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The Land of Make-Believe

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Artist Statement

My artwork represents the playful and imaginative phase of life I went through as a young child. My cluttered bedroom floor doubled as a castle courtyard for a princess and her ladies-in-waiting. The unused space in my parent's garage operated as a gourmet restaurant open to serve the finest cuisine. The fancy skirts, jewelry, and shoes that filled my mother's closet were the tools for creating my ultimate fantasyland, in which I was already a successful grown up.

My work is meant to convey the make-believe mindset from my childhood. To this day, I am inspired by the fluttering excitement that ignites and builds up in my stomach and ends in tickling my brain. The adventure begins when I think of constructing pieces of a magical world - a place where your mind molds a simple item into a sacred, irreplaceable thing of beauty and importance. I hope the viewer is inspired to slip away to a playful spot in their imagination that enchantingly transforms everyday objects into something rare.

The Land of Make-Believe

Introduction

Recognizing opportunity is like picking out a tiny beacon of light from within the swirl of events passing around me. Sometimes, I am expecting to plainly see the entryway toward my future goal. However, opportunity also embeds itself among clusters of other possibilities. My job is to sort out which path holds the most positive experiences along the way to achieving my desired outcomes. A direct path is not always the most beneficial. The unexpected and accidental gains throughout my journey have been the most rewarding.

The chance for me to enroll into Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts (MIS-IAR) program was like that tiny beacon of light far away, and I knew I had to move in that direction. The program acknowledged my needs as an artist and full-time elementary art teacher. It allowed me the space and time to try new, creative ideas that I felt were meaningful for me to explore using my own unique approach.

Aesthetics

My imagination can take me anywhere I want to go. I can travel to far off places where I will explore and interact with different cultures, or I can become a successful and dynamic entertainer with piles of riches. All it takes is a tiny seedling of an idea to initiate a chain of interlocking thoughts that can lead me toward anything I had ever thought possible. In my work, my imagination allows me to create a whimsical, make-believe world of objects relying on the use of pattern and color.

The awakening of my imagination usually originates from pattern and color. I appreciate

that patterns have the ability to hold meaning, as exemplified in ethnic or cultural motifs. Other times patterns can merely be a cheerful side effect of nature, like the shadows that spill down the wall at sunset. Even the simple repetition of shapes and lines scribbled on a sheet of paper can be a beautiful thing that intrigues the mind to further explore and interpret the connections between one segment and the next. It is this exploration that I find so captivating about patterns and it is also what motivates me to comprehend the intricacies of their design.

For me, color can bring out emotions and feelings that add to and expand meaning to a piece of artwork. I am attracted to groupings of colors and how they perform together. I can sense their energy, which stays with me throughout my interaction with them. The relationships among colors can be as complicated as relationships among people. Some colors can make a statement all on their own, while others are more powerful when part of a pair. Colors can also play off of each other to develop tension or harmony. Recognizing and understanding these associations between colors contributes to my art making process.

The objects I create resemble familiar, everyday objects. However, these objects are non-functional and are meant to be viewed for their aesthetic features. A typical piece of my work has intricate details and is composed of pastel colors. They are reflections of the toys, dolls, and make-believe constructions I used during my childhood. An example of my work would be a clay sculpture depicting a cake one may pick up at the local bakery. It might be heavily frosted with tiny yellow flowers atop pink strings of fluffy icing clinging to the sides. The visual appeal of cake draws the viewer in but it is easy to recognize that such an object could never delight the taste buds. My hope is that it will evoke in someone the flickering awareness and excitement of a make-believe place full of amusing and elaborate items.

Art Production

Most of my tools consist of well-worn objects I have hunted for and stumbled upon along my art making journey. Most tools can be used interchangeably from one project to the next. A paintbrush is one of these versatile and multifunctional wonders. Another tool I often employ for different types of jobs is a simple wooden stick. It has the ability to impress designs or cut into wet clay, scrape away dried media, and rub flat paper surfaces. More useful to me still are my hands. Whenever I need to make a change or experiment with a new idea, I drop whatever tool I am using and direct only my hands to rip, gouge, or flatten a piece. When I physically feel changes taking place in my work it makes the process more meaningful because it affirms my power to alter the tangible evidence of my mind's own invention.

