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Not Just a Symbol But a Status Symbol

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Not Just a Symbol But a Status Symbol

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Abstract

I create art, not out of a deep understanding of the world around me, but out of a lack of one. Human psychology, motives, behaviors, stressors, intentions and identity are the themes that boggle me the most. Therefore, it is only natural that my work would be fueled by the questions these themes pose. In the past I sought to understand what pushes people to make certain choices and how can the world around us affect the formation of identity. Currently I wonder about identity in terms of what do people use to form and reinforce identity both real and fabricated. In addition to this I am working through the question of what creates worth for an object; it's function or its fabricated identity. Through the use of photography, video, sculpture and installation I explore the possibilities of questions and also understandings that my work can create.

Photography, Identity, Object Relations Theory, Wealth Dynamics

Introduction

I see art as an entity with the obligation of furthering human understanding and growth. Art exists separate from us. It has its own evolution that occurs over time as we all change. With success, every piece I create serves the purpose of translating some aspect of the human experience within our society. Whether I'm looking at the idea of the group identity; as explored through social media, or wealth and consumption as explored through goods, my goal as an artist is to further my insight and understanding into the world around me. With every new work I create, it is fueled by this intention.

I grew up an only child with parents who worked a lot. Translation: I spent a lot of time alone. I learned how to keep myself occupied. I spent much of my days exploring the world around me collecting bits and pieces of items along the way. Those "items" served as markers for my adventures of the day. They allowed me to take a little bit of each place home. If I spent the day exploring railroad tracks I would come home with shards of wood, metal spikes, rocks, train-crushed coins and anything else I could find along the way. If I went on an adventure through the sugar cane fields, I would come home with snake skins, discarded bottles, dirt, berries and many other items. In the eyes of everyone around me my treasures were "junk", but for me they contained a value I couldn't quite explain. My collections grew. They became catalogs of the places I spent my days and also of me. These items discovered along the way held my interest enough for me to take them home. My act of gathering devalued objects instilled them with a new value. It wasn't long before my obsessive collecting extended outside of my daily adventures and into all parts of my day. At the super market with my mother, I

started to collect interesting discarded items. Walking the streets with my cousin, I would collect items. I began to notice differences between the type of things that could be found in some places but not in others. I started to organize my collections with names like; Nature, The City, Stores, Things Found While on my Bike, Things That Fall From Trees and many others. The names were picked instinctively based on where I was or what I was doing when the objects were discovered. The act of collecting was therapeutic. I began to see the items as markers of identity for specific places. It was more likely I would find a discarded candy bar wrapper and shards of glass in "the city" category then in "the store" category. I also became interested in unlikely places sharing the same types of discarded items. An example of this would be finding a discarded battery in both "The City" and "Nature". It made me wonder about scenarios that landed these disparate items in the same location. I am not clear what significance this served then, but looking back I see the cross pollinating of items as a indication of man's ubiquitous encroachment on nature. Subconsciously, this was the start of my obsession with people. Over time my interest in items and place extended to include the relationship between people and items. I spend a lot of time thinking about questions like: why did someone discard this item in this location, why did they not deem this item valuable enough to keep, why did they obtain the item in the first place? Separate from my collections, I started to wonder about people.

At a young age, having experienced some fairly awful sides of the human condition, I began to wonder about what makes people behave in certain ways. When I wasn't collecting I began spend time watching people. I would wonder about where they were coming from and where they were going. I made up stories about these things and

give passersby identities that existed only in my mind. I was very interested in the whys of everything on a micro level. I pondered questions like; why did he turn left and not right, why did she pause walking for a second instead of continuously going, why did he chose to wear that shirt instead of another. I wanted to understand people and their affects, their intentions and their motivations. As I grew older my collections grew as did my need to understand people and my environment. My process was shifting. The act of collecting was no longer enough to help me gain the information I felt I was missing.

Drawing was also a big part of my childhood. Most of my drawings were based on the stories I invented about people and the objects I collected. I looked at the drawings as byproducts of my collections. They created a record of my objects and the stories connected to them. In time I began to develop a strong interest in photography. I became obsessed with looking at photographs. I was intrigued by the act of capturing moments though I didn't have the means to create photographs until much later in life. My interest rested in knowing it was possible to freeze a moment in time and keep it as a personal possession. I began to collect photos that acted as artifacts of my life, though there were few to be found. Due to childhood traumas I struggled significantly with memory issues. I saw these photographs as tools to aid me in discerning fact from fiction. These photographs became containers for memories. At the time, my belief in a photograph's "truth" became an element grounding me in the reality of my life. This association created a very important bond between photography and me. I began to write as a means to identify with these memories in photographic form. The writings became another facet of my collections as did the drawings and the photographs. The act of collecting had transformed into an art object itself, separate from the collected

objects and my thoughts. This is where it all began.

I had begun to use art as a means of translation even though I didn't realize that's what I was doing at the time. Looking back art became the ultimate vehicle for my understanding of all things that bewildered me. It served as a light of sorts in a dark tunnel, showing me bits and pieces of the way getting me closer to a place where I could possibly understand the world around me. This may seem like a tall order to place on the shoulders of art but within my current view of what art is and how it serves society it makes perfect sense.

