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The Alchemy of the Everyday

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THE ALCHEMY OF THE MUNDANE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Acknowledgement

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>#ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>#vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artist Statement</td>
<td>#viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 History</td>
<td>#1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 The work</td>
<td>#3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Thesis</td>
<td>#6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Conclusion</td>
<td>#9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Artistic Influence</td>
<td>#11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Vita</td>
<td>#12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The Secret Language of Manhood</td>
<td>#3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Get Rich or Die Trying (50 Cent album cover)</td>
<td>#4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The Chronic (Dr. Dre album cover)</td>
<td>#4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The Princes</td>
<td>#4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Thug Angel</td>
<td>#4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Hammered</td>
<td>#5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Beer-Cloud-Cuckoo-Land</td>
<td>#9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Swallow Tale</td>
<td>#9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Somebody Else’ Sentimentality</td>
<td>#9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Untitled glass collage</td>
<td>#9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Transformation of the Mundane</td>
<td>#9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Artist Statement

Everyday objects inspire and inform what I do. The personal histories and associations we may have with ordinary things are of great personal interest to me. Often times, these items reflect the social class, education, and background of the owners. I am drawn to these objects and the possibility of elevating them in a way that transcends their implied meanings (their worth, importance, and status). The transformation of the mundane is a method of working that allows associations to remain intact while bringing new meaning and perspective to the object. My method of working becomes an alchemic process aimed at turning the ordinary into “art” which is second only to turning used cooking oil into fuel to run your car, and maybe third to turning lead into gold.
History

Being very eager and slightly anxious to start graduate school at VCU I arrived in Richmond a month and a half before the fall semester started. The day I left California will be etched in my memory for a long time. It was more than just a departure for the unknown but a symbolic evacuation. I left the coastal town of San Clemente California where my grandma has lived for 45 years at 4:30 a.m. on July 4th 2005. My parents who live on the big island of Hawaii where I grew up were in town taking care of my grandmother who had just had surgery to remove a cancerous cist from her lung.

Leaving California was no easy task. Logistically speaking, it can take hours to get out and onto the open road. The difficulty of leaving my friends and family, a part of the country that I had known so well and loved, the ocean which had been a part of my daily existence since I could remember, was compounded by the decision that I could be gone indefinitely. If a movie was made of my life at this time, the audience, based on my two and a half day drive from coast to coast, would no doubt think I was fleeing California instead of leaving a place that I loved. My only explanation for such haste: art school was waiting. I moved into my studio the minute the previous occupant had moved out, and may have even helped them along a little bit because of my impatience to get started.

The 3 years prior to leaving California for Virginia had been the hardest years of my life. My marriage of ten years had dissolved and life as I had known it for so long was totally different. All of sudden I was alone for the first time since I was 20. All plans for the future were replaced with questions. What did I want to do now that I was on my own
and had the freedom to do anything I wanted to do? Graduate school symbolized a new beginning for me. It gave me hope. I couldn’t wait to see what would happen once I made a serious commitment to submerge myself in all things art related. As a promise to myself, I had no preconceived notions of what I wanted to work on when I got to VCU. The freedom to explore methods of working and methods of thinking about making that I wasn’t familiar with was exciting. My intentions were not to make artistic masterpieces but to explore ideas that I found interesting in ways that I had not done before. I came to VCU to learn about myself, about art, about what it was like to be in the studio working everyday, and to surround myself with a group of likeminded people.

I love to draw and paint as a way to relax and have fun in the studio, something that Jack Wax, my mentor, noticed immediately and encouraged. I never imagined working two dimensionally with any seriousness and there was never any pressure to do so because I didn’t intend on showing this work to anyone. These intentions did not matter because I soon became aware that nothing goes unnoticed in my studio. It took a minute to get used to Jack popping his head into my open studio door to give me his honest encouraging unsolicited opinions, anecdotes, and off the top of his head short list of artists I should look up as reference. I didn’t want to be left alone. I was hungry for the attention. These unexpected and brief visits often came at the best of times and were welcome breaks that became (refreshing) digressions from the engrossment of the moment. The open dialogue that Jack and I had about what was going on in my studio is something that I will miss when I leave.
The Work

The work I made in the last two years may have taken many different forms visually, but conceptually it all shares a common thread. The work is linked together by my interest in transforming the mundane and elevating the common. By turning mustaches into a visual code in “The secret language of manhood” (Figure 1) I explored the idea of a mustache as conscious communication. Mustaches are ornamentation, and are groomed and styled at the discretion of the wearer. Each distinct style becomes a statement even a message to the rest of the world.