I have found the material which lends itself best to being manipulated by my hands is clay. In my early years of art production I was terrified to use it. I felt that it was a burden to keep its moistness level at a workable state and if I was not constantly aware of the limitations, one false move could ruin hours of hard work. I realize now that what I used to think was so overwhelming is what I appreciate most and currently embrace with enthusiasm. At a moment's notice, I can mold, regenerate, or eradicate any of my work. No longer is this a source of fear but an avenue for numerous opportunities to redirect the outcome of a piece.

Art History

Art history influences me through the viewpoints and expressions of past and current artists. I am drawn to the Pop Art Movement of the 1960's through its unique representation of popular and commercial culture. Pop Art artists used bold color schemes and familiar objects to form a new concept or extraordinary perspective by transforming the expectations of an object.

The unusually large scale of the sculptures created by Pop artist Claes Oldenburg (1929-) is an inspiration to my make-believe mindset. The surreal qualities of his larger than life pieces, such as *Spoonbridge and Cherry* (1985-1988), are similar to the fantasyland objects I dreamed of as a child. Oldenburg's work transformed common objects into humorous or whimsical roles, unlike the function we normally assign to them. For example, his soft sculptures have taken the forms of solid household fixtures, such as light switches, bathtubs, fans, and toilets. He made them into soft, pliable representations made out of vinyl, cloth, and canvas. The unexpected physical alterations made to these objects have an effect on the way they are traditionally viewed.

Wayne Thiebaud (1920-) envelopes a more nostalgic attitude toward popular and mass-produced items than most artists associated with Pop Art. The subjects for his paintings reflect American life through the thickly painted and brightly colored cakes, pies, gumball machines, and toys that tie into Thiebaud's childhood and American memories. The toys and belongings I had as a child are also representational of my early memories and experiences. Using such items as the inspiration for a piece of artwork allows me to easily infuse my own personal connection.

Another influence is the highly ornamented Rococo style of the early to mid-eighteenth-century which focused mainly on ornate interior décor and intricate architectural details. Its appeal comes from the heavy use of graceful patterns, muted color schemes, and lighthearted content. The extravagant interiors encourage the exploration of simultaneously mixing colors with pattern. Paintings inspired by this style depict eighteenth-century life through whimsical outdoor scenes such as *The Swing* (1767) by Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806). The sense of playfulness used in Rococo artwork along with the pastel colors and flowing patterns creates a visual fantasyland for the viewer. For example, the elegance of French queen Marie Antoinette

is firmly implanted in the distinctiveness of the Rococo period. *Portrait of Marie Antoinette* (1783) by painter Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun (1755-1842) casually presents the queen surrounded by delicate floral arrangements and earthy pastels. This image draws us into the illusion of her luxurious life where we can attempt to reconstruct her world full of its opulent dresses, furniture, art, and food.

The decorative and ceremonious arrangement of Thiebaud's cakes is similar to the characteristics of Rococo, exhibited in the grand display of interiors and architecture. My work also combines decorative color and pattern in order to stimulate the visual appeal of common objects. Also, like my influences, my work is conceptually based and focuses on the interpretation of the viewer. The visual appeal of the surfaces I create attracts and inspires memories of decorative pastries and cakes. The harmonizing color schemes and ornate patterns are relatable to the overindulgent moments of childhood when I would play too long outside, eat too much candy, and add too many items to my Christmas list.

Ceramic Works

Similar to the works of Oldenburg and Thiebaud are my series of ceremoniously decorated and untraditional ceramic cakes. The make-believe nature of *Cakes #9* (Appendix, 1) is evident in the green swirls, pink rose, and multicolored gumball-like handle atop what appears to be a purse. However, the purpose of the piece is to be admired as a ceramic sculpture, contrary to the function we would associate with a purse. The decorative exterior persuades the viewer to summon up their memory and sense of taste in order to envision a gourmet frosted cake. *Cakes #10* (Appendix, 2) is another example of a ceramic purse form with confectionary influences. It is adorned with a gumball-like purple handle, pink crisscross pattern, and yellow horizontal lines

mimicking the characteristics of delightful pastries. *Cakes #1* (Appendix, 3) is a small ceramic coin purse heavily decorated with pastel yellow textures and white polka dots against a black ground. The dark and light contrasting colors are meant to inspire formal elegance and decadence.