Methodology

Writing is a very important part of my creation process. Every day I create notes about anything that sparks my interest even if it's just for a moment. Primarily, I write in the form of stories or instructions but at times it's just a few sentences or a few words. Some of my writing sessions yield more than others but very few of them make it to becoming physical works. For the writings that do become realized they begin with a mental image that comes at random times. The image is a flash of what that particular idea could look like in physical form. I make a rough sketch of that original vision and begin to work on figuring out what it means and how it relates to my artistic ideologies. From here, I try to flush the idea out to a place that is concise. I believe my process starts this way because it's my minds way of naturally weeding through all my ideas to get to the ones I need to be working on at that time. The whole process is very intuitive. It starts with a spark, that becomes a note, that transforms into a vision, that gets actualized into physical form.

Because my process starts with writing, a narrative undertone is an important aspect of my work. It plays a role in whether or not a piece feels complete. I create a depended relationship between my writings and my finished art works -- much in the same way my writings, drawings and collections depended on each other. It lends itself to the execution of the idea but there must be a balance between what is said and what isn't. I break the story down to its most important elements and translate that into a tangible visual manifestation. In the end, the finished art object and the writings become one. My goal is to create an image that is simple yet full of interpretable information. I look at the act of creating a photograph much the way a painter looks at a blank canvas. Each element is important and thought about -- include this element or exclude this element; it all plays a role in the overall impact of the finished piece.

Photography and painting

Historically, photography and painting have a linked relationship. They were not thought of as a harmonious pair but rather as two disparate entities at odds with each other. The need for detailed rendered paintings was replaced with photography's ability to capture almost anything in front of its lens. In theory painting had been freed from its utilitarian function. As the two mediums assimilated into their new roles painting took full advantage of its new freedom, morphing and evolving, while photography was shackled down into the identity painting escaped. It is this period in paintings history I am interested in; not for the artistic quality of the work, but for the mediums new found freedom of choice. A painter could now approach a blank canvas with a blank mind, if they so chose, and create an image like a puzzle that needs to be solved. This is how I

desired to create photographs.

Inspirations

Specifically, this methodology drew me to the work of artists who treat the photograph like a constructible canvas. The works of the Parkeharrisons, Sandy Skoglund and Jeff Wall all hold great appeal to me. The husband/wife team of Robert and Shana Parkeharrison literally create their images staging everything from the setting, the props and to the actors involved. Their series, the "Architect's Brother" amazes me. It opened me up to understanding any illusion is possible in a photographic image. The moments depicted display the impossible. They are done so in a way that is austere, showing man as the creator of all things. The images are surreal, beautiful and full of a type poetry that I dream to incorporate into my work. Contextually this series speaks of human limits. Nature is used to symbolize "the search"; which I feel pairs well with their use of technology. I am unclear as to what "the search" fully incorporates; but the open-ended narratives of much of their work leaves room for the mind to conjure up many possibilities. From the Parkeharrison's point of view their work speaks about the didacticism that is the human existence. This dialog is done so in a way that is absurd and theatrical, creating images that carry a distinct separation from reality while , at times, using signifiers that are grounded in reality. For me the images are darkly comical, conjuring up thoughts of watching circus performers. They create feelings of discomfort and joy simultaneously.

Sandy Skoglund's work is particularly dramatic and appealing to me. Like the

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Parkeharrisons she creates images in their entirety. Her use of human and sculptural

elements as equal players in the image is inspiring. Her practices of creating a familiar

setting like a kitchen or a bedroom and then overtaking the space with impossible

anomalies leads to images that are disturbingly surreal. Skoglund's work opened me up

to the notion of creating images that are fully immersive, not in terms of the viewers'

physical involvement with the piece but in terms of how the artist interacts with the

piece. She works with self-fabricated items, in self-fabricated environments using

models acting out motions completely dictated by her. She creates images where every

aspect matters and the act of doing this becomes an art experience all on its own. In

theory, through the act of utilizing the process of making as apart of the art process, the

end result may allow for a piece to become more than just a framed image but an

experience in itself to be taken part in. I began to think; if I create images where

everything down to a candy bar wrapper in a specific corner has significance then the

viewer will be presented with a visual space that must be read, contemplated and

ultimately decoded. The act of viewing the image will become a part of the works

meanings. I became increasing interested in working in this manner.

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Jeff Wall created images I could spend hours with. Like Skoglund's work, his images are well thought out from beginning to end, but grounded in reality. Often, Wall's constructed scenes at first glance may be taking in as snapshots of some stumbled upon moment. This could not be further from the truth. Composition, settings, what to include and what not to, lighting, the body positions of the models among so many other

things are decided by Wall. The
amount of control he takes over
his images prompts me spend
extensive time studying them
and wondering about the
significance of every detail.

Whether his images appear to be   7

completely candid or have obvious indicators of being staged, Jeff Wall's work

influences the way I think about an approach the art making process.

