

SEEKING THE MAGIC IN DESIGN:

An Inquiry into Defamiliarizing the Everyday

Malika Soin

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Design.

Graduate Program in Design
York University
Toronto, Ontario
April 2014

© Malika Soin, 2014.

Abstract

This thesis project explores the application of the artistic and literary genre of magical realism to graphic design. The goal is to use the genre's ability to defamiliarize everyday Indian cultural objects in order to reveal the magical in the mundane. Apart from a discourse on design and its role in the everyday, the research also focuses on making an audience conscious of their habitual responses to quotidian life through graphic design. Using magical realist graphic design, everyday Indian cultural objects are morphed into objects worthy of notice and appreciation. These transformed objects challenge an audience to recognize the ideologies perpetuated in a culture through everyday objects. The objects are chosen as a result of the author's nostalgia experienced due to a displaced cultural context from India to Canada. The projects made during this thesis, "Pigment," "Paper Cones" and "Clay" constitute an away-from-home "survival kit."

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to everyone who helped me through the journey of this thesis and the past two years in the MDes program.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, David Cabianga and advisor, Angela Norwood for always challenging me to push my limits to produce work that I can proudly stand by. Thank you for helping me grow as a designer and being patient with me throughout the process. I would also like to acknowledge the advice and guidance provided by Michael Prokopow.

Mom, Dad and Sarthak, thank you for all the support and encouragement.

Anosh, this thesis would not have been possible without all your help, patience and love.

Thank you Marie-Noelle Hébert, for always asking questions and being a support through the late nights of work in the studio.

Emmie Tsumura, for being my friend and editor in need.

Annie Chen, Saskia Van Kampen, Nancy Snow, Krishna Balakrishnan for your support and insights throughout my MDes journey.

Perhaps it's true that things can change in a day. That a few dozen hours can affect the outcome of whole lifetimes. And that when they do, those few dozen hours, like the salvaged remains of a burned house—the charred clock, the singed photograph, the scorched furniture—must be resurrected from the ruins and examined. Preserved. Accounted for. Little events, ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted. Imbued with new meaning.

Arundhati Roy, *God of Small Things*

Contents

Abstract — ii
Acknowledgments — iii
Contents — iv
List of Figures — v

Introduction — 1

Magical Realism: Definition and Origin — 3

Magical Realist Graphic Design — 9

What is the “Real” in Design? — 14

What is the “Magical” in Design? — 22

Defamiliarization — 26

Defamiliarization; Culture and Graphic Design — 29

How is the Magic Revealed? — 35

Reconstructing the Object — 35

Strange Juxtapositions — 41

Conclusion — 52

Bibliography — 55

Appendix — 58

List of Figures

Figure 1: Alexander Kanoldt, *Still Live VI (Still life with Guitar)*, 1926 — 6

Figure 2: Gijs Bakker, *Peepshow Wallpaper*, Droog Design, 1992 — 12

Figure 3: Joseph Beuys, *Scala Napoletana*, 1985 — 17

Figure 4: A street vendor selling food in paper cones in India — 20

Figure 5: Malika Soin, *Paper Cones*, 2013 — 21

Figure 6: Conventional paper soap packages found in India — 24

Figure 7: Malika Soin, *Pigment*, 2013 — 25

Figure 8: Matchbox covers with images of babies are used here as an example of oddities found in the commonplace design existing in Indian culture — 32

Figure 9: Marcel Wanders, *Snotty Vases*, 2001 — 40

Figure 10: Elliott Earls, *Poster for Department of Painting*, Cranbrook Academy of Art, 2008

Figure 11: Elliott Earls, *Poster for Department of 3D Design*, Cranbrook Academy of Art, 2008 — 42

Figure 12: Irma Boom, *Weaving as a Metaphor*, 2006 — 44

Figure 13: A potter in the process of making a clay cup (kulhad) found in India — 45

Figure 14: Conventional form of clay cups (kulhads) shown in use in an Indian context — 45

