Sculpting an Experience

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS
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I walk into my studio with a head full of muddled feelings, wadded up arguments, indistinct longing, general contentments, and blurred memories. I try to isolate an image that is constant in my conscious mind, something reoccurring, a place to start. Sometimes it is a shape, other times it is a tool or a material. I begin in the physical process of creation, an act to clarify these fragmented ideas and emotions. Through this process I break down the barriers of this unarticulation. In the action I clarify these disordered impressions on my mind and translate them from something I have experienced to an aesthetic experience.

In Martin Jay’s article, *Somaesthetics and Democracy: Dewey and Contemporary Body Art*, Jay describes Dewey’s aesthetic experience in relation to this clarity or fulfilling closure. “The model of that self-realization he saw best expressed in the sensually mediated, organically consummated, formally molded activity that was aesthetic experience.” (Jay 55) In art as Experience John Dewey offers a way to look at experiences we’ve had in contrast to an experience (or an aesthetic experience) when he states:

Under conditions of resistance and conflict, aspects and elements of the self and the world that are implicated in this interaction qualify experience with emotions and ideas so that conscious intent emerges. Oftentimes,
however, the experience had is inchoate. Things are experienced but not in such a way that they are composed in an experience…In contrast to with such experience, we have an experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only it is integrated in and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences.”

(Dewey 42)

Dewey believes that art is not merely an expression of concepts already nailed down, but art is the hammer. True art thrusts, distills or extracts. Art is a shaping and a creation, not a simple mirroring of what we already know. He also believes that we have the capacity to see and make emotional connections without language. As a maker I feel I am truly a communicator, a translator of the in between.

In connecting my art to the realm of the “in between”; the places language and text fail to communicate, I must also consider the aspect of Deconstruction in my work. The founder of Deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, along with other deconstructionist such as Foucault believed that “text are selective in what they reveal and conceal: What is central to a text is made so by what is marginal in the same text…Derrida looks for ‘present absences’ or ‘productive silences’ that ‘haunt’ a text.” (Barrett 160) Because written and spoken language is inadequate due to the systems controlling and organizing it, you must deconstruct that system.

This Deconstruction stems from calling into question the system. Then it is made possible by identifying binary oppositions of concepts in that system. By introducing
these binaries into each other, you create a new understanding of that concept. Mary Klages offers and excellent explanation for Deconstruction:

Find a binary opposition. Show how each term, rather than being polar opposite of it’s paired term, is actually part of it. Then the structure or opposition which kept them apart collapses...Ultimately, you can’t tell which is which, and the idea, of binary opposites looses meaning, or is put into “play.” This method is called “Deconstruction” because it is a combination of construction/destruction-the idea is that you don’t simply construct a new system of binaries, with the previous subordinate term on top, nor do you destroy the old system- rather, you deconstruct the old system by showing how it’s basic units of structuration (binary pairs and the rules for their combination) contradict their own logic. (qtd. in Barrett 160)

It is my intension to draw from Dewey’s philosophies on the aesthetic experience through the process of making with my own artwork and process. Also analyzing the binaries in concepts that have been deconstructed using Derrida’s Deconstructivism and Focault’s care of self as well as a brief connection of Freud’s psychoanalysis of memory. With these theories I intend to conclude, that arts intention is to communicate a sublime knowledge, the true nature of aesthetics.

_Tell my mom I love Her (2008)_ a is an example of Dewey’s ideas of translating a series of experiences into “an experience”, it is also a piece that is easy to view the deconstruction of a system of concepts. In this work I set the task of calling my mother
twice a day at the exact same time for an entire month. What was so important that I needed to remind my mother 60 times in one month? That I love her. The calls began September 1st, 2008 at 11:00 am, the second call that day was at 9:00pm. And every day for the next 29 days following she received calls at exactly those times. Some calls were answered, some went to voicemail but they all had the same message “I love you”.

This piece came from an inner turmoil about my relationship with my mother. I am exploring the comfort of family and the opposite of that comfort, the discomfort of manipulation and abandonment. Here is present the slipperyness of language and somewhere in between these binaries or springing forth from the composite of them one can arrive at the “real” (Barrett 160).

*Tell my Mom I Love Her (2008)*
Through conceptual play, and disciplined action I came to have “an experience”. Because of this experience I reached a clarity and respect for my relationship with my mother. For me personally a greater sense of Love was established from this. I have given this deconstructed experience to the viewer by showing them the phone record of this art research and offering them to interact by calling their own mothers from my phone. If the viewer is moved in anyway then I have communicated an “in between”, and they have then had an experience through my art.

