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University of Colorado at Boulder



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How to respond?

by

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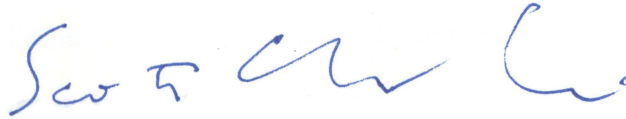
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This thesis entitled:

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Written by Jessica Knapp

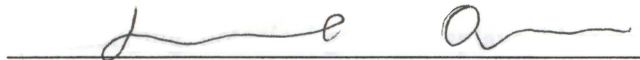
Has been approved for the Art and Art History Department



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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories; and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above-mentioned discipline.

Knapp, Jessica

MFA in Ceramics

Thesis: How to Respond?

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Scott Chamberlin

Abstract:

My work explores the ways that humans alter and arrange our surroundings to communicate emotions and designate value. I observe my immediate environment, focusing on the more subtle ways we communicate using flowering plants, for example in an individual's garden, a university park, or even a shopping center entrance. I also research formalized, even ritualized disciplines like Ikebana flower arranging, botanical garden displays, historical decorative art traditions that used botanical forms as resources, and artists who subtly alter spaces and our perceptions of space. By adapting the formal languages of these disciplines, and applying them to the arrangement of sculptural objects that I create, I intend to evoke an emotional sense or feeling in the viewer while calling attention to the fact that the experience is constructed.

Haiku:

The first this year

Blue morning glory opening

into rain.

-Elizabeth Searle Lamb

Each time I go outside the world is different

This has happened

All my life.

-Jim Harrison and Ted Kooser

How else to respond?

Fingers working, making

caked with drying clay.

-Jessica Knapp

How would you describe the physical characteristics of your work for someone who hasn't seen it before?

I work in clay, making small sculptural objects out of porcelain. Sometimes the forms are glazed, sometimes left bare. I use a combination of finishes from high temperature underglazes and glazes to low temperature enamels and room temperature surface treatments including flocking, colored sand, and paint. Though the objects are small individually, I often arrange them in larger groupings of multiples. When making my work, I usually work from a general concept, not trying to convey a specific narrative to my audience, but rather an emotion or gesture.

What resources do you use when deciding what forms to make for your work?

The forms I make relate to various sources: objects in my surroundings, contemporary anthropological topics I am interested in, art history, and my own world view. I've always been fascinated with human made objects and artifacts, thinking perhaps through study of these, I'd come to understand humanity a little better, or at least a little. What we make and surround ourselves with describes our desires, values, hang-ups and visions, both majestic and misplaced. My creative process is to take in all of these sources, think about them, and let my intuition filter out interesting combinations as I work in the studio or make sketches.

When I speak of my immediate surroundings I'm thinking of the neighborhood I live in, the place where I work, the city I live in—the design and the mood that I perceive in all

of these places that I exist in every day. Trying to understand my cultural environment is a fascinating, discouraging and never ending task for me, but one that art helps to clarify and makes more interesting and interactive. My work comes from some mimicry of the ways I see people communicating through objects, and some subjective, imaginative liberties.

Could you describe the specific forms you create in clay?

Allow me to provide a brief synopsis of the work I've made over the last few years, to formally and conceptually contextualize the current work I make, and give an idea of how things evolve for me in the studio.

I started making discrete objects based on early industrial storage containers, including water towers, oil tanks and silos along with more modern communication tools, like transmitting towers for television and radio, all of which I saw daily in my environment. The series was designed with the traditional gallery setting in mind, and these were objects made for pedestals or wall shelves.

Over time, my focus evolved into a study of various mechanical objects large and small, rather than just large industrial forms. The resulting artwork combined parts of these objects to create new nonfunctional maquettes of imagined machines and storage containers. These objects included a pink submarine/ torpedo on spindly wire legs, a series titled "wind collectors", which were unglazed porcelain windmill propellers attached to various vessels, and eventually white porcelain objects that were attached directly to the wall rather than sitting on a pedestal, shelf or inside of a box, including a small "water collector" with a funnel and bellows attached by thin clay tubes. The white

forms blended in with their surroundings, making them seem like small parts of a larger system located behind the wall surface.

While making this body of work, I started thinking about the ways places, spaces and objects are designated as special, or assigned value. In some ways, this line of thought was the opposite inquiry to the previous. I began focusing on the more positive, subtle or visionary elements of human culture. My sources shifted, if momentarily, away from a specific subject matter towards analyzing the *type* of subjects that intrigue me.