Wall found inspiration in painters such as Caravaggio and Velazquez. His interest

in painters was something I identified with. In his image "Picture For Women" for

example the influence of Manet's "The Bar" could easily be identified. In all their

naturalness, Jeff Walls works are constructions of his creation and as with Sandy

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Skoglund and the Parkeharrisons, every aspect of his images are thought about. His work deals with self, identity, sociological issues and the importance of gesture (among other things). I found his interest in the importance of gesture to be significant. Within my own work it translated into a consciousness of how body position and expressions could affect the overall impression that my images give across. Skoglund opened me up to the concept of creating the whole image but Jeff Wall helped me to understand the importance of playing close attention to details. As a whole the Parkeharrisons', Skoglund's and Jeff Wall's work helped me to see I could approach image creation in the same way a painter approaches a canvas. On the surface Jeff Wall's work holds true to what photography is in its purest form; a tool to capture the likeness, or the truth, of a moment. But below the surface, in his highly skilled hands he defies this function, creating what I considered to be anything but the truth parading as such.

Photography and truth

Susan Sontag described photography as producing works that are "no generic exception to the usually shady commerce between art and truth" (Sontag 7). Jeff Wall's work is a perfect example of the truthfulness of this statement. Just as painting has the ability to create its own reality, photography is no different. Photography evolved from being a reliable example of truth to a fabricator of truth with a power like no other. In most cases, no one will examine a painting and wonder whether or not it is a truthful happening. Photography possess the ability to parade itself as a fabrication or as the truth with a chance that it will be believed either way. My early interest in photography revolved around its association with the truth. I felt photographs could translate my past

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in a way I was not capable of doing. In hindsight, I think I saw them as the only reliable

way to answer questions I didn't trust anyone else to. I have long since filed this belief

system into the myth category but it is not completely false. In terms of photographs that

have not been altered in post-production the truth of moment still exists. Meaning, if an

event is fabricated and then captured by the camera it still stands to reason that

whether or not the content is real and truthful, the existence of the moment is real. This

cannot be said about any other medium outside of maybe the video arts. Photography

in its simplest form captures the reality of what exists in front of it lens. Meaning, outside

of all the possibilities of what a photograph can represent, it is merely a reproduction of

what was in front of the camera when the shutter was pushed.

Jumping off Point

My interest in these artists discussed lead to the creation of a semi-immersive work with qualities of an installation piece. I titled it "Bridges" because it depicted that each person is a bridge to another, and it was my artistic jumping off point. This piece was a narrative construction that consisted of 120 images weaving in and out of each other on the wall. It dealt with issues of cause and effect; as I searched to understand the events that lead people to make certain decisions. It also touched on the "what ifs" of decisions on a very micro level. With this work I was interested in the question of what motivates people to make certain decisions. I mapped out each one beforehand like a storyboard. The process of shooting this was quite theatrical; I viewed my subjects as actors and each image as a step moving closer to revealing the developing plot. This work dealt with issues of time and the possible simultaneous existence of parallel paths. It dealt with the idea that we are interconnected and that the decisions

This is a shot of my senior thesis show with two views of it's mountings. It was an installation piece composed of 120 images each presented on individual mounts three inches off the wall. The entire set up was 6 feet tall by 39 feet long. The idea behind this work was based on the idea of human connectivity and the impact of decisions upon the lives of, not only the decision makers, but also the lives of the people around them.

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we make can at some point affect other people. For each image I strove for a natural

documentary appearance, like a snapshot directly extracted from the lives of the people

involved. The circumstances of this work were highly controlled; therefore the outcome

of the depicted paths could only serve as a limited glimpse into possible outcomes. The

point of this piece is to make people question "what effects does my life have on the

lives of others known and unknown" but, due to it's limited nature, it also leads to

questions of what else could have occurred outside of these scripted possibilities.

"Bridges" was specifically photographic. Because of my interest in all things

photographic from childhood it was very natural for me to fall into photographic work. I

sought to persuade the viewer with constructed scenes of people realistically interacting

in existing environments. The preexisting environments posed the challenge of figuring

out how to use them in a way that best suited the image I was trying to create. Though I

had a need to control every aspect of my images, I was drawn to the semi-

uncontrollable element a preexisting space posed. That mixture of the controllable and

uncontrollable slightly opened me up to the possibilities of unchangeable variants. Tight

spaces could not be made bigger, walls could not be moved and unsightly stains

removed so I was forced to step back from my rigid ideas and adjust. This piece was

about creating a whole experience and every decision was a reflection of this. Each

image was a component of a large-scale installation that reinforced the overall concept

of the work. I consider "Bridges" to be my first example of a completed artwork. It

represented planning, process, trial and error, growth, but most of all it showed me what

I could accomplish. It opened the door to understanding that everything about a work of

art can influence the way it is viewed and received. A photograph doesn't have to be

framed on a wall it can become an installation; it can be a sculpture. What I learned

from this piece became just as important as it's physical existence and that knowledge

became the stepping stones for everything I would create next.

