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STRANGE RARITIES

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S T R A N G E R A R I T I E S

By

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The contents of this thesis paper are only a small summary of the colossal, collective wealth of information and experiences that I have accumulated during my time studying in Missoula at the University of Montana. To the many splendid individuals who have contributed to that collective, thank you for helping me reach this point in my artistic career.

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-Cori Crumrine, 2018

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INTRODUCTION

'Strange Rarities' is a compelling and odd coupling of words, and similar to my work, this phrase both masks and reveals its references. 'Strange' defines something unfamiliar or extraordinary; 'Rarity' describes something that is uncommon, or the quality of being rare. Paired together, a 'strange rarity' refers to an object, a feeling, or a something, which discourages familiarity and excites wonder and awe. This is exactly what I want my work to accomplish.

My work is a modest attempt to harness delight and intrigue using a medley of vibrant colors and confectionary forms. Though my pieces reference a number of familiar shapes, none are implicit enough for you to create an immediate label. I am able to achieve this 'je ne sais quoi' quality in my work, by incorporating elements of color, form, and texture from the world of culinary arts.

Food has the power to activate all 5 senses, and referencing it in my work allows my sculptures to artificially invoke the senses of my viewers. I am attracted to the tactile qualities of food, and the immediate notes of nostalgia, delight, or distaste they can generate in a viewer. I use these associative responses to my advantage, utilizing select colors, shapes, and surfaces, which invite viewers to consider the possibility that the object before them could be real or fake.



Figure 1. *Strange Rarities* – w. stoneware, colored porcelain, underglaze, paint, wood, 2018

For my thesis exhibition, *Strange Rarities*, I chose to amplify those qualities of delight and distaste, by displaying my pieces together as a colorful, intermingling crowd (fig. 1). Showcasing a wide variety of surfaces, textures, and food-like forms, offered an overwhelming palette of curious qualities for viewers to partake in. The sheer volume and variety in the work lead me to treating my pieces as party guests; engaging them in small talk while overanalyzing their appearance and intentions. This metaphor, impressionistic rather than schematic, allows me to organize my work into a variety of moods and personalities.

BACKGROUND

Color and Form will always be my greatest sources of intrigue. These two elements offer me the most motive during my creative process, as they feel both instantaneous and infinite. As my sculptures reference no singular shape, they can be equally strange and stunning, allowing them to adorn and adapt to any color palette I choose. I am particularly drawn to the lush and saccharine color palettes found in the world of culinary arts, which brings its own set of formalities and connotations to my sculpture work.

While both fine arts and the culinary arts are designed to be pleasing experiences, only food can simultaneously activate our senses of touch, smell, taste, hearing, and sight. Referencing food in my sculptures enables them to tap into all five senses of the viewer, invoking similar responses triggered by food. Though the pieces themselves are artificial, abstracted renderings of food, the viewer's response to them is genuine, even if they have not yet determined what they are looking at. I rely on the viewer to sift through their preconceived notions with Color and Form, to come to their own conclusions as to how to interpret my work. The idea that Color and Form can influence how a viewer will interpret my sculptures suggests that my work is succeeding in causing them to reevaluate the visual intricacies of the objects around them.

Though Color and Form are invaluable to my artistic practice, Color is the ultimate driving force behind my work, and I am particular with my use of it. When creating work for my pre-candidacy review, I used an exclusively pastel palette, which appeared overwhelmingly saturated and saccharine when the work filled the gallery (fig.

2). Although pastels remain a key element within my *Strange Rarities* exhibition, I chose to expand my color palette to balance the saccharinity, and to create more contrast and intrigue amongst my sculptures.

My fascination with color and confectionary forms are not without precedent. I admire the paintings of Wayne Thiebaud, whose color-centric and calorific work feeds



Figure 2. *Party Talk – Party Favors*; stoneware, underglaze, mixed media, 2016

my focus and fascination with Color and Form (fig. 3). With a shared pastel palette and affinity for dessert forms, Thiebaud and I both attempt to render delight in our work, yet we approach our attempts from different venues.



