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SHOWCASE (Concerns of the Southern Man: from Gatlinburg to Kaohsiung City)

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SHOWCASE
(Concerns of the Southern Man: from Gatlinburg to Kaohsiung City)

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Arts

by
Samuel Jacob Davis
December 2009

Accepted by:
Mike Vatalaro, Committee Chair
Dave Detrich
Heidi Jensen
Todd McDonald

ABSTRACT

One's daily life consists of collecting objects, images, ideas, fears and dreams. These items and concepts do not conjure themselves, but are selected like so many berries in a basket. I question what objects people choose to showcase in their homes, their trophies and shrines. These types of objects serve to validate their owner's beliefs and through their collection, elevate that person's status. In what items does one subconsciously invest their identity?

My work speaks to the value of the collected once transformed. In my practice I juxtapose ideals held separately and simultaneously about the value and import of ceramic art. I use kitsch and ceramics as a vocabulary and platform that is universal, but through its construction and relationships can simultaneously speak specifically to one person, one region or one understanding. I use campy humor and novelty to undermine the works integrity while attracting the viewer. These works question the merits of my heritage and pedigree. I want the work to give an impression of environmental factors that shape the experience and expectations of a Southern man. Selecting objects of various materials, they are transformed into porcelain, altering their value. Many of these objects have a previous identity. I can claim ownership only of the concept and finished product. In adding gaudy and attention-grabbing stimuli, I foolishly attempt to bestow a higher status on each piece. In this way, the work parallels the condition of a middle-class life.

DEDICATION

To Hilda Brewer.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the completion of this thesis and concurrent body of work, I would like to begin by thanking my large family. Their love and support has always meant so much to me and I feel lucky for the kin I've got. Thanks also to the entire art department faculty and all the graduate students for making this experience truly wonderful and invaluable to me. Everyone has had a hand in my educational and personal development while here at Clemson University and I am grateful for all the opportunities and memories.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|-----------------------------|------|
| TITLE PAGE | i |
| ABSTRACT | ii |
| DEDICATION | iii |
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | iv |
| TABLE OF CONTENTS | v |
| LIST OF FIGURES | vi |
| THESIS BODY | |
| I. CONTEXT | 1 |
| II. FLIGHT OF FANCY | 4 |
| III. EYE CANDY | 7 |
| IV. CULTURE CLUB | 10 |
| V. CONCLUSION | 13 |
| FIGURES | 14 |
| APPENDIX | 27 |
| A: MATERIALS | 27 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 28 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| Figure | | Page |
|--------|---|------|
| 1.1 | <i>Stages Tableware (for men)</i> | 14 |
| 1.2 | Detail, <i>Stages Tableware (for men)</i> | 14 |
| 1.3 | Detail, <i>Stages Tableware (for men)</i> | 15 |
| 1.4 | Detail, <i>Stages Tableware (for men)</i> | 15 |
| 2.1 | <i>Sport</i> | 16 |
| 3.1 | <i>Catch</i> | 17 |
| 3.2 | Detail, <i>Catch</i> | 17 |
| 4.1 | <i>Love Nest</i> | 18 |
| 5.1 | <i>Tokyo Gold</i> | 19 |
| 6.1 | <i>Still (Monument to Southern Tourism)</i> | 20 |
| 6.2 | Detail, <i>Still (Monument to Southern Tourism)</i> | 21 |
| 7.1 | <i>Iup</i> | 22 |
| 8.1 | <i>Blue Brave</i> | 23 |
| 9.1 | <i>Young Gun</i> | 24 |
| 9.2 | Side View, <i>Young Gun</i> | 25 |
| 10.1 | <i>Bird in Space (Poor Fit)</i> | 26 |

I.