Continuous Process

My process is a continuous train of thought. One idea sparks the next and every

completed or semi-completed piece becomes a lesson that informs my growth. Thinking

about the connectivity of people on a group level made me wonder about connectivity

on an individual level. I began to think about "the individual". What makes us "individual"

if we can't separate the core of who we are, our identity, from the world around us? My

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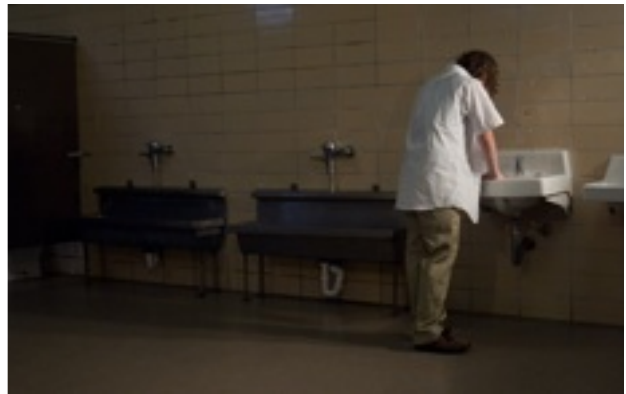
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thoughts shifted to the concept of "experiences". Our "experiences" are our own. Even within a situation where multiple people go through the same occurrence each person will have their own experience of that situation. Identity rests in "experiences".

My work titled Conversations was an exploration into human experience. I focused on two people with similar stories to tell. I created a photographic installation in a way that fostered an environment of voyeurism and sharing. The piece was constructed of two large-scale photographs suspended facing each other. Radiating between the images the voices of the people depicted were heard telling the story of their experiences. The images were staged recreations of "where they were when" they experienced the news of a lost loved one. The people depicted are women. They are telling their individual stories. The installation gives the impression they are speaking only to each other. The viewer could walk between the images in an attempt to inject him or herself in the conversation but due to the space being confined it is slightly uncomfortable and unwelcoming. The overwhelming size of the images also adds to the feelings of discomforted created within the void between them. It creates an environment in which the viewers became eavesdroppers. They were only permitted to participate with the interaction from the outside as voyeurs. It was a glimpse into a private moment backed up by the closeness of the suspended images which physically created a mental and visual intimacy. This work left me thinking about the concepts of voyeurism, private made public, the exchange of information and furthered my obsession with identity.

I set out with a need to understand how identity is formed in terms of current

societal trends. Intrigued by the concept of public made private, I began to explore the world of the Internet. More specifically my interest rested in the worlds created by online social circles. In their own way they eliminate the need for true human interactions and also foster an environment of irrational anonymous behavior. It was the anonymous behavior that intrigued me the most. I was pulled in by the idea that people will say and do anything if they cannot be identified, even if this sense of anonymity exists only on a surface level.

I searched out a platform that allowed for this and was drawn to the comments left on YouTube videos. Completely disconnected from thinking about artistic processes, I was watching videos posted by a YouTube user I personally subscribe to. The video was about how he, a black man, came to fall in love with his girlfriend, a white woman, via YouTube. The comments posted were overwhelmingly racist and malicious in opposition to their relationship despite the video being positive. I began to explore the pages belonging to the people making the negative comments and I couldn't find any immediate way to ascertain their identity. It was a direct example of people being willing to push the limits of what is "correct" as long as they can't be linked to the activities. This "world" created by technology and the Internet allows for a separation between the real and the fabricated. On the internet a person could be racist, sexist, homophobic, a stalker, or a lover of things they would never want associated to their daily self or "true" self. I wanted to explore this. I collected comments posted to videos. I looked mainly to recreate the situation that initially sparked this interest for me; meaning I searched for videos that did not seem to warrant the comments being made. I stockpiled hundreds of comments and a pattern emerged; the majority of the comments could be considered

the "extreme" of the emotion. Strong hate, undying love, anger overflowing, heartbroken sadness, looking for guidance; all expressed toward the people featured in the videos as if they knew them. I wanted to explore the power of the comments. Did the power lie in the words or the anonymity behind the words? I separated the comments into categories based on the extremes they represented; hate, love/obsession and questions. I wanted to remove the comments from their context of being anonymously written text and present it in a way it was never meant to be received which was as spoken words. Through the act of changing the intentions and the audience of the comments I didn't know if the statements would lose or gain potency.

The video was a face-to-face interaction with the model chosen to recite the comments. The model was male, white and of average build. I picked him based on his "everyday guy" look that made him a blank slate for the comments to stick to. I created three separate videos; one for each category, and presented it as an installation of projections on cloth panels. The projection surface was box shaped, large, and protruding into the room from a wall. The videos playing roughly in unison. The clutter of sound was representative of the clutter contained within the Internet world. As the statements he was making became clearer "You know why sharks don't eat niggas, cuz they think they are shit", "God don't save niggas", "omg I soooo love her, like she was in my city and I went to all the place I know she went to", "she will never love you…I know we are meant to be together" and many others it creates feelings of discomfort, alliance, humor and disgust. This piece is as much about the technological space of the Internet as it is about identity and our societies' methods of creating, concealing and destroying it. This piece questioned human nature. It brought to the forefront the question of to

what extreme will a person express themselves if they believe they will get away with it.