Figure 3. Wayne Thiebaud, *Meringues* - oil on canvas, 1988

For all their inherent whimsy, Thiebaud's paintings convey a plaintive longing¹. Thiebaud's dessert subjects appear to be all dressed up for their own party, but their mood is as artificial as their fondant's food coloring. Though my sculpture work abstracts food, and Thiebaud's paintings accentuate it, our work shares a spot in the modest, pastel corner of postmodernism. While Thiebaud clearly portrays the confections he references, I am far less representational when rendering my forms, preferring to abstract elements from desserts, rather than directly mimic every aspect of them.

The sculptures in my pre-candidacy review were similar to those in *Strange Rarities*, however, I treated those early renditions as pedestals for other accent pieces (fig. 2). I garnished my sculptures with found objects and ceramic fruit, which were very representational compared to the abstract forms obscured beneath them. While reviewing my completed show in the gallery, a friend placed a bite of mochi ice cream beside one of my sculptures, which unexpectedly triggered a massive, significant aesthetic shift in my perception of my work (fig. 4).

¹ Karmel, Pepe, et al. *Wayne Thiebaud*. Rizzoli, 2012.



Figure 4. Aesthetic shift from representation to abstraction, among other things - Fall 2016

I was distracted, amused, and intrigued by a half-eaten, melting lump of mochi; why was this more aesthetically pleasing than the refined, hors d'oeuvres-esque pieces I so scrupulously sculpted? If I removed the garnish, I viewed my sculptures as nothing more than oddly shaped lumps, which vaguely referenced rock or pastry forms. However, when paired with the right color and surface finish, those 'lumps' evolved into an object capable of projecting a multitude of flavors and sensory cues, for both the viewer and I to ponder. As I shifted my focus towards abstraction, I became less concerned with rendering realistically, allowing myself to take inventory of all the curious qualities in my work, which took the shape of objects that I did not yet have a label for.

STRANGE RARITIES

Strange Rarities was designed to be an indulgence for the senses. I may not have been able to serve each viewer a slice of triple layer cake, but viewing my work may have you craving one. I wanted to capture that craving, the feeling of temptation and anticipation, which is instantaneous when stepping into an ice cream shop. Upon entering the gallery, the immediate mood reflected that enticement, largely due to the widespread palette of multicolored forms encompassing the entire gallery space (fig. 5).



Figure 5. *Strange Rarities (detail of lumpies)* – w. stoneware, colored porcelain, underglaze, paint, wood, 2018

Despite the extensive variety of colors, shapes, and surfaces amongst the forms, no individual pieces appeared out of place or overshadowed. I wanted no hierarchy to exist among the forms, and was adamant to maintain a balance of contrasting and complimentary colors and textures during my production process.

Part of the pleasure of arranging this quantity of work was the surprising level of attention each piece demanded of the viewer for a close examination. It was impossible to enter the exhibition and not feel compelled to approach no less than a dozen pieces at eye-level, to analyze what exactly they might be. Viewers were extremely tempted to touch the pieces, and many actually picked them up in an attempt to determine their weight and material. A common question I received from viewers was whether all of the forms in the exhibition were ceramic, unaware that clay and glaze could achieve the highly pigmented colors or range of surface finishes, which so closely resembled desserts.

Although I did not intend for viewers to touch the work, I am pleased it looked tempting enough to entice them to do so. This reaction was an unexpected compliment, as it suggests that I achieved in capturing more than the viewer's attention, but their *senses*. Many elements of my work are heavily borrowed from confections, and by referencing colors and textures of the sweet and savory in my work, I can anticipate the viewer to bring their own associations to the table to pair with mine.

To amplify the feeling of enticement in the exhibition, I chose to use colors and display methods that matched a candy shop's aesthetic. Although I am more restrictive with my use of pastels, I selected 3 pastel shades to act as my backdrop for the gallery. The swatches of paint I chose complimented my work well: 'Mint Hint' for the walls, 'Whipped Peach' for the buffet table, and 'Rare Orchid' for the floating shelves. These shades were vibrant enough to transform the mood and appearance of the gallery, yet

soft enough to not distract viewers from the real centerpiece of the show, the forms themselves.