CONTEXT

In my practice, I take advantage of the relatively low artistic and economic value of both the camp and kitsch by juxtaposing them with the earnestness and attention of a fine art realization. Anthropologically, kitsch provides cultural records that are both expansive and rich. My aim is to create a visual and sculptural record of experience and wishes particular to certain periods of time or sets of circumstances. The work uses a visual vocabulary that allows autobiographical references but is accessible by its popular nature. By arranging the works as shrines, trophies, totem and curios, collected as symbols often portraying ideals of opulence and ego, I hope to bring with them some of the inherent aura or sentiment associated with these types of objects. I want to create an identity through appropriation, mirroring many aspects of human experience. I capitalize on the ability of these objects to emit and hold an aura only retained by the immediate iconic qualities of kitsch. This aura or power can be connected to remembrances, character, dreams, myth or melancholy, but is not necessarily bound by these qualities.

The piece titled *Stages Tableware (for men)* (Fig. 1.1-1.4) acts as a map legend or key for navigating my exhibition. The spoons on the wall are the collection of my late grandmother who had a large hand in raising me and with whom I was very close. As a fervent collector of many things, her identity could be defined through her collections. These spoons act as a record of all the places she visited. The collection expands to include all the places her children and grandchildren have gone. These spoons then are my birthright and the collection acts as a family tree or physical record of sorts.

The plates I have displayed below this information serve as a model of expectations to the ideal life of a Southern man. The central figures in the plate are archetypes for each life stage. Opie Taylor is the boyhood archetype. He sometimes gets into trouble but he can always be set straight by his loving Paw. Soaking up life's lessons, Opie represents the best of boyhood, inquisitive but reverent. Elvis acts as the second archetype, the coming of age. Trendsetting and confident, Elvis personifies, at least during this particular junction in his life, sexuality, danger and transition. Dale Earnhardt represents the third stage of manhood. A famous father, Earnhardt exemplifies courage and toughness, a true man's man. Finally Jesus Christ himself, representing in this case death or obsolescence, acts as the punctuation for this life and presents the ideal that should have been emulated all along.

Surrounding these central images and carried over onto the cup and saucer, are three masculine motifs that reinforce this life cycle: game birds, proteins and black shoes. The motif of the black shoe tells the tale in a linear way. Moving from one stage to another requires a change in footwear. The birds capture the essence of these central archetypes by suggesting their true nature. The proteins emphasize the kind of manliness this life requires while also suggesting a supportive menu should you choose to experience this cycle through your taste buds.

Taken as a whole, this piece acts as a fixed point, giving the viewer the correct prescription eyeglasses through which to view the other works. How different might the rest of this work have looked had I been born into a big city life with different values or a west coast culture with different heroes? The tableware set is not as unique or outlandish

in its form and being as my other series of works intentionally. The plausibility of this work actually existing in the real world and being sold out of tourist traps in Gatlinburg or a similar town speaks to the pervasiveness and popularity of this model of life in the South.

II.

FLIGHT OF FANCY

Kitsch culture and ideals originated with the Victorian collection of ferns and domestic aquariums. Mechanical reproduction and advancements in travel soon made the collecting of non-living objects and images a lasting impulse. Natural curiosities and phenomena such as ostrich eggs and relics of the ocean were often popular motifs. Later, the French appealed to the baroque sensibilities of the wealthy collector by sculpting small figurines ripe for collecting. Anthropologically, Rococo figurine collections provide a tremendous amount of insight into the fashions, interests, ideals, lifestyles, values and priorities of the bourgeoisie. Due to its' economic and cultural value, porcelain is the perfect material with which to carry out these contained narratives. Contemporary artists will appropriate this format and imagery often, maximizing and exploiting its populous nature. Competition for social status will demand the garishly ornate eggs of Carl Faberge, often porcelain encrusted with jewels and precious materials, items that so exquisitely exude and preserve attitudes of opulence and ego.

So pervasive and sought after were these forms, they were examined, watered-down to their formal essence, and reproduced for lower and lower societal classes to share in these wish or dream images¹, losing themselves to the implication the object makes to one's fears and desires. The commodification and reproduction of these formats and images becomes and begets kitsch.

¹ Olalquiaga. *The Artificial Kingdom*. 1998. Kitsch as wish or dream image.

