out of sparer use of elements. This has led to work that is less chaotic, contains fewer distractions and speaks in an altogether lower sober tone of voice. My objective is to present work that commands an immersive psychological presence within a space and relies on its own internal connective tissue and less on peripheral physical matter. This choice of refinement and reduction provides a focal point that circumnavigates the previous bravado of chaos.

My goals in the studio are to be less obtuse, less opaque, less coy, and un-hip. I want my work to be forthcoming, direct, honest and unapologetic in its transmission of concept and content. I have been making work that includes recognizable forms, imagery and actions. My objective is to strike a tone of working that is translucent, one that provides space and invites the viewer to dissect the work’s visual cues anatomically. The tone of each work as a whole relies on the recognition of its individual parts. Vivisection yields focus and perceptual shift. I understand that representation and iconography carries baggage. It also carries historical weight, relevance and common visual language. I want to remember that my approach to making art is to uphold making art as a conduit for communication not a coping mechanism or action of personal gratification.
Part II

In this section I would like to discuss in detail some motivations behind my most recent work by highlighting some longstanding thematic threads. This is an attempt to connect my relatively idiosyncratic body of work over the past several years.

Motion---the spin/the Loop/the cycle:

Cyclical movement is one constant element in my work. This is represented in the many types of cycles and looping elements that have occurred in the past work and continue to appear. In earlier works like “Narcissus : Narcissus” water and air are recycled and pumped back and forth between two identical containment units. In this piece a water cycle is given duel functions of quenching and drowning, and a channel of air suggests the cycle of respiration and pollination. In “Double Dutch” a water cycle is given the duel functions of sprouting Dutch clover seeds and forming a 3-D video screen of vapor. I’m drawn to the use of the cyclical action as a means to call attention to analogous movements of material and provide room for metaphor and sense of duration to the work. Here the cycle suggests a finite progression of time scale and an infinite rehashing of the same action.
The biological components of my earlier works have in the past two years been transplanted with electrical circuitry of found, altered and fabricated object-appliance hybrids. Yet the cycle has remained a form of continuity in the work and I have continued to use looping cyclical actions in more current pieces. In “Monument et.al. Loop” a video projection shows a perpetual looping drive around a rotary containing a notable Richmond monument whose bronze subject is obscured in the night. Of monuments Susan Stewart writes:

“The gigantic art of the public space is an art of culture, not an art of nature; its forms and themes are taken from the life of the city that surrounds it.” Stewart goes on to say, “The town giant memorializes the vernacular tradition in the face of and in the service of that authority. And like the town giant, the hero on the horse also symbolizes the reproduction of the social. In this case, a historical narrative, or instructions for the generation of ideology, is presented: the founding fathers, we may be assured, are eternally protecting us from the incursions from the outside, be it nature or the cultural other. The hero on the horse memorializes the status difference between those who can afford to ride and those who must walk as much as it celebrates the subjection of nature.”

In my work *Monument et. al Loop* I have created a video that obscures the horse and hero and suggests there is no one at the helm and no promise of protection. This piece makes no assurances. The perpetual cycling motion around the monument acts as a rotating cog forbidding the narrative to exit the circle. It represents the forsaken traveler nodding off in-transit only to find oneself at the same place they had begun. It evokes the circling image of a triumphal arch while it conflates notions of purgatory and destiny but, gives no promise to deliver on either.

*Monument et. al Loop (2011) 10’x5’x4’*
Other works like “Red Shed Red” and “Breathe Slow Blow” equally relied on the cycle and the gap between function and hiccup. Each of these works include clock motors outfitted with eyelash extensions. The loop of the motor is punctuated. It can either determine or deny the beginning and end of a movement or action. By pinpointing and highlighting specific movements I aim to elicit a kinesthetic sympathy in the viewer.
Red Shed Red (2011)  48”x48”x30”