While working on the video piece, exploring the idea of public space, I also became interested in the idea of private space on a voyeuristic level again. The other side of the internet allowing people to put their thoughts and lives on public display is that it's dismantles any sense of privacy. I sought to make a space that physically removed privacy. I wanted to literally put a person and their every move on display. As an exercise, I built a simple enclosure that was 4'x4'x8'. The space inside was white and claustrophobic. The room was built entirely out of cardboard. From the outside it appeared to be a large yet simple box. It brought to mind connotations of a being a package with anonymous content. From top to bottom on all sides the box had multiple "peep holes". They fostered a drive to see what was inside of the four walls. Inside the box sat a single person, a female, on a computer at a desk browsing Facebook. She showed no awareness of the eyes peering in on her. She had no control over this interaction. She couldn't control who was looking at her, from what angle and for how long. Her every move within this space was on display. This work felt like the missing piece in my exploration of identity within the realm of the internet. It allowed me to see a tangible example of this intangible interaction.

After working through a number of other experimentations trying to gain further understanding of the concept of identity and its sources I started to closely analyze the environments around me. Everything; music, movies, books, people watching etc., became relevant to my process. I wanted to find universal commonalities. My interest began to shift toward the direction of power dynamics. Within every type of relationship

some form of a power struggle exists. From the perspective of the entities involved in the power struggle, possession of that power is more or less constantly shifting to some degree. At times, this shift is more dramatic and noticeable than others, and in some circumstances there will always be the powerful and the powerless. In addition to power structures I also become concerned with who enforces the power and how the ownership of that power is displayed, as well as, what are symbols of power. The most universal correlation to power within our society that also has a direct relation to identity is money. The euphemism "keeping up with the Jones" came to mind. It's the idea that the people with the most displays of wealth are the most worthy of emulation. The money is the source of the power and the power is displayed through the accusation of objects. For me, this created a direct connection between objects as power and identity. This felt especially relevant due to the current money crises plaguing much of the world. I found myself back in a familiar place, the contemplation of objects. In my childhood I looked at objects as having an existence outside of their physical forms so the idea of objects having a far-reaching affect was not absurd. Through objects people create themselves. A person must buy name brand to exhibit they are worthy and the more that name costs the more important and powerful they must be. In the eyes of society a man driving a BMW wearing Gucci, diamonds and platinum is far more important them the man driving a Honda wearing Levis. It was this interest in identity objects and power that lead me down the path of my current work.

Object Relations

I began to research this idea from a psychological standpoint. The theory known

as the human object relations theory says that humans are driven by relationship seeking rather than pleasure seeking motives. Freud originally used the term "object" to mean anything an infant directly drives toward for satisfaction, but within the current view objects can be people (mother, father, others) or things, such as transitional objects with which we form attachments. These objects and the developing child's relationship with them are incorporated into self, and become the building blocks of the self-system. Another way of looking at this is that we come into the world with a genetic encoding that sets the stage for which we will become. However, it is also our interactions with significant others, from birth onward, that shapes how our genetic predispositions will be expressed. Early in life, we have little sense of our identity or ourselves. It is through our relationships with the significant people around us that we take in parts of others (objects) and slowly build a self-structure, which we eventually call a personality (changingminds.org).

In particular, this theory's concept that people seek out relationships with objects as a mode to derive identity was of interest to me. It directly related to my current thought processes. I was very interested in understanding "what is an object" and "does it have an identity outside of what is projected upon it by people". Despite the fact objects are inanimate they are not free of having an identity. This identity is largely related to the object function and physical form. It can most likely be thought of as the first few associations that come to mind when the object is encountered. I think of this as the object's natural identity. For example, goggles are protection, yet on a physical level they are also plastic, rubber and fabric. These factors play a role in making up the object's identity. A better example to look at is a baseball bat. One of the immediate and

basic associations I have with this object is it hits things. More specifically, it hits baseballs. But, when looking at this object I have more immediate association with the concept of "America's pass-time". This identity marker is not in direct relation with the physicality or the functionality of this object, but with an association imposed upon it by our society. When I think of a baseball bat this association is what I think of first. It becomes, what I like to call, the overshadowing identity. It over takes the object's natural identity, in essence creating a new one that exists completely outside of the object. Now, when thinking in terms of a baseball bat, its overshadowing identity is still in some ways connected to the object's natural identity. After all, America's pass-time is baseball and that association takes us back to the baseball bat hitting things. But what happens to the object when it's overshadowing identity has no association with its natural identity?

In terms of our current society, wealth and power rule all and is the basis of the "American dream". People seek out methods to get themselves one step closer to this ideal but more immediately they seek out objects that can be wealth indicators. The term "wealth indicators" is traditionally used in the guise of the overall economy and refers to happenings like spending patterns that indicate the economy is growing and/or getting stronger. In other words, people spending a lot of money collectively is an economic "wealth indicator". On an individualistic level this translates to; a person spending a lot of money is an indicator of their personal wealth and status. It is here, where the creation of truly destructive overshadowing identities are created. As the desire for a wealth identity is pursued the need for wealth-identified objects grows. In this catch 22, the objects' identity becomes enhanced by the wealth-associated identity,

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which also deconstructs the object at the same time.