I think it is now important to define camp, with it's sensibility valuing irony, excess and bad taste. To paraphrase Susan Sontag's essay "Notes on Camp," camp is a love of artifice and exaggeration, an esoteric badge of identity, where one sees everything in quotation marks and can be frivolous about the serious and vice versa. In her essay, Sontag claims that you can't do camp on purpose. I take issue with this point. I feel that one can intentionally appeal to a campy sensibility so long as the conceptual considerations, however minor, are genuinely heartfelt by the author, even if the stance taken is one of mockery. This sense of humor especially when directed inward, allows not only the author but also the viewer some emotional distance to better investigate the content.

Upending any initial expectations regarding an instructive role for visual art, this camp style gives an initial jolt of pleasure usually resulting first with a smile and then followed quickly by a warm fuzzy, an approach I will refer to as the giggle factor. The giggle factor disarms the viewer with its charms. The level of craft and intricate construction keeps the eye. Once the giggle factor subsides the intent of the work is revealed. If the content does not appeal or appear to that viewer, the work doesn't really care. Its frivolous nature allows the work to easily subvert itself to something that doesn't even take itself seriously. Most of this work has the capacity to operate in this way. In fact, a lot of this work acts like a child, so desperate for attention that once it has it, it doesn't really know what to do with it. Another example might be the teenager who wants so badly to be cool that he isn't. I think this is reflective of our current middle-class

culture. With many paths available and the support to become whatever you want, it is often hard to realize that sometimes you can't.

With this in mind I would like to move to the piece titled *Sport* (Fig. 2.1). This work takes four heroic and romanticized manly Southern roles: the athlete, the hunter, the fisherman and the entertainer, and presents them in a context and palette that is less than manly. While these colors and finishes might be considered to be more feminine, it wasn't long ago that you see this palette on stage at the Grand Ole Opry worn by the likes of Porter Wagoner, Conway Twitty and of course Elvis, all titans of manliness. Stardom or Southern ideals of nobility allow this palette a specific manliness that does not speak to androgyny the way it may in the current sense. The qualities of this finish is not for the everyman, but reserved for the grandest of us all, our heroes. This peacock mentality and bravura expressions are not easily accepted unless you are already deemed special.

III.

EYE CANDY

In thinking about where I am from and the typical responses elicited by art in southern culture, I feel taking liberties with mixed media elements like twinkling lights, rhinestones and rustling feathers presents a moment to capture the attention of your audience in a way that is familiar. These components are understood and approached from another part of our psychology and appeal to different senses than the ceramic finish alone. I feel that these elements have the ability, when executed with a certain amount of grace, to comfort the viewer's potential feelings of apprehension and skew their approach to the work.

The processes of slip-casting and mold-making enables me to appropriate in a way that is direct, but also ultimately changes the object, once cast, into a material whose intrinsic and economic value often surpasses that of the original. Trinkets once composed of cheap plastics are now made of delicate porcelain, with smooth, glossy glazed surfaces that imply, culturally, a greater value. The separation from the ground or surface and creation of an independent base for most pieces also asks for more respect and clout. My manner of construction and compositional decisions also enhance the objectification of the work.

The levels of finish and the objects' complexity often imply a compulsiveness that is a major root of the very nature of the collectable culture. The pieces are steeped in an attitude and approach that is desperate in its earnestness and desire. The format and

reference to the trophy, shrine and precious memento serve as a plea for more power and special attention. The fragility of the work implies a preciousness that comes from a place of ambition and references “valuable” objects sought after throughout history. What one chooses to showcase or parade clearly offers great insight into one’s values, priorities, dreams or insecurities.

In thinking about what people of this region are attracted to, I look to the wall piece *Catch* (Fig. 3.1). It serves as a declaration of a person’s suitability. A man catches a fish and pays a considerable amount of money to mount it as a trophy. He hopes it will prove to himself and visitors to his den or family room that he possesses a great wealth of grit and skill. “Did you see the size of that thing”, people will say to each other on the ride home. The owner of the caught bass will feel responsible for its length and beauty. He takes it into his identity and showcases it as the best of himself. *Catch* points to the absurdity and desperation of this notion. Its sad string lights advertise the promise of potential and fitness. Its bright color and gold luster appeal to the history of objects of a greater value. *Catch* feels like a first date, so eager and insecure.