Figure 15: Malika Soin, *Clay*, 2014 — 48

Figure 16: Malika Soin, *Clay*, 2014 — 49

Figure 17: Malika Soin, *Clay*, 2014 — 50

Figure 18: Malika Soin, *Clay*, 2014 — 51

Introduction

Vertical hanging rows of mouth fresheners on carts outside school, plastic mats and peanuts on a terrace in winter, and a smell of wet clay from tea cups are some impressions that form a person's memories of living in India. Memories such as these are closely related to objects that are a part of daily Indian life and culture. One becomes habituated to their function and existence and takes these objects for granted. Their absence creates a nostalgia for their presence and memories related to them. These objects embedded in culture and the memories associated with them inspired the projects pursued in this thesis. These objects have the ability to reveal cues about culture that are hidden by the veil of convention.

Graphic design tools can be used to explore the hidden value of an object. In order to explore this hidden potential located in the mundane, the designer can visually defamiliarize everyday objects found in Indian culture. This is done using magical realist design, which is achieved by reinterpreting the aesthetic genre of "magical realism" as applied to graphic design. American author Lois Parkinson Zamora has proposed, "magical realism is characterized by its visualizing capacity to create (magical) meaning by seeing ordinary things in extraordinary ways."¹ The ordinary or the familiar are challenged in this genre

1. Lois Parkinson Zamora, "The Visualizing Capacity of Magical Realism: Objects and Expression in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges" in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 22.

in order to reveal the magic within, by transforming it into something unfamiliar. The visual and functional aspects of an object are explored to create an element of surprise, challenge standardized perceptions of the object, and elevate its status within culture.

This text is structured to provide the reader with an understanding of the genre of magical realism, its definition, origin and its interpretation as it can apply in graphic design. The interpretation of this genre is further discussed through examples from art and design as they are analyzed in order to find equivalent characteristics. Along with establishing these connections the paper will define the concept of “magical realist graphic design.” As discussed here, magical realist design’s ability to defamiliarize is used to reveal the magical in the mundane. My intent is to provide a better understanding of defamiliarization and its relevance for graphic design. Following this discussion, this paper proposes two methodologies: “Reconstructing an Object” and “Strange Juxtapositions” as methods to achieve the desired aim of revealing the magic in everyday Indian objects. The artefacts produced as a result of my investigations provide evidence in support of the questions asked.

Magical Realism: Definition and Origin

Professor of English and Comparative Literature Wendy B. Faris efficiently sums up the definition of magical realism when she states, “Magical realism combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary blurring the distinction between them.”² Embedded in the cultural, physical and political landscape of Latin America, “magical realism” originated as a Latin American literary movement in 1940s and 1950s.³ In literature, “realism” suggests of elements that can be rationally reasoned, for instance presenting a reader with a description of daily life that is relatable and complies with habituated thinking. The habitual is dictated by unanimity of thought in a society or culture. The fantastic or the magical are things that span beyond logical explanation, like myths, dreams, and premonitions. For a reader, the existence of these magical elements is not improbable when incorporated into a realistic scenario. Realism creates a space for the magical to be accepted irrespective of its absurdity due to the blurred distinction between the fantastic and the real.

2. Wendy B. Faris, “Definitions and Locations” in *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), 1.

3. Moussa Ahmadian and Ateih Ratafi, “An Analysis of Allende’s ‘Ines of My Soul’ from the View Point of Magical Realism: A Case Study,” *English Language and Literature Studies* 2, no. 1 (March 2012): 15-16.

In spite of its popular association with literature, it was German historian Franz Roh who first used the term “magic realism”⁴ in the course of applying it to a group of 1920’s German painters who rejected Expressionism. They embraced figurative art after more than a decade of Expressionist abstracted art, which manifested under art movements such as Fauvism, Cubism, and Futurism. Roh states in his essay, “Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism” (1925) that Expressionists had, “an exaggerated preference for fantastic, extraterrestrial, remote objects”⁵ as they considered the existence of mundane objects “obvious.” Magic realist art on the other hand, “returns to a renewed delight in real objects.”⁶ One can explain this by drawing a comparison between stylistic representation of objects in expressionist art and magic realist art. Roh states that Futurists and their depiction of the objective world in “abrupt and dislocated form,” deprive the viewer of the “seductive integrity of objective phenomena.”⁷ Similarly other expressionist art focused on the overt representation of emotional expression through abstract shapes, form and color. Magic realism returns the focus of art to a realistic representation of the everyday. Through detailed painted strokes, artists not only imitated the object but also revealed a new perspective of looking at them. The new way of seeing objects was achieved by embedding

4. The terms, “magic realism” and “magical realism” have been used to refer to the same genre. “Magic realism” is used when referring to the art movement defined by Roh and “magical realism” pertains to literature.