I tried to be as open as possible making forms intuitively while simultaneously thinking about the kinds of contexts to place these objects in. I created a narrow hallway space with a red floor covered in candy wrappers. Around the corner in this space, I arranged wrapped ceramic forms on a shelf, which I invited the viewer to take, in exchange for their ideas on gift giving. The forms were vague and abstracted, yet creature like, made intuitively without a specific source in mind. I also continued to make stand alone objects, including small white clay boxes attached to the wall that supported odd, plant like forms on wire stalks. I started experimenting with surfaces in these works, using flocking, paint and paper in addition to glaze.

What led to this shift in your work?

This shift in the work came in part from my studies of several traditional Japanese objects and practices. They provided a contrast to what I was accustomed to and showed pared down, economical or spare design principles, ingenuity and poetic expression. The traditional packaging of food and produce in Japan showed the care and attention paid to even the smallest parts of daily life. Japanese gold leafed folding screens from the

Momoyama period provided an elegant and efficient way to divide spaces, and provide an imagined space for viewers to contemplate. I looked at Sogetsu School Ikebana flower arranging, after seeing many slides of arrangements and vases while researching another project. The movement, poetics and expressive lines created by Ikebana masters was so dramatic and beautiful that I started researching it more seriously and thoroughly so I could employ the arrangement techniques to my own work and understand the philosophy leading to the way arrangements look.

All of this actually coincided nicely with the changing of the seasons, and as things warmed up, and dormant plants started to reemerge into the landscape, various garden patches sending up shoots and buds, I also decided to look at selective planting and arranging of flowering plants in my surroundings more closely. I enjoyed documenting and studying these living, changing information sources.

What does your current work look like, after distilling these sources?

After looking at these sources, I let the information mix around freely in my imagination, and created my most recent grouping of work in response. I translated the element of human artifice in the sources I studied by making botanical forms out of clay, complete with high temperature wire stems and stamens.

I refined my surface materials, selecting the ones that create seductive and rich textures and colors in order to engage the viewer, in the same way that the colors and patterns of flowers attract all kinds of species. I then arrange these objects on the wall, using gesture, line, color and texture combinations to create an emotional response in the viewer. The finished, installed work may sit in a wall niche, protrude directly from the

wall or from a plaster relief form integrated with the wall, or emerge from a ceramic plinth or box structure. At the same time, I am experimenting with drawn line, and bas-relief designs interacting with wall sculptures, activating the wall as a plane and as a context.

Could you explain more about how Japanese folding screens relate to your interest in spaces?

I first became interested in the way folding screens simultaneously create and divide space when I visited the Denver Art Museum's Asian Art Collection early last spring. Upon entering the room, I was awed by the powerful, mysterious presence of the "*Bamboo Screen*" in one of the large display cases. The Momoyama era (17th century) gold leafed screen radiated its own light in the dimly lit room; the colors and painting style were bold and confident, and the use of gold to depict both a specific foreground mist and the undefined background led to an interesting ambiguity of space. I was initially awed by the screen, and this sense of wonder expanded as I considered the technical proficiency and artful combination of two and three-dimensional spaces.

As I researched the topic further, I discovered that historically, the folding screen was a high status room divider, and low-tech illumination source, reflecting all available light. It performed a function while simultaneously connoting material value and providing the viewer with a glimpse into a mysterious or dreamlike space depicted on its surface.

The Kano school of painters credited with making the Bamboo Screen were famous for bold compositions, sure line and simplified subjects that would be readable from afar

and interesting to the close observer. They wanted to impress with both their artistic skill and material value. (1)

After seeing the Bamboo Screen, and reading Elsie Grilli's book, Japanese Folding Screens, I started to think about how the object bridged real and imagined space, simultaneously evoking sensations of both. I was most interested in its implied value through coloration and its actual value and use in signifying spaces as special, as different. I saw that I could adapt the form to convey some of the ideas I had about imagined or dreamlike space, and to subtly bridge the gap between two and three-dimensional elements in my own work. It also informed my object and drawing combination wall sculptures, and my interest in using color blocks behind groupings of objects to create a context.

How have other artists working with ideas of space and context either informed or validated your own work?

I've been intrigued with the ways Adrian Saxe implies context and value in his work for three years now. Though he is working with historical presentation or trophy vessels as sources, he's focused on how and why objects embody and symbolize value and prestige, approaching the subject from an ironic Funk movement perspective. While we don't share the same aesthetic of "more is more", or overt humor, I have learned from his understanding of the visual cues suggesting importance, luxury and opulence, and admire his wittily loaded pots.