If *Catch* feels like a first date, then *Love Nest* (Fig. 4.1) feels like heartbreak. For this work I chose a Baroque style, a theatrical and over-the-top appeal that best suits the amount of melancholy and self-pity this work references. The baby acts as a stand-in for the author, peering accusingly over the edge of his safe nest. He has built this nest on top of technology, hoping it will provide a machine’s dull warmth. From his high vantage point, he believes he is prepared for a lengthy siege and waits, ready for what comes next. Arranged in a kind of totem structure, this piece speaks to the gravity of one’s own

heartbreak and how unique it feels. Of course it is not unique but universal. And even being consciously aware of this fact, one cannot help but let this heartbreak take them over completely.

Congruously, this work deals with being raised in an environment where you never really have to worry about the basic survival requirements of food and shelter. Your attention then turns to the third level of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the one that deals with love and acceptance². The fulfillment of this need becomes the first priority for most and one you cannot fulfill alone. One never gains the simple satisfaction of attending to a primary need in a way that is direct. In a time when the comfortable middle class continues to expand, more pressure and emphasis is placed on the love and acceptance level as being the most essential priority and this piece speaks to the treachery of this condition.

² Maslow. "A Theory of Human Motivation." 1943. The basic needs.

IV.

CULTURE CLUB

Here I would like to acknowledge the genesis of this body of work. A year ago, I had the incredible opportunity to take part in a residency in Taiwan. Afterwards, I traveled to Japan as a tourist and the whole trip had a profound impact on me. At that point in time, the work I was making was a kind of faux-Asian vessel. They spoke to a sensibility of Zen aesthetic, traditions that I was long attracted to from afar. The act of manufacturing of these pots took on a pleasantly spiritual quality for me but lacked a certain truth. A few weeks into the residency, I began to question the merits of making this type of work. Anyone could make these pots as good or better than me. I wondered, “What do I bring to the table?” My life in no way mirrored the vessels I had been making and so in my travels I would give myself exercises such as looking at a Taoist shrine and considering how I would construct it for myself if I were being completely honest.

But before I made these shrines for myself, I made the piece titled, *Tokyo Gold* (Fig. 5.1). My aim was to create the perfect souvenir for my personal experience. Although in my travels I accumulated many mementos, none could speak completely to my impression of a place. And so this work is a response to the place and time, as it will exist in my memory. Selective memory fascinates me and so in many of my works revisionist history is a theme. This process happens naturally in most of our memories anyways, usually going unnoticed and uncontrolled. I find that actively participating in this process is more effective and enjoyable for me.

In any place deemed special or memorable in the mind of the collector, an urge appears to mark the experience with the purchasing and cherishing of an object, trapping the gravity or import of something. Much like my grandmother's spoons, the object acts as proof of a past experience to those interested and to the owner. One often needs something tangible to recall the appropriate levels of nostalgia, regret or remorse. When time passes and memory fades, the objects will hold on to the history they've witnessed and serve as cues for the attached associations and feelings. The problem is that normally the souvenir fails to fully satisfy the desire to return to these associations due to its inherent generic qualities. In creating a kind of reverse keepsake after a trip, this piece will be able to more accurately display for the audience the impression left of that time and place while becoming a manifestation of the experience itself as documented by its author.

While in Asia, I was impressed with the ease and grace with which multiple media combined to create a simple and majestic vessel. Wooden base, ceramic body and metal ornamentation worked as symbiotically as could be, no one part acting out. I thought about how this approach might look in my culture. The southern American way is not one of tempered thoughtfulness and balance, but values aggressive effort and competitiveness always. I wanted to achieve that Asian balance I admired in *Tokyo Gold*, its base as integrated and harmonic as it could be, while in other works the wooden attachments speak a bit more to how my culture combines media. As a lover of cultural anthropology, I express interest in the tradition and history of particular times and regions. Consequently much of my work bears a sense of duality concerning the old and

the new, as well as how one might express reverence or investment toward both. Asia is perhaps the richest continent in terms of blend of their appreciation for their tradition and a burgeoning commitment to innovation. The Geisha and her young Maiko apprentice furiously text-messaging in a Kyoto park paint a harmonic picture.