A New Direction

My path of creating in terms of human and object identity relations did not start

with high priced luxury items. I started with goods that are priced just above the range of

low middle to poverty class level citizens. These objects still had the ability to impart

identity reinforces on their owners but not to a coveted level. In my first explorations of

this concept I was interested in looking at how people interact with and have

relationships with their objects. I started off the process in very heavy-handed way.

Using computer generated drawings of objects like an iPhone, an expensive

refrigerator, a gun and many items I created oversized semi-3d spoofs. I sought to

investigate society's lack of insight into the "emptiness" of their relationship with these objects. The images were planned out much like I had done in the past and included actors going through the motions of interacting with these spoof objects as though they were real. In the end these images held some successful qualities but were not entirely what I was looking for. In an attempt to get a grasp of my concept I broadened my thinking outside of product branding. Advertising became my new focus. With all the controversy that has plagued advertising over the years in terms of the images it sells, it is well known by many that ads are meant to sell an ideal to the public. Ads offer up a product paired with a tangible visual representation of what pursuing or having ownership of that product can do for your status in life. It is with this, an ideal paired with over pricing, that luxury goods are born. Objects are priced out of the range of most regular consumers. This strategic process of branding makes them desirable to those that can afford them and even more desirable to those who cannot. Objects, no matter how commonplace, can be transformed into luxury goods and they are. Cars, bicycles, watches, etc. become far more than their object identity intended for them for to be. Intellectually I found myself at a cross roads between: what can a disassociated overshadowing identity do to an objects natural identity and my interest in human object relations. This is where my current direction begins.

Current Work

At the start of what is now my current work, I had very few pre-decided ideals in terms of what the end result would look like. This way of working was radically different from my usual way, which was to plan everything out being only minimally flexible. I

started by looking through product advertisements of high-end goods. In my previous

manifestation of this work I used objects that still had a fairly high level of attainability.

These objects carried weight for some as reinforces of identity but on a level much

smaller then I was interested in. Going through the ads I decided to focus on true "high

end" goods, luxury objects with a very low level of attainability. These would be the

items that could serve as true indicators of means and be coveted as wealth indicators.

In other words association with these objects would create an identity for its owner that

they could not easily achieve on their own. A person riding down the street on a Gucci

bicycle would be viewed much differently than someone on a Huffy.

When looking at the ads I was particularly drawn to the way the objects were

photographed like models. I could imagine a photographer taking great care posing and

reposing the object and capturing it from different angles, treating it as if it were

precious. I knew immediately I wanted to mimic this style of shooting in my images.

Meanwhile, I also found myself wanting to destroy the objects in a way. I wanted to strip

them of everything that should logically make them worthy of being viewed as valuable.

I wanted to decontextualize the objects and place them in a neutral context, opening

them up to critical thought. At the same time, I also knew I wanted to personify them and

allow the objects to keep their basic visual essence. I decided to revisit my earlier

process of recreating the products in a semi-sculptural manner but this time to maintain

its basic look. I created black and white photocopies of the object. This allowed me to

remove all color information while maintaining its characteristics. I further degraded it by

using a large-scale copier to create an oversized print in which the grain of the original

black and white copy became apparent. I had my foundation for what the object would

look like. To further my process of devaluing the object I decided to pair it with

corrugated cardboard, serving as it backing. Having worked with this material in the

construction of the box/room I was aware of its possibilities. This created an association

between the object and junk material. As my final move in depersonalizing and

decontextualizing the object I cut

away all hints of the advertisement

source material leaving only the

object behind.

For my first set of

photographs I created portraits of

the objects. The products used

were select because they had

their own identity in addition to

being tools used by people for the

formation of their personal identity.

In creating these portraits I hoped

to personify the object and create

a face to face encounter forcing

critical thought and analysis if it.

The images were large-scale. The   15

object gave an illusion of dimensionality though there wasn't any. Under close

examination visible evidence of the cardboard can be seen making the viewer aware of

the base material. On the surface of the object the texture of the cardboard's surface

