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Existentialism and Creative Practice

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors
Studies in Studio Art

By

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Studio Art

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Abstract

The creative process mimics the existentialist philosophy of human freedom and the responsibility to create one's own meaning in life through an emphasis on invention, experimentation, and ceaseless becoming. Through my body of work, I examine the meaning-giving capacities of the viewer and creator as agents involved in a work of art. The sculptures, as well as found objects, have the power to illuminate the human circumstances they emerged from, while the process of making is also the process of learning, where objects can be used to understand ourselves and the world. Philosophical concepts can be accessed through art in the interest of advancing cross-disciplinary study.

Method

I create vessels from clay, with several cylindrical pieces on the inside connecting opposite ends of the interior. Once this is dry, I wrap it in burlap, then paint on several layers of plaster to reinforce the clay mold. After mixing cement, I pour it into the opening of the vessel and wait for it to dry. Then, I crack the plaster mold and remove the burlap and clay from the dried cement form. The cylindrical clay pieces form tunnels throughout the rock once I excavate the remaining clay. To embed found objects that I have collected for the past year, I apply fresh cement to the surface of the sculpture. Several of the pieces have words carved into them with a dremel. For the installation, many of the pedestals are found objects, while some were constructed from scrap metal. The cement surfaces have treatments such as fabric stiffener and resin.

Conceptual Basis / Discussion

“...For nothing is more unbearable, once one has it, than freedom”, wrote James Balwin (5). Man exists before he can be defined, and our task in life is to build our own internal constitution on how to live, how to throw ourselves into the future, and how to deal with the dread this imparts on us. Existentialism is the school of thought that holds that as human beings, we have the burden of complete freedom to create ourselves (Sartre 290-303). Sartre, a key existentialist philosopher, describes this circumstance of being in the world as “nausea,” where being is revealed to us as our sole responsibility to define the world (*Nausea* 23). The mode of building ourselves is creation. One has to choose how to use their being, and thus how to relate to the world. Hegel writes that “we are relentlessly driven on by a desire to be something, to complete ourselves...we are always directed forward into the future, moving towards realizing the fundamental projects that define our transcendence” (qtd. in Guignon and Pereboom pp xix.). Hegel’s statement relates to the practice of art making, the desire to always move forward and discover how to throw the most of oneself into a piece, physically and conceptually.

Yet, this freedom allows for the possibility of revealing crucial features of the world and those who inhabit it. With my work, I aim to provoke questions about the viewer’s relation to the world and themselves through the exploration of found objects. If structure is what we value in the world, what happens when that is taken away from us is that we are confronted with an “uncanny” anxiety, or existence as a whole, which we are forced to question (Heidegger 246). We are released from our state of detachment and presented with a future that we have to actively throw ourselves into. The found objects reflect an unstructured, over-saturated world through their decontextualization that should

collapse the world in some way, prompting the viewer to question who they are and how to move forward. However, losing this sense of security opens up the occasion to be authentic, to accept the unsettling world, and to begin constructing meaning out of the ruins.

Because the artist is a role model for human freedom, it is one of the privileged modes of revealing what the world is about. This takes the form of active engagement with the world, just as prose is “a living relation between writer and reader, whereby they create together” (Meter Ames 254). Novels and artworks are ends in themselves, as opposed to means to other ends, which serve to elicit freedom. Pursuing art is valuable in itself. It is an effort to reinvent the world as it is, but as if its “source were in human freedom”, which is a mark of aesthetic joy (Sartre qtd. in Meter Ames 255). This power of revelation is often devoted to the expression of the absurdity of the human condition, whereby we exist in a world that is not hospitable to the human desire for meaning.

The possibility of knowledge is grounded in human freedom, or the ability to reveal something about reality and relate to the world. Since humans have no fixed nature, it is their duty to self-determine what they will be, as this is their responsibility towards oneself and others. An important element of my work is the potential for creating meaning through narrative and communion with the audience. I offer my work as a microcosm that parallels the necessity of structure in everyday life. While the found objects present the viewer a disorganized world, the cement figures propose organization. The juxtaposition of these contradictory ideas represents the struggle to create order in the face of the burden of an empty world. It probes at the conflict between sickening, but meaning-giving authenticity and easy, unfruitful inauthenticity. The sculptures are a

reaction against a meaningless world, against the absurdity of the human condition.

