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PERMUTATION

By

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Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Arts
Fine Arts, Ceramics

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Abstract:

Chairperson: Trey Hill

Permutation, is an exploitation of utilitarian pottery and domesticity within the gallery setting through the use of handmade tables and cabinetry. The gallery is transformed into a more comfortable environment and exhibits a casual essence. This paper explores the thoughts, interpretations, influences, reflections, and definitions of his most recent work created for his Masters of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition. Caldwell presents his work as an ongoing continuum of conceptual research and physical exploration of form and surface.

Acknowledgements

My time at the University of Montana has been a once in a lifetime experience. I am incredibly grateful for the last three years, and to have been surrounded by so many talented artists that grew from acquaintances to colleagues and then to friends.

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I would also like to thank all the University of Montana School of Art faculty and staff. You all have always been willing to meet and critique my work, even when I was not enrolled in hours with you. I want to thank our two great technicians, Jason Clark and Micheal McCollough, for keeping our studios up and running so I could get the work done for my thesis. I want to thank Kevin Bell and Ed Morrissey for the leadership and devotion to our students. They were always there to fix what went wrong and find the quickest solution to the problem and always put the student first beyond all else.

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Above all else I would like to thank my family for always being supporters of my work and my dreams. I would like to thank my mother for always being a caring person that was always looking for a way to help me through life. Especially my amazing wife Megan, you are the foundation that this was all built on. You have always pushed me to keep going when I wanted to stop and convinced me to march on though the storms. I couldn't have done this without you by my side, I love you.

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Background: *Reflection of Importance*

Throughout my life, utilitarian objects have held an essential personal meaning for me, and through this, I have developed a highly romanticized relationship to objects of purpose. During my early childhood, my mother was in the military. As my mother's career continued, she was transferred around the United States and Mexico. Due to this, we moved around a lot, and growing up, I was considered an army brat. As time went on, so did new places and new things. During these transitions my mother was not at any time really bound to anything. Places and objects were always temporary even when they weren't supposed to be.

The only things that genuinely lasted were the few objects of practical use, such as my grandmother's handmade ceramic mug that I saw her drink out of every day. Seeing this object always around and its involvement in a repeating mundane daily ritual such as morning coffee gave it a heightened importance to my young mind. Objects, such as these stayed with us as we moved from place to place served a purpose, not only in their functionality but also the emotional sentiment these objects held. Just like my grandmother's coffee cup which I still have and cherish to this day stayed with me. So did the remembrance of everyday objects that held significance and were inherently more important than others, not by their value or uniqueness but by their secure emotional connections. In the book "*The Poetics of Space*," Gaston Bachelard speaks to the importance of objects and place. Bachelard states,

We should, therefore, have to say how we inhabit our vital space, in accord with all the dialectics of life, how we take root, day after day, in a 'corner of the world.'¹

¹ Gaston Bachelard and Etienne Gilson, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973))

The above quote by Gaston Bachelard is reinforced by Polly Ullrich's paper, *Workmanship: The Hand and body as Perceptual tools*, from the book *Objects and Meaning*, where she states:

In functional craft art, the most earth-bound, useful objects humanize, but never deny, postmodern instability - the user always maintains a central point of bodily reference within the fluidity of time and action. As they are used, therefore, functional craft objects are bound up with or immersed in an event-, body, art, and process are intertwined in the most literal way, and the "meaning" of such objects is only completed by use over time.²

"Everyday"

As we live our lives among the ordinary, the commonplace, and the "every-day," we are in constant contact with imagery, and objects of use and function, be that a ceramic mug that holds your morning coffee, or the white painted lines in the street indicating a crosswalk. My appreciation of the ordinary, the regular, and the commonplace is rooted in my personal history and in my appreciation of design that influences us daily. I researched Everyday Aesthetics, which is a relatively new field of study in philosophy. Yuriko Saito, a professor of philosophy at the Rhode Island School of Design, is one of the pioneers of Everyday Aesthetics, and in her 2007 book, she poses an interesting question about the power of everyday objects.