Oldenburg's ballooned use of scale is seen in my larger than life ceramic *Hershey Kisses* which are much bigger than the small bite-size treat we expect to pop in our mouths. *Hershey Kiss #2* (Appendix, 4) is finished in a milk chocolate-inspired glaze color. I crafted the word "chew" out of a ceramic coil and placed it diagonally across the front. This small piece acts as an extension of the delicate string of chocolate that curls itself over at the top of a real Hershey Kiss. *Hershey Kiss #1* (Appendix, 5) is slightly larger than *Hershey Kiss #2* and adorns the word "eat". It is finished in a dark chocolate-like glaze coating. "Bite" is adhered to the smallest of the three Kisses, *Hershey Kiss #3* (Appendix, 6). Here, I used a glaze which resembles the color of white chocolate. Each of my ceramic *Hershey Kisses* ironically exemplifies an object advertising something it is not able to deliver. These ceramic kisses will never serve the role of being eaten but they proudly display the word associated with their real life function.

Collage Works

My ceramic works lead to ideas for other types of media. For example, in *Marie Antoinette #2* (Appendix, 7), I developed a cyanotype image of a little girl in a dress with her hands above her head being twirled by the hands of her mother. In loose handwriting I added the words "Let them eat cake" across the bottom of the photograph. I infused pastel colors into the cyanotype with colored pencil, and I collaged delicate patterns and shapes as a border around the central image of the little girl. I intended for the playful and ornate appearance of the piece to

infer an elegant and lavish childhood.

For the next piece, *Marie Antoinette # 3* (Appendix, 8), I presented a similar childhood lifestyle. I placed the image of two young girls in dresses sheepishly posing for a picture in the center of the collage. Detailed patterns in soft shades of orange, yellow, white, and pink form a frame around the image. Strips of ribbon adorn the waistline of the dresses to guide attention toward the elaborate and decorative style of the overall presentation of the collage. The influence of Rococo is meant to be felt in the lighthearted spirit of the girls in the photographs, the pastel colors, and the heavy use of decorative textures and patterns layered in an intricate design surrounding the main image.

My use of familiar objects as subject matter is a device for revealing memories. It is also a way to incorporate playful humor and visual appeal into art. In addition, I use them as a means to demonstrate the irony of turning a utilitarian or common item into one made for purely aesthetic purposes. The make-believe mindset of childhood shines through when I am able to reconstruct the reality and purpose of things around me.

Conclusion

The MIS-IAR program allowed me to discover my own potential through self-reflection and collaboration with my classmates. Producing artwork and working alongside my peers was the most rewarding aspect of this program. Networking within the classes opened up countless connections that allowed more information and camaraderie to be shared than would ever been possible working on my own. Interaction with my colleagues during the process of developing ideas and techniques for my artwork was invaluable.

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Figure 1. *Cakes #9*, ceramic, 3.5"x7"x5", 2008.



Figure 2. *Cakes # 10*, ceramic, 4.5"x7"x4.5", 2008.



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Figure 4. *Hershey Kiss #2*, ceramic, 6"x5"x5", 2010.



Figure 5. *Hershey Kiss #1*, ceramic, 7"x6"x6", 2010.



Figure 6. *Hershey Kiss #3*, ceramic, 5.5"x3.5"x3.5", 2010.



Figure 7. *Marie Antoinette #2*, collage, 10"x8", 2008.



Figure 8. *Marie Antoinette #3*, collage, 10"x8", 2008.

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EDUCATION:

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EXHIBITIONS:

- 2010 *The Land of Make-Believe*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia at The Fridge, Washington, DC
- 2008 *11th Annual National Juried Show*, Gallery West, Alexandria, Virginia (Sharon Mason, Juror)
- 2007 *Artist/Teacher Exhibit...Present/Future*, Mason Hall, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia
- 2004 *Purdue Student National Art Education Association Spring Exhibit*, Pao Hall of

EXHIBITIONS (continued):

- 2004 Visual and Performing Arts, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana
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- 2003 *Land, Site, Scene*, Purdue Memorial Union, Purdue University, West Lafayette,
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