In the humid Taiwanese summer I would zip about on Fong-Yi's Moped and she would show me selected objects or places that she felt could shed some light on who she was and what impact her setting or its history had on her development. When the spoken language is an obstacle, this method is perhaps a more effective means of communicating. People do this naturally I suppose, especially in times of cultural exchange. I thought about what I might show her back in the States and all I could think about was Dollywood and touristy Gatlinburg. If *Tokyo Gold* is Asia as it was presented to me, then the piece titled *Still (Monument to Southern Tourism)* (Fig 6.1) is Tennessee as I might present it to her. It makes the moonshine-drinking hillbilly prejudices seem fun and novel. *Still* showcases the best and worst of the Appalachian region. It romanticizes the crooked history of the area while also reinforcing the stereotypes attributed to the region. It is constructed as a three dimensional logo of a fictional Tennessee theme park with its copper tube roller coasters, farmland spires, and lush landscape. By embracing the kind of dumb Southern stereotypes, I nullify their power over me.

V.

CONCLUSION

When considering where this body of work fits in the history of ceramic art, I feel it aligns itself historically with the Superobject or Supermannerist style. Characteristics of this movement at work in my practice are high levels of detail, material precision, embracing of commercial and industrial techniques, and imagery that questions authorship. I follow in the footsteps of artists like Howard Kottler and Mark Burns in terms of scale and feel. Much of the work also functions within the contemporary movement of the Neo-Figurine, “with intentional faux pas and visual counterpoints that herald a move away from minimalist subtlety and high art towards retro knick-knacks, blatant romanticism, and nostalgic overtures.”³ I consider Barnaby Bradford and Wesley Harvey to be my contemporaries in this ceramic context.

For the viewer, I pose questions about the value and import of the objects with which they surround themselves. I want the viewer to question their assumptions about the objects of others. I want the tenor of the work to provide a primary sense of warmth to the audience. I also hope this work raises questions concerning the creation of identity and ego, while challenging feelings held toward the value of sentiment and memory and its' place in a quickly changing world.

³ Klaten. *Fragiles*. 2008. Neo-Figurine.

FIGURES

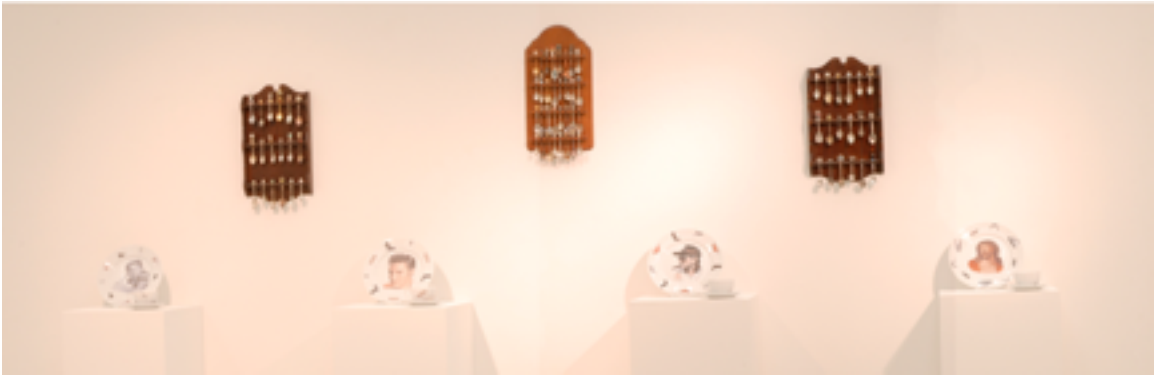


Figure 1.1

Stages Tableware (for men)