Rain Harris's installation, "*Gilding the Lily*" provided me with a great example of how to make modular work in the studio and install it in a gallery space. Through her

slide lecture I saw her gradual progression from object maker, to an artist creating both objects and contexts for them, a course of study similar to mine.

The installations consist of intricately patterned and antique looking wallpaper cut into patterns attached to the gallery walls and framed by ceramic filigree or ornately curved and scalloped ceramic forms reminiscent of wood molding or ornate frames. Integrated with this is a ceramic vessel of perfume bottle size sitting on a small plinth. The object itself becomes lost in the profusion of pattern behind it, but lost in an integrated way, as if the object were camouflaged to match this particular background, this environment. Her specific way of thinking about integrating the object with the surroundings relates more closely with my own artistic aims, to create a context within a larger space for these objects to exist in comfortably.

I admire and am drawn to Anish Kapoor's success in making work that embodies sensuality, dreamlike space, and an invented magical realism. His research into architectonic, primal, monumental forms, saturated, radiant colors, and extremely subtle wall moulds validated and expanded my thinking about spaces, and systems or vocabularies I could use to evoke feelings with my art. (2)

Kapoor's piece "When I am Pregnant" made me think about altering the existing wall subtly, but enough to give a specific and powerful focal point and context for my work. Germano Celant eloquently described the piece in his book on Kapoor's work, saying that "When I am Pregnant" can't be entirely defined as representing either spirit or matter, because it describes both. This combination of solid form and reference to the ephemeral has a poetic force that I am interested in evoking through my own work. (3)

Kapoor's vibrant surfaces invite viewers to touch, to reach out to the source of that pure color. Celant described that the colors Kapoor uses had optical weight from the density of the color, while also appearing soft and ethereal, qualities that they transferred to the forms beneath the colored surfaces. He goes on to say that the color dissolves considerations of the real and emphasizes the power of light, which enables the forms to float in space. (4)

I thought about Kapoor's use of pure, saturated pigment, to transform objects, to change our reading of them from solid to ephemeral, physical to mysterious and elusive, when making my own color choices for my recent body of work. I used strong, saturated colors in combination with more muted tints. Unlike Kapoor, who tends towards using only primary colors, I was also interested in the contrast and visual energy produced by using one color in a background or on part of an object, to set off its compliment or a chromatically related color on another part of the flower form.

Gardens figure in Kapoor's sources; he uses them as an influence, responding to oriental gardens, which he thinks of as "ceremonial sites of powerful sensory impressions that put us in touch with cosmic energies." I too look to gardens, but I don't focus on their transformative powers. However, I do think of them as contemplative and positive spaces that are a place of contact and transfer between nature and culture, living plant and human artifice. (5)

Lastly, one other artist dealing with ideas of spaces and designation of space proved helpful to my thinking. Robert Irwin's work had the same effect on me as my introduction to the work of Anish Kapoor, a spark of interest and sense of familiarity despite the vast difference between his work and my own.

Part of the reason I initially responded to Irwin's work relates to his manipulation of space, foregrounding its importance to viewers, and his careful control of the ways viewers see his work displayed. During the 1960's and 1970's, Irwin used color, light and line to alter our perceptions of the depth, slant, and scale of existing spaces, transforming them with minimal changes. His work inspired me to think of our perception of two and three-dimensional space as more elastic, more relative (6).

I studied this work intently because for a long time, my work looked best isolated in slide form; it got lost in actual spaces, which frustrated me. As a result of looking at work like Irwin's, I started to think about how to make the work more integrated with the environment, or to create an environment that accentuated rather than overwhelmed the pieces.

The work that I studied included his disc paintings, scrim installations, and colored light installations. Seeing Irwin's disc painting in the Denver Art Museum's "*Retrospectacle*" exhibition was a viewing experience that is still hard to verbalize, since the excitement came from what I could see in the moment, from the subtlety and the ambiguous, vibrating color and space he created. He enhanced the floating quality, the effect of defying gravity and having the object float in front of and dissolve into the space around it by allowing only one very specific vantage point.

This piece and his large formal garden at the Getty museum, demonstrate Irwin's belief that viewers should come to an understanding of an artwork through experience of the art object rather than by referencing it to sources. His artwork often heightens a viewer's phenomenological experience in a space, skewing his or her normal perspective

or reading, making them more aware of the realness of phenomena like lighting and perspective.