If 'everyday' is characterized as the familiar, ordinary, commonplace, and routine, regardless of the specific content that varies from people to people depending upon their lifestyle, occupation, living environment, and other factors, what makes its aesthetic appreciation possible? ...the aesthetic appreciation of everyday life requires defamiliarization, making strange, or casting an aura.³

Through Yuriko Saito's writings and the writing of Thomas Leddy, Everyday aesthetics is interpreted to illuminate the aspects of our lives that people frequently neglect or ignore, as we

²M. Anna Fariello and Paula Owen, *Objects and Meaning New Perspectives on Art and Craft* (Lanham (Md.): Scarecrow Press, 2005))

³Saitō Yuriko, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford : Oxford Univ. Press, 2013))

celebrate them through an aesthetic lens of philosophy and art. In Thomas Leddy's opinion, if art is defined as something designed for aesthetic experience, this would allow room for the lesser arts, i.e. craft, to be included within the realm of fine art. In turn, it allows the refining of the remaining field of everyday aesthetics to things that look or sound aesthetically exciting but are not necessarily designed to be so, such as the casted shadows on a staircase in mid-morning or the patterning of painted street lines.

Many aspects of domestic life and its connection with utilitarian objects offer comfort and stability mainly because of its very ordinary and repetitive nature, and these such qualities are indispensable for a good life.

Exhibition: *Permutation*

Permutation is an exploration of form and arrangement through the use of utilitarian pottery. The term permutation comes from mathematics suggesting, a way especially one of several possible variations, in which a set or number of things can be ordered or arranged. I have used this as a lens of which to view all my aesthetic and conceptual decisions. The self-titled piece in the center of the gallery incorporates eighty-four individual plates, created using an intuitive action of making resulting in each plate being unique but while having similarities to others in the group.

Through the use of kitchen like tables, counters, and shelves, I strive to bring the essence of a domestic space into the gallery. The pots are arranged within this space in a still-life fashion, which evokes a sense of change and fluidity. This arrangement helps show pottery's ability to convey a humble generosity, allowing for broader emotional connections with ourselves and others through use.

By examining the culmination of work from my three years at the University of Montana, it is my goal to separate the exhibition into three distinct aspects, Domestic comfort within the Gallery, and I will examine the concepts and theory behind my performance video and its correlation to the long table of plates in the center of the gallery. Finally, active and passive utility as new terminology within utilitarian ceramics.

Part I: *Domestic Comfort within The Gallery*

As a ceramic artist that works mainly in utilitarian forms such as plates, bowls, cups, and so on. I am by and large concerned with the location my work ends up and the space it occupies after its creation. The ideal setting for one of my pieces would be the home or another social environment. A domestic domain where the work lives and breathes, fulfilling its functionality by helping to facilitate the activities and rituals of daily life.

In the book, *Home a Short History of an Idea*, Witold Rybczynski creates a historical account of the evolution of the concept of home and the development of what we consider as a modern domestic space. When Witold speaks about the home, he states that,

...the domestic interior has always demonstrated a feeling of intimacy and hominess.”⁴

When thinking of this quote, I am captivated by the idea of hominess, which means, of a place or surroundings having a feeling of pleasantly, comfortable. How does this fit into utilitarian ceramics, and would it be possible for this concept to exist within the milieu of the fine arts gallery? This is a question I strived to explore and hopefully answer in my thesis show.

⁴Witold Rybczynski, *Home: a Short History of an Idea* (New York, NY: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1987))



Figure 1: Ryan Caldwell, *Permutation (instillation view)*, ceramics and wood, 112" x 60" x 16", 2020

To bring the feeling of a casual environment into the gallery, I created natural wood cabinets, shelves, and counters for my work to be placed upon and within. (fig. 1) The woodwork placement along with the painted walls were done with formal design in mind. Done in such a way to reference the domesticity of the home and of the characteristics inherent to pottery while also giving a show room style design appeal. The arrangement of the work within these spaces were made in a relatively random fashion. The pots were laid out and rearranged multiple times until the composition of the work created a visually exciting motif while also giving natural space between works. I also actively moved pots away from groupings of similar forms in the goal of creating implied moments of use within the overall display.