China, Custom Ceramic Decals and Grandmother's Spoon Collection

3" h x 11" w x 11" d

2009

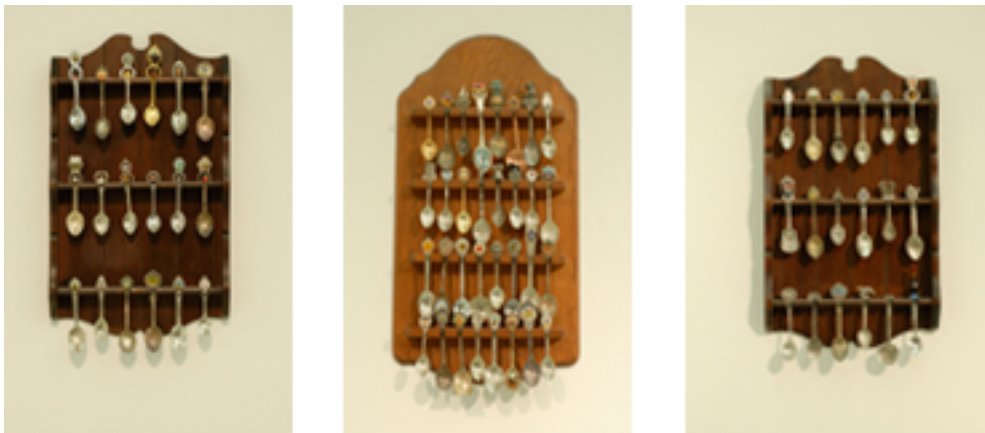


Figure 1.2

Stages Tableware (for men)

Detail of Grandmother's Spoons



Figure 1.3
Stages Tableware (for men)
Detail of China



Figure 1.4
Stages Tableware (for men)
Detail of Cups and Saucers



Figure 2.1

Sport

Porcelain, Rabbit Pelt, Rhinestones and Glass Eyes

20" h x 14" w x 9" d

2009



Figure 3.1

Catch

Porcelain, gold luster, stained oak and green LEDs

8" h x 16" d x 4.5" d

2009



Figure 3.2

Catch

Detail



Figure 4.1

Love Nest

Porcelain, Fur Muff, Dyed Swan Feathers and Plastic

26" h x 10" w x 7" d

2008



Figure 5.1

Tokyo Gold

Porcelain, Feathers and Custom Hickory Base

16.5" h x 9.5" w x 6.5 d

2008



Figure 6.1

Still (Monument to Southern Tourism)

Porcelain, Hickory, Copper Tubing, Fake Moss, Garden Hose and Cork

38" h x 9" w x 16" d

2009



Figure 6.2

Still (Monument to Southern Tourism)

Side View



Figure 7.1

Iup

Porcelain

9.5 h x 6.5 w x 5" d

2008



Figure 8.1

Blue Brave

Porcelain, Leather, Feathers, Plastic, Wire and Wood

14" h x 8" d x 6" d

2008



Figure 9.1

Young Gun

Porcelain, Chasing Red and Green LEDs, Tan Flocking and Black Gum Wood Base

11.25" h x 11" w x 4.5" d

2009



Figure 9.2
Young Gun
Side Views



Figure 10.1

Bird in Space (Poor Fit)

Porcelain, Red Rubber and Metal Bells

10.5" h x 4" w x 2" d

2009

MATERIALS

Casting Porcelain

Cone 10 Body

| | |
|--------------------|----------|
| #6 Tile | 50 |
| EPK | 10 |
| Tennessee Ball | 10 |
| F4 Feldspar | 15 |
| Flint | 20 |
| <u>Pyropholite</u> | <u>5</u> |

100%

Pre-mix dry ingredients well. Mix 6 gallons of water with 250 ml. Sodium Silicate.

Add pre-mixed dry to water while bludgeoning.

Add 1 cup water while bludgeoning at the end.

I make multiple-part plaster molds for slip casting. At the leather-hard stage, I assemble and attach the pieces, before drying. The work is bisque fired to cone 05. I glaze fire each piece, usually multiple times, at a variety of temperatures. (cone 10, 6, 04 and 017) I use primarily commercially made glazes, particularly in cases when I fire in oxidation cone 04. I generally use Spectrum and Amaco underglazes for color with an Amaco SuperClear or Transparent glaze clearcoat. I also use several other glazes from both companies. Then luster and decal work is fired to cone 017.

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