Would you speak more directly to how your immediate environment affects your work?

I have always lived as close as possible to the place where I work or study so that I don't have to commute every day. Having to drive to work for a time, I realized that being immersed in my environment makes me more aware, more vulnerable, and more receptive to what is going on around me.

I love taking note of what has changed and not changed in the gardens I pass daily. I observe what plants are blooming, how high the creek is, how fast it is flowing, and now, what trees are turning colors and losing leaves, and how the yucca plant's stalks hang onto their dried seed pods despite the morning frost. Later, I ask myself questions about what I observed, note interesting color combinations or make sketches of the shapes and plants that intrigued me or stuck with me.

How do you see humor operating in your work?

My work is like my personality, sarcasm and earnestness somehow rolled into an uneasy union. Though not always sarcastic, my sense of humor is certainly dry, and critical. I realize that there are elements of my work that are funny, but I'm not consciously thinking about humor when I make the work. I think it is there naturally because I look at the world in an off-kilter way, with a distancing irony. Some of my

work is made in awareness of this perspective, and sometimes I deny or step away from this protection to make work that is less guarded.

People have asked me, both directly and hushed, as if relaying a secret or afraid they will insult me, if I think the work is funny. I'm fine with people seeing the humor in my work, as long as it doesn't mean they discount it, or don't take it seriously. My work is both funny and serious, simultaneously.

With this body of work I see an obvious irony in making forms using natural sources in order to study the ways humans use plants to express themselves and create or designate value. The finished forms have an animated quality that is also charmingly humorous, the way they mimic something living, swaying or bobbing in response to movement in its environment.

How do you see your work relating to decorative art, like the porcelain flowers made at Vincennes/ Sevres in the 18th century and/ or objects like these?

I see my work as more of a critique or investigation of how we use nature than an accurate rendering of a specific plant's form. I felt this way with the other bodies of work I did as well. It is less important to me that the viewer recognizes the exact source for the object they're looking at, and more important that they wonder about what they are seeing, and have some emotional response to it. In fact, I often use actual flowers to build my basic form vocabulary, then I can branch out from there to create new, invented forms.

So to answer the question, perhaps the work I'm making now falls in space between the Vincennes flowers, and say the collection of glass flowers made during the late 19th

and early 20th centuries by the Blaschka family in Bohemia, today the Czechoslovakian Republic, for Harvard's fledgling botanical science department. The Vincennes flowers were made as arrangements, and given to prominent aristocrats and monarchs in the mid 18th century as objects of status, value and novelty (7). The Blaschka's 3,000 lamp worked glass flowers and plants were exacting replicas of plant specimens, made during the early days of science so that students at Harvard could learn about plant anatomy and taxonomy. Both transferred the appearance of a temporal living thing to a more permanent medium, and in this very material sense, I can identify similarities with my own work. (8)

My objects are an examination of cultural uses of flowering plants, not specifically of the categorization of plant structure and biology, nor even of the profound variety of form, though I find that interesting. In some ways this manifestation of cultural use is implicit in both the Vincennes flowers and the Blaschka's flower and plant models. They fit into the structure of culture using forms to communicate its own ideas and values.

The flowers made at Vincennes and the glass flowers at Harvard are examples of the cultural desires to make objects in order to designate value, to embody preciousness and technical mastery, and to scientifically order and explain the world around them, categorizing living things and creating models for students to study. The exquisite craft and coloration of both these examples remain seductive, and their makers were well aware of how to make beautiful decorative objects, and the power of nature as a reference.

The colors I use for my work are artificial renditions of floral colors, several times removed from their source, another obvious contrast with the historical forms. The idea

of floral colors has value to us, since we value flowers as ornament and embodiment of a certain type of beauty. This leads to industries like hobby crafts and paint manufacturers mimicking and interpreting the colors found in the world of flowers and inventing new, more exaggerated hues that though unnatural, become a symbol for floral colors.

Perhaps rather than being between these two examples, my objects are in triangulation with them, a third point all-together, though linked to the other two. My work also incorporate humor and the ironic distance that is my own way of looking at the world. These earlier examples do not consciously attempt humor or irony. They are completely sincere, whereas mine are only mostly sincere with an element of knowing.

Do other art forms influence your work?

I recently saw the French film *Amalie*, and I felt as if someone had made a film about my imagination, my perspective on the world as an observer, and the things and colors that I wish were possible. The film helped to validate my work, my attempts to describe and understand my world visually, and my observations of the wondrous and tragic.