By doing this, I was able to create a feeling of casual comfort in what would have usually been a rigidly structured display. Just as one may open a cabinet and retrieve a plate or cup, use such an object, and then place it on a counter to then become forgotten. I was able to remove

similar pieces and place them alone, separated from the core groupings, giving it a sense of action and memory that can only be expressed as a nostalgia of everyday life. This creates a feeling alluding to the idea of hominess while showing a visual reverence to the domestic.



Figure 2: Liam Gillick, *Kitchen*, in the main room of the German Pavillion at the Venice Art Biennale, 2009

This is a direct inspiration from Liam Gillick's work '*Kitchen*' that he installed in the main room of the German Pavillion at the Venice Art Biennale, 2009.(fig. 2) Inside, Gillick built a kitchen-like structure in clear pine wood formally reminiscent of Donald Judd's wood sculptures. In this example, I am inspired by his ability to put a domestic environment into a building rooted in the fascist background of the Pavilion's architecture.

Part II: *Performance of Permutation*

When designing this show, I wanted to have a central focal point in the gallery that would create substantial impact on the viewer as they entered the space. The view of the table from the doorway is blocked by faux walls placed as part of the theater area so attendees guided by them and are then confronted by the large table in the center of the gallery. Keeping the concept of domesticity and permutation in mind, this 18.5 foot long table is built from black steel frames and treated butcher-block countertops. (fig. 3)



Figure 3: Ryan Caldwell, *Permutation (instillation view)*, ceramics, steel, and wood, 2020

Displayed on this table are eighty-four small lunch plates placed in a four by twenty-one grid; each of them having a unique combination of cut shapes forming the rims. The arrangement of these plate is a direct result of the actions taken during a twenty-minute performance. To demonstrate the concept of permutation outside the time when the actions took place, I chose to take the activity of placing and arranging the plates and create a performance video. The record-

ing of this performance acts as an artifact of this arrangement and plays on a television mounted to the adjacent wall. This video is of me going through a structure of systematic motions. During these motions I kept the desired outcome in mind but did not let that impede my choices of placement. The placement of the plates were done by making decision as I went, creating a cause and effect process that naturally flowed through me during the performance. I started by moving stacks of between ten to twelve plates onto the table in random locations. After I placed all the starting stacks, I began a ritualistic counter-clockwise walk around the table. I began to pick up



Figure 4: Ryan Caldwell, “*Permutation Performance*” (Video Stills), ceramics, steel, and wood, 2020

smaller groupings from the more towering starting stacks and placed them in other locations chosen by an action and reaction process of decision making. (fig. 4) This arrangement process continued in this fashion until all the plates were arranged in a grid.

During this performance I am wearing all white to stand out against the dark floor of gallery. My movement is steady and slowed and always with a fixed expression of concentration.

This is to allow the action that I am participating in to become the focus of the video. Through my research of performance art, I began to read about Bruce Nauman's performance work. Especially his piece, *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* from 1967. (fig.5)