can be seen breaking its way through, further degrading the "image" of the object. These images were as much about the object as they were about the people who use them. The objects used were an illustration of the lengths people will go to in order to express their financial superiority. The images say "why buy a $30 papoose when you can buy a Gucci papoose". They speak of excess in a way I don't think words could quite express. I felt as if I was creating my own visual language. I had a strong desire to push this further and to continue to do so in a way that is intuition based and fluid. I began experimenting with different methods of incorporating other visual elements into
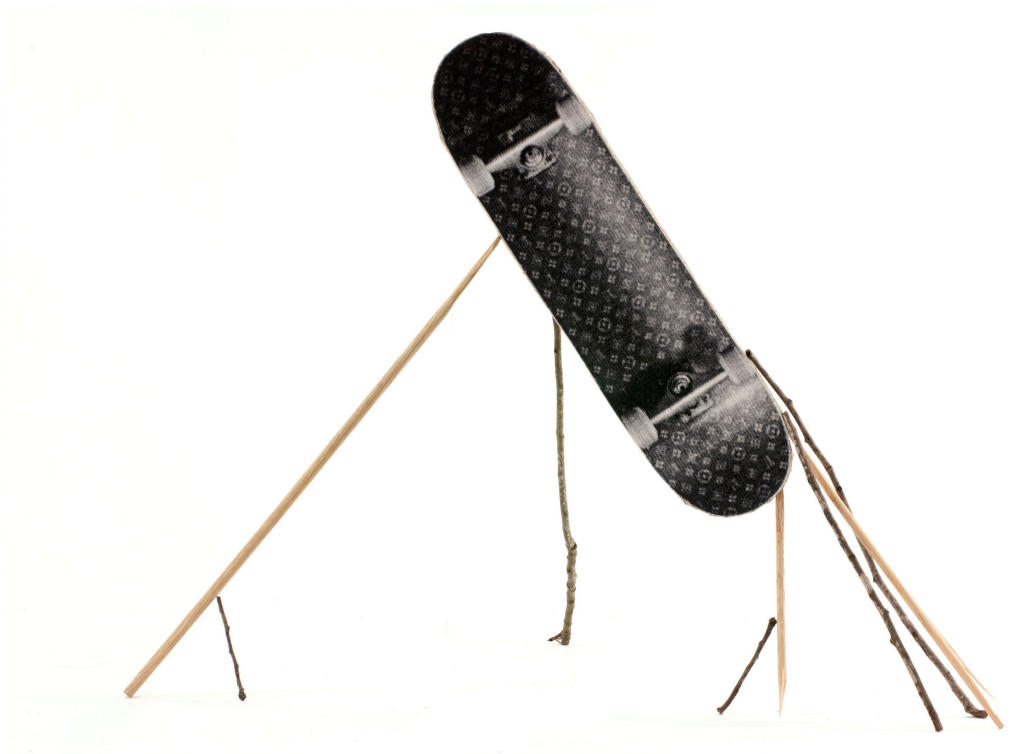

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the image. I tried creating groupings of multiple objects in an attempt to create a dialog between them but this was unsuccessful. I wasn't interested in creating a possible

dialog between objects or bring up issues of one brand or object in relation to another. I wanted to maintain my examination of the objects individuality.

At the conclusion of this experiment, I became interested in the sticks I used to keep the objects upright. They were manufactured dowels and I enjoyed the look of them in contrast to the color of the cardboard. I thought it could be interesting to reveal the "behind the scenes" information. I started to stage the objects using the dowels in a way that allowed them to be visible. I forced them to precariously support and stabilize the weight of the objects. This created a wonderful tension between the surface supporting the set-up and the objects. The fragility of the sticks gave the impression they could fall at any second. They were beautiful to me but something was missing. I was given the suggestion to use natural sticks as opposed to the manufactured dowels as a solution to my problem. I experimented with them but fairly soon into this process I realized this was not the proper solution. I saw beauty and purpose in incorporating both stick types. I began to create set ups using both objects. The natural wood spoke to me of the concept of natural identity while the dowels spoke of manufactured overshadowing identities. When paired with the objects they created a wonderful contrast amongst themselves. Without realizing it, I had created my own language for discussing my subject matter that worked for me conceptually and aesthetically.

After experimenting with different objects I became concerned I was losing focus of my investigations into object identity. I still stood by the assertion that "high end" goods were the answer but it wasn't enough to discuss the effects of wealth on object identity. In order to question what happens to an object's identity when it encounters a

disassociated overshadowing identity I felt I needed to start off with objects that strongly

held their own object identity. I shifted my focus to objects with a definite utility function

that had been branded to the level of being a luxury item. I felt the contrast between the

objects function or natural object identity and its luxury status or overshadowing identity

would create a bit of a tug of war in the minds of the viewers. This was the solution I

was looking for. I started picking objects based on their function first and then their

brand, and one would not do without the other. I was drawn to objects that had a definite