5. Franz Roh, “Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism,” in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 16-17.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 19.

the painting with strange details that are conventionally not associated with the painted objects. Observing the minute details in the paintings leads one to find a deeper layer of meaning waiting to be discovered. The accurate and photograph-like visual representation of familiar objects can be associated with “realism” in this genre of painting. The “magical” element is achieved by placing realistically painted objects in bizarre illogical settings or manipulating the painted object in order to infuse it with hidden associations on the part of the viewer.

Magic realism is often confused with Surrealism as both use elements pertaining to reality and fantasy, the two however differ on the account of the content they explore. Surrealists intended to explore physiological experiences, imagination and the world of dreams. Magic realists on the other hand, dealt with the unexplored aspects of the material reality. “The extraordinary in magical realism is rarely presented in the form of a dream or a psychological experience because to do so takes the magic out of recognizable material reality and places it into the little understood world of the imagination.”⁸ Surrealists were curious about the depths of the subconscious mind and magic realists wanted to intervene in the untapped aspects of society, culture and the material world.

German magic realist painter Alexander Kanoldt’s *Still Life VI* (fig. 1) can be stated as an example to elaborate on the characteristics of paintings belonging to the genre of magic realism. At first glance, the painted objects look like

8. Maggie Ann Bowers, “Delimiting The Terms,” in *Magic(al) Realism: The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2004), 22.



Fig. 1. Alexander Kanoldt, *Still Life VI (Still life with Guitar)*, 1926, Oil on Canvas, 75 x 88 cm. A magic realist painting.

an ordinary representation of their conventional selves. The realistic depiction of objects by Kanoldt functions as a known constant, something that one can relate to and identify. As one is familiar with these painted objects, there is a tendency to compare their resemblance to their realistic selves. This leads one to question the skill of the painter and his ability to represent the “real.” In the process of questioning the accuracy with which the objects are painted, the painting is closely examined and inconsistencies are found. For instance the guitar does not have strings, the second playing card lying flat on the table is blank and the frame on the wall appears to be empty. These details would have otherwise gone unnoticed, had one not been “seduced” by the realistic representation of ordinary objects. Kanoldt, through his technique and detailed execution brings to light the elements of the ordinary that are taken for granted. One can also suggest that these details in the painted objects are symbolic of

a deeper meaning that Kanoldt intended to reveal. “He was interested only in the autonomous object of the surrounding world, the object which, however, maintained a secret inner meaning.”⁹ The secret inner meaning is the “magic” that one is drawn to and that Kanoldt wished to reveal in the everyday.

In painting the genre lays emphasis on revealing the everyday as magical so that it can be considered from new perspectives. In literature the “magical” or the “fantastic” is the point of interest and through its amalgamation with the “real” the genre “represents the mixture of differing world views and approaches to what constitutes reality.”¹⁰ The two mediums emphasize different characteristics to convey different ideas. Zamora notes one parallel characteristic in the works of Latin American novelist Gabriel García Márquez and the writings of Roh, “Magical wells up from the world as we know it.”¹¹ This can be noted in Kanoldt’s painting discussed above, as he uses the construction of ordinary or known objects to evoke magical meaning by introducing discrepancies in their carefully executed construction.

Márquez’s excerpt from his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* demonstrates that magic originates from the everyday even in literature:

Inside there was only an enormous, transparent block with infinite internal needles in which the light of the sunset was

9. Seymour Menton, “Germany: Neue Sachlichkeit, Magischer Realismus,” in *Magic Realism Rediscovered, 1918-1981* (Philadelphia: The Art Alliance Press, 1983), 36.