Red Shed Red (detail) (2011)  48”x48”x30”
For “Spit-Shine,” the 2011 sculpture MFA candidacy exhibition, I showed an installation and performance titled “Heirloom Prosthesis.” In this work I mounted a 12’x15’ room to the open timber structure of an repurposed mill building and mounted high intensity factory lights on the interior. The room operated as a blind for a number of cycles and looped narratives to emerge. In “Heirloom Prosthesis” the visual information was limited to a reflective Mylar scrim on the floor that reflected objects, image, movement and light from the interior of the blind into the field of view for the viewer on the exterior. Additionally, two motorized photographic loops spilled from piercings in the wall. In Camera Lucida Roland Barthes writes
“A photograph can not be transformed (spoken) philosophically, it is wholly ballasted by the contingency of which it is the weightless, transparent envelope”…. “The Photograph is never anything but an antiphon of “Look,” “See,” “Here it is”; it points a finger at certain vis-à-vis, and cannot escape this pure deictic language.” ³ He goes on to say “The photograph sometimes makes appear what we never see in a real face (or in a face reflected in a mirror) : a genetic feature, the fragment of oneself or of a relative which comes from some ancestor. “…The photograph gives a little truth, on condition that it parcels out the body. But this truth is not that of the individual, who remains irreducible; it is the truth of lineage.” ⁴

My hope was that these photographic loops would operate as apertures into the closed space and, as Barthes would suggest, would point to and reveal intimate aspects of the tasks being performed inside the blind. I thought of the cycles of un-making and making that would be happening inside the blind and began to envision all of these cycles culminating in a churning anthropomorphized installation. I became concerned with limiting the visual access of the viewer and how this space was to be hidden away or pierced and which viewpoints would be accessed and experienced by the viewer. My discretion and limiting the apertures in this piece seems somehow tied up in understanding the visual access to this space the same way one might access the human body. In her book On Longing Susan Stewart writes,

“...The body presents the paradox of contained and the container at once. Thus our attention is continually focused on the boundaries or limits of the body as object known from an interior, the limits of its physical extension in space. Lacan has described “erotogenic” zones of the body as those areas where there are cuts and gaps on the bodies surface—the lips the anus the tip of the penis the slit formed by the eyelids, for example.” ⁵

Heirloom Prosthesis (2011) 12'x15'x12'
With this passage in mind I imagine the Mylar and photographic loops that pierce the wall existed as the “erotogenic” zones. The photos offered a place to indirectly address progeny and lineage and pulse. One of the loops was a digitally stretched image of my father, taken of him at my present age, fixing the wheel of a small bicycle blended into an image of my twelve foot digitally stretched eye. The other was a solid band of red florets that expanded and contracted in size. As the motors slowly extruded the photographs they would tumble and roll onto the floor before being drawn back behind the wall. The installation included a performative element: during certain hours of the exhibition I worked inside the cube structure where I knelt and began methodically stripping apart, dissecting, cleaning, polishing and organizing my father’s 1972 Triumph motorcycle. I imagined this performance to be an extension of the object and a celebration of its becoming. Of this interest in the complete use of the body in art Juhani Pallasmaa writes in his essay The Eyes of the Skin,

“When working both the artist and the craftsman are directly engaged with their bodies and their existential experiences rather than focused on an external and objectified problem. A wise architect works with his/her entire body and sense of self….In creative work, a powerful identification and projection takes place; the entire bodily and mental constitution of the maker becomes the site of the work.”

This was a complete restoration of a project previously incomplete for 20 years. Repeating this action of polishing and handling closed a once open and incomplete loop. I attempted to highlight the action of caretaking as a way to open myself to a deeper understanding of the nature of an object though the action of touch.

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6 Juhani Pallasmaa The Eyes of the Skin. West Sussex, England John Wiley & Sons Ltd. 2005 (p. 12)
I could be polishing a silver plated fork, dusting a brass picture frame or wiping down a modestly crafted maple dinner table. Here I was polishing the enamel of a fender and cast aluminum of a transmission case. The repetitive action of polishing a surface embodies two types of caretaking. The first type of caretaking is one of direct maintenance. It is an act of self-respect and respect for our guest that we treat the dining utensil as an extension of the body. This might also be the reason we polish our shoes before a funeral. The second type of caretaking is indirect, exercising the connections of the object to one’s memory and their history. I think of it as learning through a tacit understanding of surface and function.
**Purpose, Provenance and Death**

“Heirloom Prosthesis” focused on the motorcycle as a bequeathed object that embodied a familial bond. I aimed to address the strange responsibility inherent in caring for an anthropomorphic object by elevating its status to that of a relic. By peeling it apart, carefully cataloging, cleaning, refinishing, and finally reassembling the motorcycle I developed a relationship with it of intimate understanding. As an art project, the piece lived as a mythic fusion of action, history and persons. Through this process the motorcycle dissolved as an object and reemerged as a historical relic and tangible link to a shared lineage. Through this link I have been inserted into the history of this relic just as the relic has become attached to my own history.