Making organic cement forms inhabited by tunnel systems and adorned with collected objects is my way of trying to find meaning in a world devoid of it. I am producing these works in the same way a child would build cities in a sandbox. I am playing, testing my life's capacity for significance.

By revealing to the viewer what I choose to do with my freedom, there are many possibilities of interpretation. The sculptures may just be an aesthetic object to some, or an act of world-building, but they can also be a catalyst for questioning one's relationship to the world, their freedom, and their ability to create their own meaning. In realizing that one imposes values, he can no longer want anything but freedom as the foundation of those values, for the pursuit of freedom is the ultimate meaning of acts. Involvement with others reveals to us that our freedom is dependent on one another. In deciding for oneself, one decides for all of mankind in the sense that one is creating values that should be applicable to everyone, which refers back to the active relation between maker and viewer (Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism" 279).

Anousha Payne is an artist whose work highlights key features of existentialism. Her paintings inspired by the Corleck head, a carved rock found in the 1st or 2nd century in Ireland, serve as self-portraits that reflect her exploration of self ("Corleck Head"). The three-faced head, to Payne, represents the past, present, and future. The protagonist is pulled between these three states, "...forcing the present into a mask-like state, making it difficult to discern their current state of mind...a purgatory of indecision" ("Spotlight: Anousha Payne's Self-Reflective Paintings Explore Symbolism, Mythology, and Dreams"). Payne's show, "Thick Mud Slowly Oozing", reflects the anguish of the

existentialist that has to surge into the future instead of dwelling on the past. The Corleck heads are in an endless state of becoming, not only as artworks, but as the face of the head that represents the future. Humans, in the existentialist view, are constantly becoming and never actually achieving freedom, only attempting to elicit it. Payne, through her work, suggests the nausea of having to shake off the past and deal with the burden that is the future. Her work is successful in that it calls for human involvement; it asks the audience to consider themselves under these three states, which reveals aspects of themselves. Payne is promoting other ways to live in and relate with the world through her “imaginary presentation of the world” that she offers for others to understand (Goldthorpe 45).

Through my work, I present existentialist themes of creation and freedom. My subjectivity is manifested in the intentionality of the imagining of an object, which exemplifies human consciousness. According to philosopher Alva Noe, philosophical and aesthetic conversation produce an understanding whereby one can bring the artwork, or the world, “into focus” (128). Art matters because it highlights this feature of perceptual consciousness. At the same time existence is posited, so is inexistence, which is presented in my work through the tunnel systems that create negative space. The elements of the piece are related to each other through negativity and their aesthetic significance lies within each element’s relation to each other. The absence of space that forms the tunnels is not present from the outside of the work, which presents the viewer with the capacity to imagine what is not shown, just as for the existentialist, there is meaning to be found within silence (Sartre qtd. in Deranty).

I begin with a lump of clay, then roll and flatten it into coils, building a vessel by pushing the coils together. As my fingers mold the clay, they leave indents of finger-prints. These mark my presence on the object, but most importantly, cannot be replicated in the exact same way. Meaning, I can never make the same object twice. This is an instance of creating an entirely new object each time, allowing them to ceaselessly become, just as the existentialist strives for in creating themselves. This is a constant revolt against defining an object or defining a man, for it is the act of making continuous decisions instead of giving up the burden to decide, which exemplifies one's freedom. Yet, with this freedom comes anguish. Not only is one sacrificing a risk of failure in order to avoid creative repetition, but freedom is something that can only be strived for and never reached. Thus, the artist is in doubt, "...endowed with all the hesitations needed to let him be carried perpetually in search of his own decision'" (Maldiney qtd. In Meter Ames 252).

Once the clay dries, I cover it in burlap, then several layers of plaster to make sure the clay will hold. When the plaster dries, I mix concrete by hand and pour it into the vessel cup-by-cup. This is the final stage of creation, for then, I break the plaster and clay mold to reveal the hardened concrete that is shaped from my imprints on the clay. These two opposing forces, creation and destruction, are what encapsulate the spirit of the object. Both are essential to the end product. My pieces are representative of the self-imposed creation of the human condition, while also centered on destruction as a method of dealing with the nausea of creation. To destroy the mold is to rebel against the freedom to create, yet it also is what reveals the end product.