At the start of the mustache project, I was interested in what makes somebody a man. It was my thought that although it takes a man to grow a mustache, having one does not make the wearer a “man”. So what does? This question proved to be a little much for me to try and answer and translate into something that made sense visually, so I changed it slightly as a way to shed some light. Somehow my interests in glass blowing, hip-hop music and questions of manhood melded and a series of enameled glassware was born.

Who are the men today, the role models of American youth? Based on the popularity of hip-hop music and the outlandish posturing of popular rap stars, I decided that these are as good of examples of “the men” that I could find.

There is a hierarchy in hip-hop where street cred respect, and longevity in the business mean everything. “The men” in hip-hop are those that have risen to the top practicing a ‘by any means necessary’ street hustle philosophy. I thought it would be appropriate to showcase these men of hip-hop in the same way that royalty in 17th century
Europe often paid tribute to themselves. They had their busts enameled on glassware. Sometimes there were scenes of them hunting or fighting. Similar to album covers depicting rap stars holding guns and wearing bullet proof vests, ready for “battle” (Figure 2). Often times the painting was just a portrait of a Prince wearing a stoic expression (like Dr. Dre’s ‘Chronic’ album cover)(Figure 3). I painted quite a few of these hip-hop stars on replicas of traditional 17th century glassware (Figure 4) and eventually came to a point where I realized the project could potentially go on for some time. I put it on hold and decided I would come back to it at a later date.

Because of my research on the subject of hip-hop and the decisions I had to make as to who was worthy of being painted, I became focused on one individual in particular: The late Tupac Shakur, long my favorite. Murdered in 1996, the case is still unsolved and surrounded in controversy. Tupac is undeniably the most respected and loved rapper that ever lived. He survived gunshot wounds. He himself shot two police officers that were beating a man that he did not know. He was incarcerated for a crime that he did not commit. He lived the life that he rapped about and rapped about the life he lived. He was the “real deal”.

Tupac was easily identified by the signature way in which he wore his bandana, like a backwards headband. This became his trademark and I wanted to use it as a way to venerate him. Making it out of glass was a way to transform the ordinary 99-cent bandana into something precious and valuable. The finished glass bandana looked very much like it could be a halo (Figure 5). This was serendipitous in a way because Tupac has been referred to as a ‘Thug Angel’. The Tupac bandana project got me really excited about
what happened when an object is transformed or altered slightly and the implications there in.

This first experiment ended up being one of the stronger pieces I made in the last two years, it also has led me directly to what I am doing in my studio presently. It was a very simple transformation that occurred. I bought an Old English 800 40 oz beer at 7-11 and battutoed the bottle (Figure 6). Battuto is a traditional Italian technique in which the surface of the glass is carved using a lathe and a stone wheel with a rounded profile. The stone wheel makes a mark that when repeated creates a texture and pattern resembling hammered copper. The literal translation of battuto into English is ‘hammered’. Amazingly this battutoed bottle containing the cheapest, strongest malt liquor one could buy became a glorious, beautiful, glowing, object. Metaphorically, the contents of the bottle represented another kind of transformation, one that signifies escape and a dulling of reality, another way to get “hammered”.
Last summer I had the good fortune of teaching a summer class to a group of students who were eager to learn everything and anything about glass. One of the projects that I assigned was of particular personal interest to me. It was one in which they had to use found glass. For as long as I’ve been blowing glass I have made drinking glasses and little flower vases out of old beer bottles especially the ones that have an enameled label like Red Stripe, and Corona. Up to this point, that had been the extent of my experimentation. The found glass assignment wasn’t supposed to be about recycling and reusing in particular. It was going to be about using the found glass as the artistic medium, not just about its inherent conceptual baggage.