*Birds for Julia* (2008) is installation of hundreds of paper and plastic birds seemingly springing from their original material form (computer paper and sheets of lexan covering the floor) to ascend toward a light through a cut hole in the ceiling. Through the repetition of cutting by hand hundreds of birds from paper and lexan and stringing them in a specific rhythm and order, there is what Dewey refers to as “inception, development and fulfillment”. (Dewey 161) In a previous artist statement I wrote this of my process:

> I enjoy the action of creating something small and simple, setting it aside and then doing it again. I become a sculpture machine, a robot driven with a rhythm set by something internal and carried out by my hands. This steady pulse of repetitious movements, noises and vibration lulls my mind to a quite state. “Shhhhhhh” the angle grinder says to me.

> “Concentrate” the band saw hums, and sandpaper across a surface whispers “hush...hush”.

In the *Art as Experience* Dewey describes the aesthetic experience achieved when working with a material in the multiple or in a series:
Material is ingested and digested through interaction with the vital organization of the result of prior experience that constitutes the mind of the worker... An aesthetic experience can be crowded into a moment only in the sense that a climax of prior long enduring processes may arrive in an outstanding movement which so sweeps everything else into it that all else is forgotten... The form of the whole is therefore present in every member.

(Dewey 161)

*Birds for Julia (2008)*

Present in this piece is also the deconstruction of ideas of light and dark (literally by using light and also figuratively), of capture and release, of being bound and ascending. By simply establishing the binary opposition within the ideas of transformation and ascension, and illustrating those visually one could easily say that this
is a work of deconstruction. Hopefully the effect is one of a new creation, one that lends to an experience in the viewer.

*Faaar Flies (2009)* is a video piece that runs for just over a minute, and takes the viewer through a field of moving twinkling lights, reminiscent of lightening bugs or falling stars. In the end the sky becomes lit with dawn and it is revealed that the video is a series of moving frames, each frame made up of 16 cells of images. The images in those cells are seedy low-resolution photographs from a “point and shoot” camera of me in my yard with a flashlight. As the video progresses the curtain is pulled back and the magic of these fireflies or falling stars is uncovered to be a grown woman in jeans and t-shirt, standing in her back yard with a flash light in one hand and a cigarette and miller highlife in the other.

I was approaching the ideas of awe-inspiring childhood reflection. I am trying to attain or recreate a magical sensation locked in the vault of childhood memories. *Faaar Flies* carries a sadness in its yearning for simple “naïve” pleasures and the reality of growing up. I believe that it also however creates a new type of wonder through the ideas of play (even as an adult), and the reality that simple actions and vernacular objects can be tools for creating your own magical moments.

Just like the piece discussed previously, this piece consisted of hundreds of multiple elements created by the artist. The repetition of action in each of the hundreds of photographs (each one slightly different), and the end result to create a complete “whole” links directly to Dewey's explanations of having an aesthetic experience through process.
faaar flies (2009)
Here there is a series of binaries established that were deconstructed. The binary of light and dark. When it is pitch dark all you see is magical twinkling lights, in the light of dawn it is revealed the much less ethereal and more sinister nature of the loss of innocence. Sentimentality and cynicism was another deconstruction, and the binary of finally being a child and being a grown up.

*Field (2010)* and *Tornado (2010)* I will discuss together as they are of the same series and deal with the same subject matter. *Field* is a six foot by three foot wall hanging piece composed of just over 300 cast iron elements and steel rod. *Tornado* is a ceiling mounted sculpture that hangs ten feet long, and is roughly five feet in diameter at the top and tapers to eight inches in diameter at its bottom. Tornado is composed of steel rod and 500 hand carved wood elements of the same hook like design as the cast iron ones in *field*. For an explanation of the design of those “elements” that make up these sculptures I will refer to an excerpt from the artist statement I wrote at the completion of this piece:

> I became infatuated with the shape of a particular object, the outside caliper. I was drawn to the sleek hook-like prongs of this rudimentary tool. The tool’s common use and everyday purpose to measure the external size of an object also carried significance. In the search for my own identity I saw some symbolism in the caliper. If I could mathematically map my external size with certain precision, then perhaps I could also use this tool as medium to find my internal direction and appropriate position in the world.
This piece is dealing the ideas of “home”, which for me is Kansas, or at least that is where I grew up. When reflecting upon the ideas of home similar to *Tell My Mother I Love Her*, there is an immediate and obvious binary opposition. My true feelings about home live somewhere in between this binary. This piece was a very significant deconstruction for me. I struggled greatly even identifying the memories or feelings I was trying to capture in the initial production of this work.