I choose to work on a small scale, as I consider it to be the scale of wonder. Working with objects on an intimate scale demands closer inspection from viewers and invokes a sense of preciousness about the objects they are analyzing. The objects invite temptation, asking you to touch and test what material and purpose these objects are meant to represent. On a small scale, my pieces can be modest and gestural, allowing me to better navigate the awkward space between artificial and genuine. When amassed together on display, the sheer quantity of dozens of small forms overwhelms your eyes and taste buds with infinite choices to indulge in.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

My fascination with blending color and clay is shared by ceramicist, Ling Chun. She and I place color at the forefront of our work, admiring and relying on its ability to amplify the mood and opulence of a piece. Although our choices in color overlap, the origins for our palettes differ in size. My color palette is inspired by small-scale, confectionary objects, while Chun's stems from the bright, chromatic cosmopolitan atmosphere of neon lights from her upbringing in Hong Kong². In both the kitchen and the city, color is used as a means to draw people in, which is precisely how Chun and I use color for our sculptures.



Figure 6. Ling Chun, *Three Musketeers #3 Something* - ceramics, hair, resin, metal, 2017

² "It Shocked Me to Find out I Wasn't in a Struggle Making Them' Studio Visit with Ling Chun." *ArtMaze Mag*, 25 Sept. 2017, artmazemag.com/ling-chun/.

Using color with intuitive urgency, Chun saturates her abstract forms in multiple layers of color and pattern. As seen in her piece, *Three Musketeers #3 Something*, the resulting surfaces are a fusion of chaos and control (fig. 6). Even with the extensive variety of colors and patterns adorning her surfaces, there is a resounding sense of harmony within the compositions of her work. To maintain a sense of balance in *Strange Rarities*, I utilized the abundance and excess of colors and textures of my pieces. Although the absence of a set color scheme seems counterintuitive, I discovered that the more colors I introduced to my work, the easier it became to balance their composition as a collective. The sheer volume and variety amongst the pieces created patterns and imbalances, which intermingled together to form a balanced bouquet of pieces.

Determining when I have achieved this balance within my work is difficult to articulate, as it is ultimately an intuitive response. I label a sculpture successful or finished when I feel that the color I have chosen is capable of initiating a multi-sensory response from the viewer. While Chun seeks to capture emotive qualities of color, I look to color for the food-related associations it can conjure from a viewer; there is an inherent and involuntary dual balance of desire and distaste, which we each seek to capture in our separate bodies of work.

I have an ornate obsession and greed for color. Color is the salient indicator of how I identify and respond to objects; whether I will scrutinize or savor what is served before me on a plate or a pedestal. At my former job working at an ice cream shop,

children would almost exclusively choose their ice cream based on its color. While this might seem naïve, this simple and instinctive response is what I want from my viewer.

When discussing Form, I draw inspiration from the work and words of Linda Lopez. Lopez's ceramic work investigates seemingly mundane objects found in everyday life and how they inhabit our surroundings. Referencing furniture, houseplants, and domestic implements, Lopez's work borrows from the silhouettes of objects, which are often limited to our peripheral vision. She chooses to abstract these overlooked objects, as a means of offering viewers the opportunity to reinterpret their purpose and value. Drawing reference to Plato's Allegory of the Cave, Lopez strives for her work to, "question the understanding of the objects in the cave and the objects *outside* the cave; which one is real and which one is the shadow?"³ Similarly, I use abstraction to offer viewers the opportunity to reevaluate what feels familiar into something that feels new and unexpected.

Lopez's use of abstraction is more personified, applying it to her work as a means to animate the inanimate. Lopez renders her work in a style, which resembles my own blind-contour method of making. Although the objects we choose to reference differ, we are both using our work as a means of reinterpreting the visual intricacies of objects; the purpose, value, and designation of these objects is ultimately left to our viewers to define.

³ Möller, Sabrina. "Interview with Linda Lopez." Art & Signature, Mindy Soloman Gallery, VOLTA New York, 4 Mar. 2016, www.artandsignature.com/en/blog/2016/03/04/interview-with-linda-lopez/.