I don’t remember when I bought the first faux carved crystal pressed glass salad bowl at Diversity Thrift. I do remember wanting to make it into a plate so I could work with the different patterns and textures. I wanted to do something that required the human hand to transform but in the end wasn’t about that process. It subsequently became apparent that cutting up plates with different patterns and textures and then reassembling them into different flat forms was a method of working that would allow for the integration of many of the conceptual concerns I address in prior explorations. I could engage in a dialogue about class, social issues, value issues, art and craft issues and hand made vs. the readymade. The fabrication of these forms also gave me the freedom to focus my interest in more formal concerns like the roles of composition, color, and light.
The glass that I have been using in my work was made originally to mimic hand carved glass. It is a simulacrum as it is a ‘made for the masses’ piece of glass modeled after another piece of glass. I like to think of it as glass for the middle class. This glass was made for blue collars by blue collars (I’m using mostly American made glassware from the 50’s through the 70’s that I found in thrift stores in and around Richmond, Va.) My idea is to enable the glass to transcend its original associations and functions by altering it and reassembling with the goal of changing the way one encounters it and thinks about it. It is altered and becomes something new while continuing to retain its original qualities. The work addresses the issue of value in two distinct ways; One, it is a product that has a monetary value assigned to it based on it’s target consumer demographic, the middle class and two it is transformed from a mundane object into something that is unique. This I believe changes its’ core value. Three aspects that I am interested in exploring with this work are 1. To see if value change is contingent upon if the work is machine-made-found-altered-glass, 2. If it is a hand made copy of machine made altered glass, 3. If it is completely handmade. I like the idea of presenting the work in such a way that there is some confusion as to how it was made. I hope to use this as a way of diverting attention away from the process and focusing on the ideas that are being engaged. Fooling people is not the point. The point is to avoid the value judgments that are based on material and process.

My formal concerns with this work involve approaching each piece as if it were a painting. An attempt is made to be sure that what I am presenting is art, or at least looks like it is “supposed-to-be-art”. I want to play off the idea that there is a hierarchy in the art
world, where painting always seems to reign supreme. By constructing my work two
dimensionally and hanging it on the wall, I am consciously mimicking what art is supposed
to look like.

It is my feeling that this body of work has the potential to grow exponentially. I
feel like I am on the right track with all aspects of this endeavor: the use of materials, the
method of working, and the conceptual concerns. The found glass that I have been using is
heavily laden with history. The history of the glass can become an integral part of the
piece, perhaps fueling a looping dialogue. Where the glass was made, where it was found,
it’s original function and what it represents, even as far as its’ sentimental value are all of
great interest to me. My continued goal is to become more specific with the glass that I
use, as a way to empower the work even more.
Conclusion

Eric Fischel is a painter from New York who I had never heard of before I attended his lecture earlier this year. His candid way of speaking was refreshing in a “no bullshit” sort of way. He said one thing that really struck a chord with me. What he said, and this is not a direct quote, was this; “My one piece of advice for all of you art students out there is to find a medium that you like to work with, one that excites you and challenges you, and stick with it. If you stick with it you will get to know it very well and you will grow and progress as an artist.” I suppose the reason this was important for me to hear is because I love working with glass. I have invested the last 13 years in learning how to work with it. Do I know everything there is about the material? No. I feel like I can work with glass for the rest of my life, continuing to learn and remain excited about it. Admittedly, I have been wrestling with some insecurity. I was insecure about working with a traditional craft material and not being respected as an artist because of that. I have learned a lot in graduate school. One of the most important things is that my insecurity about using glass is ridiculous because ultimately it is the work that matters. I feel that I can make my best work using glass because I am passionate about the material and I am not ashamed of that.

The work in my thesis exhibition represents two years of my progression as an artist. It also represents about four months of serious exploration and focus in a way of working that will not end now. I tried something that was new for me and that was to work more intuitively. I did not want to plan out each piece from start to finish. I wanted to allow for some surprises and some work-in-progress evolution and transformation.
Working this way has been rewarding for me because I learned to trust my sensibilities a little more and it kept me from becoming bored with my projects. The work became alive in a way because it would change so much while I was working.