The saturated jewel like colors used in the movie captivated me, to the point that I missed them as soon as the film was done. The lush colors heightened everything, making it more important, more beautiful; a vision that is wonderful, optimistic and utterly bewitching. These colors validated my interest in art making. The real world is often devastatingly bereft of the visual and emotional beauty described in the film, but making art with these hopeful, enthralling magical realism visions is both a relief and meditation on possibility even within the mundane.

The magical realism in the film, symbolizing how Amalie combines her imagination with reality equates to the same sense I hope to achieve in my work. By intensifying the colors on my forms to those not seen in nature I hope to combine real and imagined space, or at least to make the imagined seem more plausible.

Literary works in the Magical Realism genre have influenced me as well, including books by Matt Ruff, Tom Robbins and Gabriele Garcia Marquez. In the works of all of these authors, the combination of events that are completely mundane with those not possible, like flying carpets, faeries living in university bell towers and talking and walking sticks, spoons and cans of beans makes the world seem more magical, hopeful and inviting. Like the film, they help validate my interest in enlivening or enriching the every day by skewing the expected slightly through color, surface, material, and arrangement.

Do you study plants?

You know, I don't study them scientifically, but aesthetically in my surroundings. In some ways I've just started out with them as sources, observing them as they sprout up, bloom and wither in my environment. I've also done some reading on this history of plants and culture in Michael Pollan's The Botany of Desire. This was helpful to my research in how we use plants to communicate specialness, and how they have been adapted to our purposes, needs and desires. His discussion of tulips in Holland, their inflated value based on nothing but the belief in their preciousness, the breeding used to favor certain appearances, and the ways this one plant provides insight into a whole culture at a particular time period was revelatory. (9)

After reading his work, I started to think about my own plant preferences; the neat, clean lined tulip, jack in the pulpit and tiger lily appeal to me much more than the many petaled rose, peony or poppy. I prefer the architectonic and structured or solid looking flower to the profusion of petals. It is a marker of my disposition towards order and clarity. The book helped me to see that I too have a bias, a personal or cultural preference for flowers with a certain look, and recognizing this bias helped me to be more conscious about determining what flowers to study as sources for forms. (10)

As I look more into the use of flower forms in Ikebana and continue to research both Harvard's collection of glass models of plants, and the historical decorative arts tradition using flower forms, I may need to study the meaning and value of specific plants in depth. I also have plans to visit herbariums to see what they have, and how they display specimens

You spoke about Ikebana as a source. Have you studied flower arrangement?

I have not studied Ikebana, though I have the assignment books for the Sogetsu school's beginning lessons in arrangement, and have read through them several times, learning about the angles, flowers, structures and containers used, and the aesthetic rules and choices for each arrangement. These books, as well as research on the school's website, have been extremely helpful in terms of understanding gesture and tension between forms in my own installations.

The Sogetsu school's previous sensei, Hiroshi Teshigahara often wrote in these assignment books that the students should think of the plant materials as raw materials to be used to express their creative thoughts. This emphasis on the importance of the human

being to create meaning, and the importance of poetic self-expression through the manipulation of natural forms is where my observations of how we alter our living environment in order to communicate and create value or preciousness started to solidify into a determined inquiry. (11)

I have considered enrolling in an Ikebana class, though it may have to wait until I finish graduate school. I think that hands on experience could inform the arrangement of my ceramic forms, and make me more aware of how to manipulate space effectively.

How would you describe your aesthetic?

If this were a record review I'd describe it as a little bit Funk, combined with austere, economical Scandinavian sensibility, a bit whimsical but with a detectable degree of deft immediacy.

Do you see yourself working with a material other than clay?

I could see myself working in cast paper, fine metals and clay in the future, however, as a medium, clay is so perfect for plastic modeling and quick intuitive work, that I don't think I could or would want to abandon it. It will always be integral to my process as far as determining forms, or making ideas into three dimensions, and prototyping. It is a language that I'm fluent in, and comfortable expressing my ideas with as well as experimenting loosely and intuitively, so I see no reason to stop using it.

I appreciate its permanence and durability when fired, and amorphous, touchable malleability when wet. This transformation is unique to clay, and I've learned to use it to

my advantage and make forms that can't be made as fluidly in other, more rigid materials.

Clay is also has such a rich history, and is one of the few material records we have with which to speculate about ancient civilizations. Since I'm interested in how and why we alter our environments, and how we use objects to communicate as humans, this seems like a perfectly poetic material for my artwork.

End notes

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