10. Bowers, “Origins of Magic(al) Realism,” 14.

11. Lois Parkinson Zamora, “Swords and Silver Rings: Objects and Expression in Magical Realism and The New World Baroque,” University of Houston, http://www.uh.edu/~englmi/ObjectsAndSeeing_intro.html. (accessed December 15, 2013).

broken up into colored stars. Disconcerted, knowing that the children were waiting for an immediate explanation, Jose Arcadio Buendia ventured a murmur:
“It’s the largest diamond in the world.”
“No,” the gypsy countered. “It’s ice.”¹²

The above conversation in the novel takes place in the imaginary town of *Mocando* where people are admiring the wonders of ice. Márquez visualizes an everyday object such as ice having magical qualities. He situates this magic in the material properties of ice; his description of the reflective quality of the surface of ice, its transparency and its internal structure. He uses these properties to relate ice to a diamond, symbolizing its worth. Márquez’s narration of the “obvious” properties of a mundane object, establishes the point of view that everything that exists around us can be looked at with speculation. This is also emphasized when he goes on to state how ice is a “great invention.” Even touching the cake of ice is narrated as an extraordinary experience as the ice “boils” when one touches it. The everyday objects in the genre of magical realism exceed their capacity of being just ordinary physical entities and are transformed into wondrous beings.

12. Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Perennial Classics, 1998), 18.

Magical Realist Graphic Design

The following Wednesday while their parents were at the movie they filled the apartment to a depth of two fathoms, dove like tame sharks under the furniture, including the beds, and salvaged from the bottom of light things that had been lost in darkness for years. The sofa and easy chairs covered in leopard skin were floating at different levels in the living room, among the bottles from the bar and the grand piano with its Manila shawl that fluttered half submerged like a golden manta ray. Household objects, in the fullness of their poetry, flew with their own wings through the kitchen sky.¹³

The above excerpt is from Gabriel García Márquez's magical realist short story "Light is Like Water." Through textual narration the reader visualizes the transformation of an everyday apartment setting to a sea world with floating objects. The realistic function of light is to brighten up a space but Márquez writes about the light from broken light bulbs drowning the apartment and submerging the objects. He also introduces floating and flying objects at the same time: a shawl flutters like a bird and floats in the apartment like a golden manta ray. He transforms mundane household objects into magical entities. A reader does not know what else the objects can become or what functions they can perform after their transformation. Through his narration Márquez liberates a reader's imagination accustomed to the normative functions of objects. A reader is now exposed to objects that can levitate or have wings. The mundane world around us is now relooked at as a poetic image. The genre enforces the point of view that the world we live in is filled with many fascinating details that are often overlooked due to our habitual engagement with them. As pursued here, the understanding of narrative techniques from

13. Gabriel García Márquez, "Light is Like Water," in *Strange Pilgrims*, (New York: Knopf, 1993), 159.

the genre of magical realism are applied to graphic design to create magical realist design. In literature, words are used to describe different aspects of everyday reality, revealing even the most obvious elements in a new light. In design the visual tools namely form, shape, color and type can be used to perform the above stated function.

To elaborate on characteristics specific to magic realist design, the traits from two mediums of literature and visual art are investigated. In literature, one can examine the narrative techniques in order to explore the possibility of their application in design. The narrative voice in literature can be equated to the visual characteristics of artefacts in design, such as its type, scale or form. English literature professor Maggie Bowers states, “García Márquez tells all the stories in a matter-of-fact narratorial voice and includes exact detail to strengthen the claims.”¹⁴ Attention to details can be noted in Márquez’s writings when defining the properties of objects, or going to great lengths to describe a space by elaborating on the most insignificant details of a visual landscape. Roland Barthes notes the use of abundant irrelevant details in “realist” literary texts that create an “effect of the real.”¹⁵ This characteristic enables to blur the boundary between the magical and the real. One can observe some overlaps in the characteristics of magic realist art and magic realist literature.

Austrian art historian Wieland Schmied sums up the traits of magic realist art:

14. Bowers, “Locations of Magic(al) Realism,” 40.

15. Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 148.