The differentiation between objects and one's decisions are both modes of action, and to act is to cause change (Sartre qtd. in Meter Ames 254). This presents as a change in making and as a means to elicit change in others. Such change forges a relation between the maker and the viewer, for according to Sartre, "there can be no part of art except for and through others" (Sartre qtd. in Meter Ames 254). Art is an active relationship between the artist and the viewers; they are working together. What is termed aesthetic joy or pleasure is, "the sign that a work has hit the mark in calling out the recognition of a value above the cascade of means and ends: a value which is "a task proposed to human freedom"' (Meter Ames 255). In my own work, I aim to work together with the audience, to create an active relationship based on the aesthetic and interpreted meaning of the work.

After I cast the molds in cement, the clay masses I place throughout the vessels form a tunnel system. These serve as a home for hidden, collected objects. According to Sartre, everyone has a void-like hole to fill, or a nothingness that symbolizes a mode of being (Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* 84). This desire to fill is part of the human condition.

"It presents itself to me as the empty image of myself. I have only to crawl into it in order to make myself exist in the world which awaits me. The ideal of the hole is then an excavation which can be carefully molded about my flesh in such a manner, that by squeezing myself into it and myself fitting tightly inside of it, I shall contribute to making a fullness of being exist in the world" (Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* 84).

The holes Sartre speaks of are a physical presence in my work, symbolizing the nothingness in a person which they are inclined to fill. The object is birthed through a process of creation that is essential to the existentialist notion of man being in the world. One is not only creating themselves, but the conditions of the world that they live in. The viewer, in experiencing the tunnel systems from the outside, where they appear to just be holes, may experience this feeling of nothingness or subtraction.

Further, the partially hollow objects are “...a projection of the live body that itself reciprocates the live body...” (Scarry 2). Projection of pain from the interior of the human body animates the object, according to Scarry (2). Creating is a reversal of the interior and exterior of the body; a reversal of my physical pain from making heavy objects and the emotional pain that the act of creating emerges from. The made object is a site of projection and reciprocation meant to alter the “felt-experience of sentience” (Scarry 2). The external world can no longer be indifferently inanimate and the human is given the privilege of inanimateness. If use value emerges from structure, there is no use value to humans in an unstructured world. This shift from use value to aesthetic or personal value is a way of creating meaning, merging things with oneself.

Embedded on the surfaces and in the tunnels are collected and found objects, as well as sonic elements. This is a form of pathmaking and marking my unique presence on the object, while also attempting to fill the nothingness of the holes of existence. The objects, ranging from car keys to bison teeth, act as memory structures and serve my intense desire to remember and collect my experience. Yet, these largely ephemeral objects were not made to be collected. A ticket stub from a movie I saw with my high school boyfriend, or a flattened can from when I lived behind a fraternity house were not

intended to endure, which is one of the reasons I am drawn to them. I think of my work as giving a life to, or animating things that are not thought of as important. In the same way that I am not significant unless I make meaning for myself, the objects are not significant until someone assigns significance to them.

I have every birthday, holiday, get well, and love note that has ever been given to me. I have every baby tooth I lost, in a jar somewhere. I have saved every voicemail that has ever been left for me and every rock a child ever gave me while I supervised recess. I give these things meaning as a way to give myself meaning through memory. I collect out of the desire to not forget, because all I am is the sum of my experiences.

Further, collecting sound is like collecting objects; they are markers to create an imagined and constructed significance. One of the soundscapes is a recording of how making the sculptures sounds, which refers to the method of making to emphasize how artistic practice is a form of continual creation. This is a form of art as play and the experimentation of play aligns with the construct of decision making and creation in existentialism. Upon collecting and repurposing the objects, I have shifted their value from use value to aesthetic value and replaced production with consumption, which relates back to Sartre's notion of filling (Stewart, 155).

“...the world-embracing, metaphysical, cupola that once enfolded mankind has disappeared, and man is left to rattle around in an infinite universe. Thus he seeks all the more to fill in his immediate, his physical environment with things...this filling in is a matter of ornamentation and presentation in which the interior is both a model and a projection of self-fashioning” (Spitzer qtd. in Stewart 157).

I am faced with a meaningless existence, and am thus attempting to create meaning by filling the void with objects. This is a presentation of the self I am ceaselessly building through my work.

On collection, Stewart writes, “for the environment to be an extension of the self, it is necessary not to act upon it and transform it, but to declare its essential emptiness by filling it (Stewart, 157). The collection, without the context of the individual objects, becomes its own world on a distinct timeline of mine and is thus recontextualized; mass media becomes personal media. They reflect my imaginary world, which the audience can relate to by forming their own imaginary worlds based on the experience that is presented for them to collect. The general understanding is that

“...things have no meaning apart from those that human transactions, attributions, and motivations endow them with...”, but “the anthropological problem is that this formal truth does not illuminate the concrete, historical circulation of things” (Appadurai 5).