In an article describing Diebenkorn paintings, John Elderfield references Freudian psychology as a way of exploring memory. I feel this description offers some explanation in my process of creating these sculptures:

> The freedom he discovered was the freedom to be able to forget the specific reality of a depicted object. And forgetting, we know from Freud, is the precondition for symbolization, while repetition – in this case, the series – is what happens when something cannot be remembered, being reproduced not as memory but as an action, the compulsion to repeat replacing the impulse to remember. (166 Elderfield)

This quote refers to the confusion of memory and nostalgia and to the lines between. Concepts that can only be explored through deconstruction and through the act of making. I chose to work with images from my native landscape that I felt a natural attraction and repulsion to, obviously another binary. Then through reproducing objects in the multiple and the varied material an object, I reached a state of the sublime, a true deconstruction, the root source. Using words I can only refer to the concept of this piece as a comforting sense of terror, simultaneous wonder and dread, or awe. Because I do not believe these words do justice to this experience I will not
attempt to explain it further. I can only hope that the viewer can adopt and attach their own significant reaction and meaning through these sculptures.

*Field (2010)*
Tornado (2010)

**Defibrillator (2010)** is a cast iron series in three parts: a cast iron guitar, cast iron amplifier and cast iron lead cord. The title “Defibrillator” is in reference to the medical machine used to bring the human heart out of an abnormal pattern and place the beat back into a normal rhythm. This piece was inspired by the kindness, patience and love of a musician friend of mine, who helped to remind me of my heartbeat.

The sculptures were made by carving voids directly into the core of bonded sand molds. The creation of this piece is truly an example of Dewey’s “aesthetic experience”. It was through the weeks and months invested in the meticulous process of these casting that I found greater peace and understanding with the issues which had driven me to make this sculpture. The end result also reflected the complexity of the situation in a set of beautiful
instruments that are cold, disconnected and could never actually function to make music. They are a monument to love and beauty and simultaneously a representation of fruitless desire, speaking to the places that lie in between.
Following *Defibrillator* I continued to use this method of direct carving into my molds to create *Holding (2011)*, a cast iron and bronze sculpture. This sculpture was created from a celebration and simultaneous fear of the liminal, the “in between.” I created this piece about not knowing the state of someone I care for dearly and the cowardice of not calling to find out. Without concretely knowing one way or another, I go back and forth from celebrating that this person is living and mourning this person’s possible death. The answer to this paradox being a phone call away.

Similarly to the work *Defibrillator*, I borrowed the form of everyday objects. The emotional potentiality of vernacular objects continues to fascinate me. By divorcing these objects from comfortable context I enhanced the discord. From this rift these castings
simultaneously sing to the opposing concepts of both longing and fulfillment. I hope to force an emotional reencounter with objects unhinged from purpose.

Through the course of making this piece I came to discover other meanings. I had originally chosen the vintage telephone and gossip bench because the phone had actually belonged to the person I was making the piece about. My initial intension was to illustrate the absence of a physical link and yet strong ties of emotional resonance. However during the months it took to create the work there was an escalating anxiety about what was to come following the completion of my Master’s degree. I felt in limbo, surrounded by the binaries of being terrified and excited for the future. That future was waiting for me on the other end of a phone call that had yet to come.
Holding 2011

The awareness and expression of these added meanings through the physical creation of art is the model of the self-realization that John Dewey believed is an aesthetic experience. I have discovered I use art as a distiller, as a method of exploration in subconscious concepts as well as deliberate subject matter. At times the realization of these journeys isn’t evident until a work of art is finished. As with any of the art discussed in this report, my hope is that the viewer can be brought into this experience by the visual appeal of my creations.

In conclusion, I do not know that I am an authority to show anyone anything about themselves, to boast any philosophy on human nature or theory of psychology. But as an artist I can tell one tale of being, and that tale can remain personal and independent from the whole of society or that tale can be applied universally through the interest and interpretation of another. At the very least I believe I am sincerely and authentically communicating. I am communicating ideas that can only be truly read and understood by
the viewer through the emotional interaction with art. This is the greatest importance of
art in society and the nature of aesthetics.

In the idea of art we find the moment in which human alienation is
overcome and the need for the experience of meaning and value is
satisfied. Through art, in the aesthetic experience, the rift in the world
that frustrates our primordial desire for encountering a sense of meaning
and value is healed. -Thomas Alexander

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Works Cited