Surrendering a beloved object is an action born from necessity, love and the fear of being forgotten. It is proportional to the arc of one’s life and speaks to the desire to live on through memory and progeny. This is a most passionate means of ownership. It imbues a meaningful way to understand that the core of a possession is greater than the sum of its visual characteristics or practical properties. The bequeathing of an object represents an embrace of the thinnest veil of immortality.

In terms of understanding the depth of provenance, I see the act of taking in a handed down object that requires caretaking as a form of adoption. The responsibility for its care and maintenance is a stand in for the previous owner. Rebuilding and maintaining my father’s possession is an indirect way of remembering and looking after him. In this way the action of polishing is a vector for remembering.
**Time----Duration**

I have imagined that my work exists in the studio as hypothesis and is presented to the public as a visual and metaphorical experiment with systemic events. The gallery has become a place where seemingly utopic atmospheres perform a series of additive reforms and are affected by atrophic symptoms. For example, in “Cotton Mouth” water vapor was used as a vector for fungus as well as to deteriorate sugar, salt, plaster and clay materials that made up the building blocks of the piece. In this way the exhibition serves not as a completed endpoint but as a distinct starting point to expose the duration of the piece.

I see the exhibition as an opportunity to slowly allow a piece to be revealed. The work is in flux. There is morphing stimuli that suggest that something has not merely arrived rather, it is in some state of becoming. The physical transformation of the work is intended to reveal processes of growth, transformation, and decay. The timescale of each project is made palpable through an implied kinesthetic sympathy of object, momentum of action and residue.
Residue

The systemic and kinetic components in my work are stand-ins for the physical actions of the body. These components are intended to yield residue as a consequence of action. To rub, grind and wear out, is a built-in dysfunction of both machine and human. I bring to bear the analogous tension by highlighting the residue of an action. I have come to understand that the conceptual impact of my work is often transmitted through what remains after actions are performed or set into motion. In Red Shed Red an eyelash extension connected to a clock motor slowly arranges settling dust particles in the pattern of a fan. In Breathe Slow Blow the same system is stopped momentarily by the collection of breath on the clock surface. The residue of my thesis work Re-coil Temple de l'Amore will be the most direct illustration of this theory.
Part III

Re-coil Temple de l’Amore

“Architecture articulates the experiences of being-in-the-world and strengthens our sense of reality and the self; it does not make us inhabit worlds of mere fabrication and fantasy. ... The sense of self, strengthened by art and architecture, allows us to engage fully in the mental dimensions of dream, imagination and desire.” --- Juhani Pallasmaa

My thesis work is a single installation that took place in the Carriage House adjacent to the Anderson Gallery in Richmond, Virginia. Re-coil Temple de l’Amore is a work that hinges on a constructive action and destructive force operating in tandem. Over the course of the two week exhibition, constant slow mechanized ripping actions will tear seventy simultaneous line-drawings through the surface of a faceted sheetrock wall. The installation will use tension and scarification to slowly reveal the residual image of a portion of a French Neo-Classical garden temple, Temple de l’Amore, which was commissioned by Marie Antoinette and built on the grounds of the Petite Trianon (Marie Antoinette’s private estate within the Palace of Versailles). This palace served as the source inspiration for the design of the Scott House (the estate that owns the Carriage House) and will host my reincarnated temple in its barn.