To explore this one has to consider the things themselves, for their meanings are embedded in their uses and trajectories. Humans may give things significance, but conversely, the “things-in-motion” reveal human and social context (Appadurai 5). The found objects in my work thus have the power to illuminate the human circumstances they emerged from.

Through collection, the tunnel systems, and the imaginary aspects of my work, I am engaged in a kind of world-building. This is a process of recreating the world in a different structure, which introduces regularity or sense into the chaos of the world, which is the practice of the existentialist in regards to oneself. What we do with our

freedom is what matters, and a large aspect of this is trying to introduce meaning to a meaningless world. My style, artistically and otherwise, introduces my perspective on how to approach the world. Without expression or artistic expression, this perspective would not exist, which creates meaning.

The process of making is also the process of learning, where objects can be used to understand ourselves and the world. Abstract thought can be transformed into material manifestations. In an essay on the material culture of empirical knowledge, Smith, Meyers, and Cook explore how making is investigative as well as productive, in that it produces not only things, but knowledge. For example, the methods of preserving anatomical specimens in mid-seventeenth century Holland came from the process of developing new techniques, and would not have emerged from thought alone. In this way, making things with natural materials produced empirical knowledge. Experimentation was a key factor in this important medical milestone, as well as the artisanal tradition, which reveals the same methods used in early modern natural history. When creative practices, such as improvisation, are combined with empirical skills they can lead to new bodies of knowledge. Science is not simply conceptual, but the technical process of using objects and creative processes to understand the world (Smith et al.1457).

Further, science is driven by facts and aims to “eliminate ambiguity of interpretation” (Roniger et al. 4). Art, on the other hand, can be partially defined by its ambiguity and unquantifiableness. Yet, the link between art and science is “playfulness of curiosity and method” (Roniger et al. 4). In testing a hypothesis, the researcher may yield results that lead to interesting ideas, much like experimentation in making art. Neither are

linear processes to the result, and both often start with a simple question. Science and art share fundamental impulses that simply direct them to different paths of discovery.

Similarly to the research in Holland, I use objects to experiment with the ways in which existentialism and its critical feelings of profound tension, the struggle for authenticity, and the disenchantment of the world permeate into daily life, as well as how we understand and avoid these feelings. This entails a creative expression of these feelings and investigation into modes of art-making that embody or revolt against these ideals. Existentialism is the basis of life, not just historically, but in each present moment. Through this philosophy, people can recognize their finitude as the meaning-giving factor of their lives and respond to this anguish and joy through art. By accepting our finitude, we are set free to live and create meaningful lives for ourselves and others.

Conclusion

My research is not only for my personal growth, but of importance to the intersection of art and philosophy. In the words of philosopher David Funt, “science provides a schematic structure in which our experience may be ordered but art focuses concretely the vast areas of our experience which remain unknown or unclear to us for lack of a coherent form” (99). Through art, we can develop our way of perceiving these concrete things that reveal new experience and thought. My research places an emphasis on an interdisciplinary approach to learning that I hope will act as a gateway for others to embrace the often inaccessible field of philosophy through the readily accessible world of art, and overall foster a new interest in the possibilities of cross-disciplinary study.

As Simone de Beauvoir points out, existentialism is of interest to non-specialists, is an attitude towards the problems of today, and does not want to confine itself to academia (3). Through novels, plays, and art, it reaches a wider audience. It is not a “singular discipline”, but a “global vision” of the ambiguous state of man and the world that embraces all humanity (Beauvoir, Timmermann 4). Man’s task is to shape the world by giving it meaning.

Existentialism “...can hardly be summarized; it reveals itself only by a direct intuition that must be sought in the works where it is presented, and that bears fruit only if one takes the time to let it ripen within oneself (Beauvoir 7).

Through the process of making this body of work, I wanted to examine where existentialism and creative practice intertwine. Both involve constantly inventing oneself in a world with no prescribed meaning. Both lead to a communion of people who share the circumstance of being in the world at the same time. The artwork that is made is exactly the artwork that was to be made; the person one becomes is exactly the person whom they were to become. Neither are determined a priori; both are matters of creation and “the one thing that counts is knowing whether the inventing that has been done, has been done in the name of freedom” (Sartre, *Existentialism* 307).

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