indicator of the brand name but I was not completely against the brand being

ambiguous only to be revealed by some other means. I had my "models" decided; now
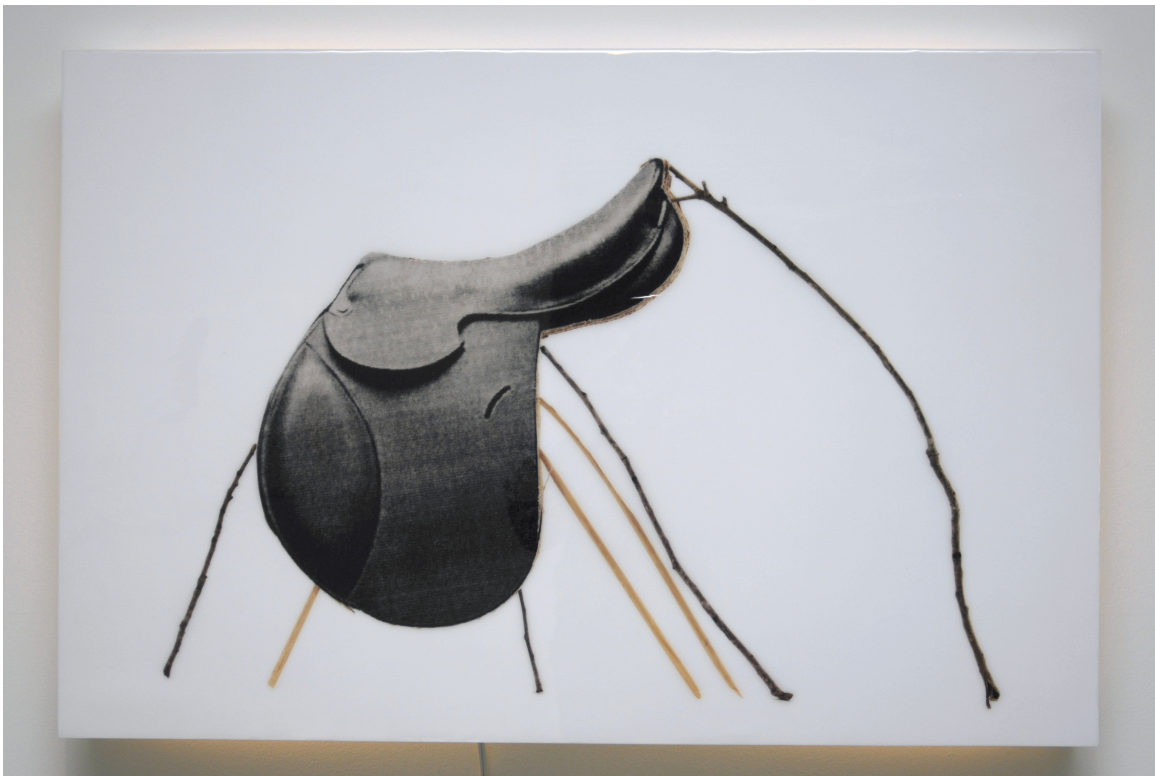
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it was time to create the images.

The process of combining the sticks with the objects was based on physics and

intuition. Being the sticks were the only things holding the objects up, often in difficult to

maintain poses, the weight of the objects had to be properly accommodated for. The struggle to get the set up to stand was a grueling yet highly satisfying process. Once success was achieved it brought a sense of relief and excitement. After the main supports where in place I began to place other sticks to fill necessary areas of the composition on an aesthetic level, adding and removing sticks until the image "felt right". The combination of all the parts came together to create one multilayered object. This process of creating

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became a highly emotional experience at times, taking me through the range of happiness to frustration and anger, then loss when it was time to dissemble the set-up. Once photographed, the objects began to take on a second life outside of its physical existence. Conceptually the personification of the object and its components became apparent and I was able to fully see the interaction occurring between the parts. The objects became monuments in the process of being erected. The sticks, it's constructors and worshipers. This association is exactly what I was looking for even though I was not consciously attempting to achieve this. It was more than I could ask for. I felt I had successfully achieved my goal of decontextualizing the object and placing it in an environment where critical examination of its meaning could occur. At the same time though, on a personal level, I felt I had stepped too far away from my source material.

I had a need to subtly reintegrate aspects of the advertisements back into the work. My most immediate thought was in the framing of the images. I knew I was interested in using light but I didn't want to create a light box. I also knew I wanted to bring color back in. In my process to depersonalize the objects and decontextualize them from the source material the first thing I removed was the color. It was only befitting that in my process to reintegrate the advertisements that bringing color back in would be a consideration. When thinking about traditional framing I rejected it. I realized I didn't want any mechanism to interfere with the viewers face to face interaction with the images. This is why I made the choice to mount them completely flush with its support surface maintaining the life of the image. In terms of the mounting surface I wanted it to be a solution that would become a part of the piece. Something that could add to the conversation and that would be impossible to ignore. For each frame mount I chose a different color that corresponded to a particular image. The colors were based on the original advertisements that objects belonged to. The mounts were built to be light boxes but not in the traditional sense. No light was allowed to come through image, only around it, radiating like a strong glow. When hung, the light interacted with the wall and color of frame. Without fully realizing it these pieces became sculpture, installation and photography.

Conclusion

With this work I felt a sense of achievement and pride that I can't say I felt before in any of my previous works. I feel as if I was able to successfully disconnect myself from my rigid analytical nature and just create. The experience was freeing. Before this

point I felt myself getting to a point where I no longer enjoyed the act of making work. It began to feel like a mechanical chore and the creation of "Not Just a Symbol but a Status Symbol" renewed a sense of excitement within me. It reminded me just how satisfying the process of creating can be.

My time in graduate school has truly been a continuous growth process. Three years ago I couldn't have imagined that my work would have evolved as much as it has. Every step along the way served a stepping-stone getting me to the next stage and I feel I am getting to place where I can trust the artistic decisions that I make. My series "Not Just a Symbol but a Status Symbol" is a result of me fully realizing an idea and pushing past it to achieve the next step. This work allowed me to break free of my self-confining way of working and opened me up to the freedom of just making. I'm not sure what my next step for this work will be but I still see a lot of potential in working this way. What I do know is, when it is time to grow past this and create something new, discussing something new, I will be well prepared to handle the task.

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