Figure 7. Linda Lopez, *Three Hundred Years of Now* – ceramics, mixed media, 2015

Despite their mundane origins, Lopez is able to assign value to the objects she creates in the way she displays them. In her piece, *Three Hundred Years of Now*, Lopez constructs a modest still life scene for her objects (fig. 7). Against the dense fabric backdrop, the display turns into a stage, providing her pieces with an assumed narrative, which we are left to construct.

Eccentricity is central to the sculptural ceramic work of Genesis Belanger. Although I share her vested interest in searching for the strange qualities within seemingly benign or ordinary objects, we are attracted to different facets of what is considered 'strange'. While I am interested in the sensory connotations that my viewer creates from my work, Belanger's work asks viewers to examine their relationship

between themselves and an object; what is their individual role vs. what is an object's role in relation to you?

This focus often leads her work to often be more suggestive than strange. With her highly pigmented stoneware and porcelain surfaces, Belanger's work is uncannily smooth and refined, resembling surrealist emojis. Her choice of objects can be ominously funny, while simultaneously exuding a mood of deadly seriousness. These emotive qualities personify her objects similarly to how Lopez characterizes her work.

My work might be less intimidating than Belanger's, but my intention for viewers to look twice at my work is just as enticing. Belanger and I share a common interest to accentuate the uncanny within the ordinary. Her work exists in the twilight zone between realism and surrealism, ever so slightly altering the appearance of familiar objects in an attempt to dilute our sense of reality.⁴ My work exists in a similar realm, appearing both familiar and strange to the viewer.



Figure 8. Genesis Belanger, *Pieta* – stoneware & porcelain, 2017

⁴ Kron, Cat. "Critic's Picks - New York, Genesis Belanger." ARTFORUM, Artforum International Magazine, New York, NY, 2017, www.artforum.com/picks/genesis-belanger-71345.

In her sculpture, *Pieta*, a bunch of bananas are held in the hands of a vessel-figurine hybrid (fig. 6). We recognize these forms immediately; their color and shape are unmistakable, yet their rendering is off-putting. Belanger's piece is simultaneously flat and statuesque, almost toy-like. There is most certainly a hidden narrative behind *Pieta*, but it is obscured through her soft take on abstraction.

Belanger's work is successful in creating confusion and disquiet for her viewers, yet her pieces still convey an elegant air of intention. The work's composure is both poised and staged, heightening your feeling of unease over what you are witnessing, and possibly what is missing from the clues given to you. Whether the viewer chooses to interpret her work as strange or suggestive, there is no mistaking that Belanger is adamantly invested in depicting the sensuality of a handmade object.

Rather than relying on hidden meanings to create intrigue in my work, my work is infused with both hidden and highlighted elements found in my references from food. I keep my references visible on the scale between slightly obscured and obvious, neighboring the border of surrealism. Although our methods of capturing the audience's attention differ, Belanger and I share the pursuit to play with the duality of the uncanny and the ordinary.

CONCLUSION

I enjoy comparing my work to a scoop of Neapolitan ice cream, though rather than chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry, my work is made up of a trio of color, form, and curiosity. While simultaneously strange and familiar, my body of work navigates through many awkward spaces between the frivolous and forced, the artificial and candid, alien and intimate. It is reminiscent of all of these things, yet refuses to be finitely defined as just one.

As I accumulate additional colors, concepts, and experiences to apply to my artistic practice, I am constantly reinterpreting and chronicling all the small details that come with them. I consider it a fundamental necessity to keep a small, underlying element of curiosity in the core of my work. If I have a finite reason behind every individual aspect of my ideas, then creativity can become calculated, and I will have lost the 'je ne sais quois' quality that makes the small details loom large.

Ultimately, my underlying goal for my work is not to create something that is immediately recognizable, but to make objects that lie in-between the familiar and the strange. This abstract space is constantly evolving and effortlessly subjective, which offers the viewer and me with an endless supply of material to analyze, appreciate, and simply observe. I hope viewers become mesmerized in the process of viewing my work, arriving at their own conclusions as they admire the visual intricacies of objects, which could be called a Strange Rarity.

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