1. Sobriety and sharp focus; an unsentimental, unemotional vision;
2. The artist's vision is directed towards the everyday, banal, insignificant subjects; the absence of timidity with regard to painting the unpleasant;
3. A static, tightly unified structure, which often suggests a completely airless, glass-like space, which, in general, gives preference to the static rather than to the dynamic;
4. The eradication of the traces of the painting process, the liberation of the painting from all signs of the handicraft;
5. And finally a new spiritual relationship with the world of things.¹⁶

Consolidating the characteristics observed in the magical realist literature and the magic realist art, magical realist design can be stated to have the following traits:

1. It focuses on the commonplace objects that are considered “obvious” and are taken for granted.
2. The equivalents of “matter-of-factness” and “unsentimental vision” in design can be implied when the visual characteristics retain some resemblance to the previously known artefact in order for it to be understood against a known constant.
3. The inclusion of details when describing an object in literature can be compared to stressing the visual peculiarities that can be represented to provide an alternative view of an object.
4. It can be mass-produced and does not become a one-off artistic object.
5. The viewer discovers a deeper meaning through his/her interaction with the

16. Wieland Schmied, *Neue Sachlichkeit und Magischer Realismus in Deutschland, 1918-1933* (Hannover: Fackeltrager-Verlag Schmidt-Kuster, 1969), 26. Roh initially listed twenty-two traits that according to him stylistically distinguished Expressionist and Post Expressionist paints. He then reduced the traits to fifteen renaming Post Expressionism as New Objectivity. Wieland Schmied further condensed the fifteen traits to five by omitting the repetitive characteristics.

designed artefact. The meaning addresses or informs the viewer's relationship with commonplace objects and their influence on everyday culture.

These traits can be illustrated by using the example of the *Peepshow Wallpaper* designed by Gijs Bakker in 1992 for Droog Design (fig. 2). Made out of high quality craft paper, "This simple design of plain paper with cut out circles can be put directly on top of existing wall decoration. The wallpaper gives a new

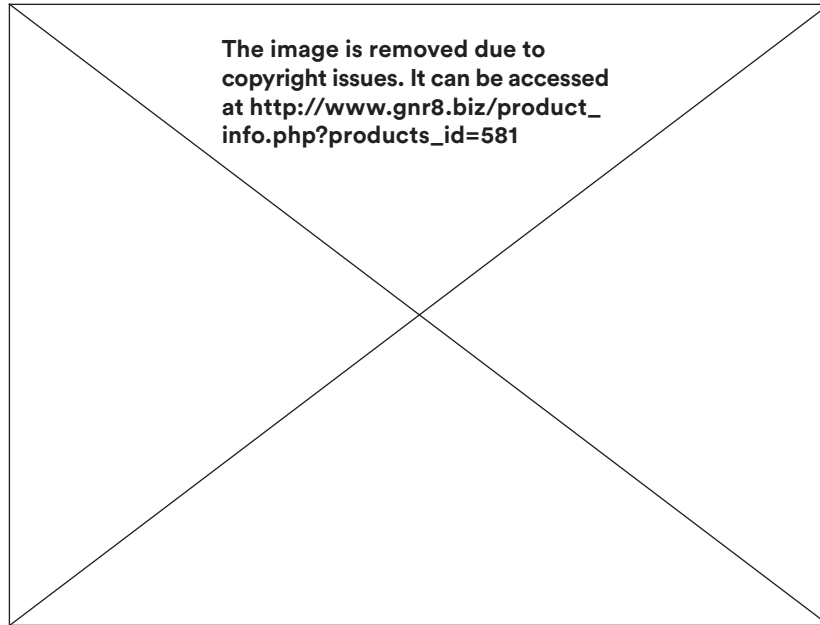


Fig. 2. Gijs Bakker, *Peepshow Wallpaper*, Droog Design, 1992.

look but with windows to look back on past memories.”¹⁷ The *Peepshow Wallpaper* is white in color and is devoid of all decorations that are usually found on conventional wallpaper designs. The wallpaper retains its conventional length

17. *A Human Touch*, ed. Remy Ramakers (Amsterdam: Droog, 2006), 20.

and width, which makes it usable for its basic function to cover and embellish walls. It is also presented and marketed to an audience as a consumer commodity so that it is not just perceived as a whimsical artistic expression.