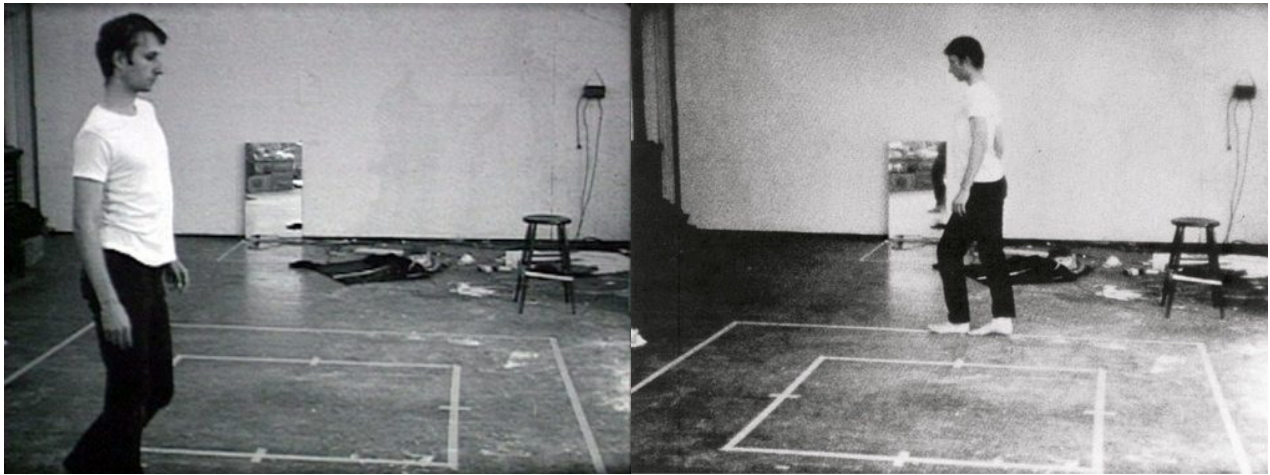


Figure 5: Bruce Nauman, *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*, (film stills), 16mm film with sound, 1967–8

In this work, Nauman speaks to the concept of exercise as a more functional motion as it contains the implication of framing toward and outcome. I see this outcome in my performance as the extended end result of a fully new and unique arrangement of the plates on the table that only could occur though the preceded actions. As with Nauman's walking films, with each permutation of the exercise being completed, the film ends concluding his intended creation. The philosopher Michel Foucault speaks of exercise in a way that I believe bridges the concepts of Nauman's work into the conceptual work of my own video.

Exercise is the technique by which one imposes on the body tasks that are both repetitive and different, but always graduated. By bending behavior towards a terminal state, exercise makes possible a perpetual characterization of the individual...It thus assures, in the form of continuity and constraint, a growth, an observation, a qualification.⁵

⁵ "A Quote from Discipline and Punish," Goodreads (Goodreads), accessed April 1, 2020, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/779737-exercise-is-the-technique-by-which-one-imposes-on-the>

Part III: *Active vs. Passive Utility*

Throughout the last three years, my studio practice has consisted of making utilitarian ceramics at the University of Montana. I have also done a sizable amount of research into craft and the new renaissance of the hand-made happening now, almost one hundred years since the first arts and crafts movement. During this research, I have devised a new way of classifying utilitarian ceramics. In this section, I will explain two new terms and my reasoning behind them. In this classification, I will be only relating these terms to utilitarian works and not sculptural or performance-based work, even though these new terms could apply to them as well.

Active Utility

Just as the term "*active*" is defined as engaging or ready to engage in physically energetic pursuits or as of a thing working, so is the bases of the idea of Active Utility. Active Utility applies to utilitarian works that fundamental intended functions are that of fulfilling an action that can only be achieved through physical interaction. This action is the root of the classification; in example, for one of the most simplistic forms in pottery, the "cup" can serve many functions such as holding a toothbrush, serving as a candy dish, or even a piggy bank. These are not the forms intended purpose, or we would call the "cup," a toothbrush holder, a candy dish, or a piggy bank. A cup's intended purpose is to hold something and be a delivery device to our mouths, yes you could say that this is possible with the candy example, but the classification still stands in the action of use. The cups intended function or "base function," as I will refer to it from here on, is that of a specific intended action.

The action being delivering the cups contest to our lips for nourishment. Thus meaning to be able to classify a pot or any other utilitarian form, not necessarily made from ceramics, as

having “active utility,” the object must have an intended base function that can only be fulfilled through a physical activation of use. Such as filling a cup with a substance and bringing the cup to the lip to be consumed. Active Utility also has the inherent quality of mobility. Mobility being the capacity to fulfill its base function while being in motion such as holding a cup and drinking from it at the same time as walking around the house or sitting in a moving car. In so far as the physical touch of the object is one of great significance. In his book, *Ceramics*, Philip Rawson writes of touch:

A primitive sculpture or a good pot may well have even-more structures to offer to the attentive hand than to the sense of sight. This is especially easy to understand in relation to pottery. For a potter produces his forms by placing his hands and fingers in particular positions to make the clay shapes. And when we are able to find these positions with our own fingers a pot can spring to life in an extraordinary fashion.⁶

Passive Utility

Unlike "active" utility, passive utility does not require fulfillment of function through touch. Passive in regards to an activity is defined as; a passive activity involves watching, looking at, or listening to things rather than doing things. My concept of "passive utility" is that of utilitarian objects that fulfill its intended base function without the use of touch or, at times, any physical interaction. That being said, some passive utility objects do, at some point, require some sort of physical interaction. This action is usually only to facilitate its function and not fulfill it. For example, a flower vases intended function is to hold flowers, sustain them with water that's held within them, and pleasingly display them. The intended base function can be fulfilled by being passive and just observing the arranged displayed within. But to obtain this result, one must first physically interact with the piece to place the flowers and water within. This action is done in preparation for the desired result and not the primary function of the flower vase, which

⁶ Philip S. Rawson, *Ceramics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984))

is to hold flowers and create visual interest and be aesthetically pleasing to the eye. Unlike pottery that has active utility, these passive utility forms lack the aspect of mobility that is intrinsic to the active utility. Passive forms are stationary, and so are they're functions. A flower vase filled with water and roses isn't very practical being carried around or in a moving car. To adequately fulfill its base function it must be sedentary and untouched.

Though this analytical analysis of utilitarian ceramics from the perspective of active versus passive utility, I have come to look at my work differently. As a utilitarian potter, my mission is to have my work live in the home and fulfill an intended function. So while I am in the studio, I refer back to these classifications to help guide my decisions within the studio.

Process: *Studio Practice and Ways of Making*

Over the years, my studio practice has gone through many iterations. I have experimented with different firing ranges and techniques. In my first year, I started out working in low fire red earthenware clay that I hand-built using the coil method. This work was very rough and kept the pinch marks visible, creating an undulating surface. Then I began to use more white stoneware bodies due to switching to high fire atmospheric kilns. This work was my first exploration into atmospheric firing techniques, due to this my results from my experimentation were generic and simplified. Through a semester of intense production and research my skills and understanding of the method grew. Seeing an opportunity to change and grow my work in a new way I started to reduce the temperature of my work from cone 10 to cone 5-6 and then to my current firing range of cone 1-2. This reduction allowed my work to become more colorful and allowed me to start to explore more techniques of surface design. Currently, my work consists of altered thrown forms that are refined using a rasp and metal ribs. These forms are then covered in terra sigillata that is



Figure 6: Ryan Caldwell, *Permutation (instillation view)*, ceramics and wood, 2020

colored using Amaco underglazes. To finish the surface of the work, I apply tape and latex resist and fill in the areas with underglaze. (fig.6) This enables me to keep a loose gestural design while also allowing the line work to be clean and crisp.

By utilizing wheel-thrown forms, I am able to create a conversation between pattern and purpose. My studio practice always contains a balance between loose spontaneous flow of an action and reaction way of making, and an over arching sense control. This control can be seen as a restraint or a limitation on certain variables that allow me to have a beginning and an end in mind, thus framing my artistic practice. This is done by beginning with a set of geometric parameters such as shape, line, and repetition, and then progressing into more intuitive actions and reactions with each pot. As I alter and refine each form, I am able to reflect upon the referenced

composition and transform it through my own intuition of pattern and design. The layering of these elements creates a conversation between the domestic and the industrial landscape.

Conclusion

In these past three years at the University of Montana, I have pushed myself not only in my studio practice and physical skill, but also in my conceptual research and appreciation of my medium. In conclusion, I have learned as a potter; my goals live beyond academia and stretches to the realm of the humble craftsman and the community around me. By being able to focus and this new mindset, I hope to push my work further and to continue my research and development into the modern craft movement. I also hope to join in partnerships with other local artisans such as professional chefs and woodworkers to foster a collaborative atmosphere of creativity and togetherness with the hopeful result of elevating craft in all its facets and not just in ceramics.

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