Carriage House (exterior installation view) Recoil Temple de l’Amore (2012)

7 Juhani Pallasmaa The Eyes of the Skin. West Sussex, England John Wiley & Sons Ltd. 2005 (p. 11
**The Vector line:**

The central mechanism within *Re-coil Temple l’Amore* operates as a single point perspective drawing creating a series of physical lines in space. It is producing a taunt bundle of vector lines. It feeds on tension. It takes charge but without care. It is mindless not careless. Its mantra is off…on… in… out.

A vector exists in mathematical theory as an infinitely divisible equation plotting the distance between two points. As an expression of distance it is dependent on two static points. Therefore, a vector is expressed as a line but doesn’t exist on its own accord. This simple principle is how three dimensional thread drawings were created to describe and visualize complex algorithms and parabolic curves in physics models. The vectors in *Recoil* are under tension and constant motion. I like to imagine that they function in a way not unlike those polite physics models but do so in a radically chaotic fashion. The equations in *Recoil* are thereby never numerically static but constantly scrolling. Their exact destination and configuration is unknown thus the viewer’s perception of them can never be locked in. I imagine these vectors to exist as a faint line that represents woven bonds of half-light and half-trust.

**The Column as Symbol:**

A column is a multi-purpose symbol. It asserts itself at once as a heroic symbol of culture, of golden proportions, of history, of power, of civilization, of support, of relic and of remains. It has been ripped off, coated in façade cast and passed on by Home Depot as a convenient decorative mantle trimming. It has been transmuted and has spread like a cultural mold across once sovereign boarders now no longer in existence. It is pre-European and post-humility. The column occupies the threshold of disdain and of hope. It is simultaneously heroic and suspect.
Eclecticism--- Brief History of Location:

My thesis exhibition will not be taking place in a ‘white cube’ but rather in a space fraught with history and association. The Scott House and Carriage House were built four decades after the end of the Civil War and reconciliation, at the height of the period known as The American Renaissance. At the time, Richmond was transforming itself into a Euro-chic southern metropolis with the building of the broad thoroughfare Monument Avenue. The American Renaissance heightened our visual proximity to Europe by adopting a cadre of its quintessential Neoclassical building styles. The Scott Estate was built in several phases with two main stylistic differences. Its main house was modeled after the French Renaissance Petite Trianon and the Carriage House built in the British Tudor style both being popular styles during the American Renaissance. This broad
eclecticism resulted in a town that became a mishmash of repurposed style born out of cultural aspiration, re-branding and cultural appreciation. I see the appropriation of Temple de l’Amore as a way to directly fuse my work to the history of this peculiar architectural landscape. In The Eyes of the Skin, Juhani Pallasmaa writes on the art of exchange,

“In the experience of art, a peculiar exchange takes place; I lend my emotions and associations to the space and the space lends me its aura, which entices and emancipates my perceptions and thoughts.”

To realize this work I have been in search of the perfect union of performative action, residual image and encompassing space. My hope is that the historical setting of the Carriage House and its proximity and relationship to the Scott House offers Pallasmaa’s promise of this exchange. In this work history itself occupies a material vestige. I have maintained my interest and constructed this project with the aim that history of place will resonate through the work and not merely exist as a polite, picturesque backdrop.

The title Re-coil Temple de l’Amore is derived from a combination of the precise source imagery within the piece and a play-on-words that encompasses several physical associations taking place within the work. The title offers a sense of counter-valence. It conflates notions of conspicuous romanticism with that of fear or revolt. The title itself is an attempt to revel in the eclectic sensibilities of the American Renaissance here in Richmond, Virginia.

I see the eclecticism that inhabited the American Renaissance as a curatorial proclivity. It is a curious act to adopt, or, perhaps more appropriately, thieve style as a means to assert status. It is a

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8 Juhani Pallasmaa The Eyes of the Skin. West Sussex, England John Wiley & Sons Ltd. 2005 (p. 12)
conditional aesthetic to select and intertwine distinct but overlapping or idiosyncratic ideals. To collect is an action of the body to have, to hold, and to keep close. To collect is also a perceptual reaction of the amorous mind in search for specimens that fit their predilection. Likewise, to recoil is both a methodical action of the body to pick up, re-bundle and start over and a perceptual reaction of the mind in response to an inflicted or immanent force.