Beer-Cloud-Cuckoo-Land (Figure 7), Swallow Tale (Figure 8), Somebody else’ Sentimentality (Figure 9), Untitled glass collage (figure 10), and Transformation of the Mundane (Figure 11) represent what I would call The Alchemy of the Everyday. There is magic in changing the ordinary, the everyday. I believe in that and I believe that my work is a testament to that.
Artistic influences

Tupac Shakur, Nas, Adam Roach, Jeremy Swan, Ed Hardy, Glen Friedman, Thomas Campbell, Margaret Kilgallen, Barry McGee, Kevin Ancel, Marcel Duchamp, Brian Jungen, Neal Blender, Tommy Guerrero, Ed Templeton, H.C. Westermann, Mark Gonzales, are all people that have inspired me because of the way they offer an alternate view of the world through their art.
VITA

Education

M.F.A. 2007, Craft/Material Studies, Virginia Commonwealth University
B.F.A. 1998, Glass, University of Hawaii

Workshops attended/assisted

2007  Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Lino Tagliapietra
2004  Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, assistant to Katherine Grey
2002  Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, assistant to Einar and Jaimex de la Torre
2001  Pilchuck Glass School, Michael Schiener
1999  Pilchuck Glass School, Pino Signoretto
1998  Pilchuck Glass School, Josiah McElheney
1997  San Francisco State summer glass blowing class, Joe Cariati
1996  The Studio at The Corning Museum of Glass, Bill Gudenrath
1995  Pilchuck Glass School, Randy Walker/Robin Winters

Work Experience

2006  Instructor, Introduction to Glass Blowing, Virginia Commonwealth University
2001-05  Production Glass Blower, United Glass Blowing Costa Mesa, Ca.

Visiting Artist Lectures

2007  California State San Bernadino
2007  University of California at Fullerton

Grants/Awards

2007  Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, work study scholarship
2006  Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Fellowship
2006  Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Virginia Commonwealth University
2001  Pilchuck Scholarship
1998  Pilchuck Scholarship
1995  Pilchuck Scholarship
Selected Exhibitions

2007  MFA Thesis Exhibition, Anderson Gallery, School of the Arts, Richmond, Va.
2007  MFA Biennial, Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts. Wilmington, De.
2006  “Burning Ideas: Contemporary Visions in Glass” River Tree Center for the Arts, Kennebunk, Maine
2006  Nanda Soderberg and Rebecca Saunders, 821, Richmond Virginia
2006  The Goods, Graduate Students in the Material Studies Department Virginia Commonwealth University, Gallery 5, Richmond Va.
2003  Featured artist, Orange County Fair, Costa Mesa, Ca.
2003  Cash, Grass, and Glass, Roq la Rue Gallery, Seattle Wa.
2001  “I Heart Mom” Roq la Rue Gallery, Seattle Wa.

Collections

The State Foundation For Culture and the Arts, Hawaii

Bibliography

Bob Baxter, “Making art from art” Skin and Ink Tattoo Magazine, July 2004
Figure 1, The Secret Language of Manhood, paint on wood panel, 12’x4’

Figure 2, Get Rich or Die Tryin’, 50 Cent album cover
Figure 3, Dr. Dre, The Chronic album cover

Figure 4, The Princes, blown and enameled glass, 9” and 11” tall
Figure 5, Thug Angel, blown glass, 11”x11”x5”

Figure 6, Hammered, found and altered glass and malt liquor, 11”x3”
Figure 7, Beer-Cloud-Kuckoo-Land, found and altered glass beer mugs, 42”x27”

Figure 8, Swallow Tale, Found and altered glass, 48”x22”
Figure 9, Somebody else’s sentimentality, beer bottle glass, marbles, and found and altered glass, 22”x18”

Figure 10, Untitled, found and altered glass, 37”x10”
Figure 11, Transformation of the Mundane, found altered and mirrored glass punch bowl, 19” diameter