Titling a piece presents a unique function in the act completing the work. It both locates the threshold of implied intent in the work and indicates a lineage within a larger body of work. At times the title seems to mark the ending of one piece and the beginning of the next. The method of titling my work also becomes a place where I can be playful and imagine how each piece might penetrate into a larger shared language. The accuracy of translation is almost always questionable and suspect. I understand that it is rare for the visual and the verbal to tightly mesh. Perhaps, it is best if the two resist each other slightly. I embrace this friction but, it is not a place to be shy or coy. This is a place to try harder and to locate the central axis of the work. By directly ascribing language as a framing mechanism I give my work a push into the cultural current. This thesis has operated in in a similar way for me. It is difficult on one hand, to surround the intimacy and absurdity of my visual body of work with forthright language. This thesis, like a title, offers me a place to become less withholding and is a way to frame how the work might be absorbed. In its current form my written thesis is an approximation. It has been an equitable exercise of memory and speculation.
As always, this project has been built with reckless hope, which is the unflinching motivational force of the distant dark matter of studio debris.

Detail of a Sketch for Recoil Temple de l’Amore 2012
Works Cited


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Education

2012 M.F.A., Sculpture + Extended Media, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

2005 B.F.A., Ceramic Sculpture/Installation, Alfred University, Alfred, NY

Exhibitions

2012 Recoil Temple de L’amore, M.F.A. Thesis Exhibition, Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA

Suzanne, Artisphere, Arlington, VA, curated by Amy Haupt/ Kendall Buster (forthcoming)

2011 Spit Shine, Candidacy Exhibtion, Richmond, VA

Hors d’oeuvres, Fab Gallery, Richmond VA

The Wrong Miracle, NoMinimo Gallery, Guayaquil, Ecuador

2010 Man vs. Beast, Soil Gallery, Seattle, WA, curated by Timea Tihanyi

Erotomania, The Candy Coated Center, Philadelphia, PA, curated by Candy Depew
2009  And For All This Nature is Never Spent, Fordham College, Pelham Gallery, Pelham, NY

            curated by Jo Anna Isaak

            Form is Verb, Usdan Gallery, Bennington College, Bennington, VT

2008  The Nevica Project, Galaxie Chicago in conjunction w/Sofa, Chicago, IL

            At the Bray 2007: NCECA Conference, 3rd Street Gallery, Pittsburg, PA

            Winter Show, Lux Center for the Arts, Lincoln, Nebraska

2007  Solo Exhibition: Allegories of Dream, SCA Project Gallery, Pomona, CA

            International Contemporary Ceramic Exhibition, Jingdezhen/Shanghai, China

            Fresh Clay, Atkinson Gallery, Santa Barbara City College, Santa Barbara, CA

2006  2006 at the Bray NCECA Exhibition, Lewis and Clark College, Portland, OR

            Archie Bray Resident Exhibition, Kolva Sullivan Gallery, Spokane, WA

            Collaborations: Group Exhibition, Irvine Art Center, Irvine, CA

            Archie Bray Resident Exhibition, ABF Gallery, Helena, MT

Residencies

2012  (forthcoming) I-A-M: Institut für Alles Mögliche, Berlin, Germany

2010  Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris, France

2009  European Ceramic Work Centre, s’-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands

2005-07  The Archie Bray Foundation, Helena, MT

2004  Watershed Center For the Ceramic Arts, Newcastle, ME
Awards

2012  
VCU School of the Arts, Graduate Teaching Assistantship
VCU School of the Arts, Graduate Research Grant

2011  
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Fellowship Grant
VCU School of the Arts, Graduate Teaching Assistantship

2010  
Artist Development Grant, Vermont Arts Council
VCU School of the Arts, Graduate Teaching Assistantship

2009  
Lighton International Artists Exchange Program Grant, Kansas City Artist Coalition
Artist Development Grant, Vermont Arts Council

2008  
Development Grant, Bennington College

2005  
Magna Cum Laude, School of Art and Design at Alfred University
Purchase Award, awarded by the faculty of Alfred University
Daniel J. Murphy Memorial Award for Creativity, Alfred University

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Archie Bray Foundation, Helena, MT

Alfred University, Alfred, NY