The Oxford Dictionary defines the word “peepshow” as “a sequence of pictures viewed through a lens or hole set into a box, formerly offered as a public entertainment” or “an erotic or pornographic film viewed from a coin-operated booth.” Both these definitions reinforce that the circular cut outs can symbolize a window or a lens to look inside or beyond something. When pasted on the wall, the cutouts create an illusion of a space that exists beyond the wall. The name “peepshow” also attaches sexual connotations to an artefact devoid of any visuals relating to the same, which adds an element of humor. Instead of covering up the walls the design enables the wall to become a point of enquiry along with the wallpaper. The punched out holes featuring the wall enable in the creation of unexpected patterns through the holes and in turn no two spaces using the same wallpaper end up looking the same. Through this artefact, one can look at a wall as image from the past that has a story to tell and is given a place in the present. When experienced in a space, this artefact takes a viewer by surprise—instead of being a bystander, the viewer is now challenged to consider what wallpaper is, and what it can be. Artefacts such as the Peepshow Wallpaper make the viewer take note of the role that design plays in the reception and communication of meaning through these everyday objects.

What is the “Real” in Design?

As we have previously established, both literature and arts in the genre of magical realism believe “magic” to reside in the “everyday.” The everyday or the common place can then be stated as the “real” which enables magic to “organically grow within it.” It can be implemented through text or through visuals. Following the same premise in design, “real” can be noted as things that we unconsciously encounter everyday, from books to wrapping papers to packaging of artefacts or artefacts themselves.

In context of art, Roh states that by emphasizing the everyday, objects act as potential points of interest but need to be rediscovered so that new appreciations can emerge. Roh notes “objectivity” as one of the five points in his essay to elaborate on the same. According to art critic Seymour Menton “objectivity” for magic realists had two meanings, first, was elimination of the presence of an artist from the canvas and second was an interest in commonplace objects and endowing them with their own magical qualities.¹⁸ “Objectivity” as discussed by Roh also pertains to the focus of the magic realist painting on everyday objects, their stylistic representation and the meaning conveyed through them.¹⁹ He notes an elemental happiness re-enters art via this genre’s

18. Menton, “Magic Realism in the Arts, 1918-1981,” 21.

19. Irene Guenther, “Magic Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic,” in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 33-36. The term *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) was first used by German museum director Gustav Hartlub two years

ability to reflect the “obvious.”

He explains what he means by objectivity by giving an example:

When I see several apples on the table, I receive an extremely complex sensation (even without leaving the plane of aesthetic institution). I am attracted not just by breath of exquisite colors with which Impressionism entertained itself; not just by the varied designs of spherical, colored, and deformed shapes that captivated Expressionism. I am overcome by a much wider amalgam of colors, spatial forms, tactile representations, memories of smells and tastes; in short a truly unending complex that we understand by the name of thing.²⁰

Encountering the material reality of the represented objects in magic realist paintings stimulates a “complex sensation” in Roh. One can suggest that this “complex sensation” is due to the personal memories or previous interactions associated with the recognizable objects. For instance upon observing the tactile representation of apples, a viewer imagines their taste or smell on the basis of knowledge that he/she already has. This information is accompanied by any personal associations that he/she might have with an apple, like thinking about a specific apple orchard previously visited. Art theorist and perceptual psychologist, Rudolf Arnheim notes, “A person’s memory can hardly be called an integrated whole, it contains organized clusters of small or large range, families of concepts bound together by similarity, associations

before Roh used the term *Magischer Realismus* (Magic Realism). “Originally, both Roh’s Magic Realism and Hartlub’s New Objectivity denoted the same thing: a mode of art that had come into being with the demise of Expressionism and the aftermath of World War I [...] From the outset, Hartlub viewed his child as having two distinct characteristics, a right-wing, sometimes idyllic, Neoclassicist trait and a left-wing, political Verisitc one. Roh although acknowledging these variations, at first analyzed his child in more aesthetic, stylistic terms.”

20. Roh, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, 19.

of all kinds.”²¹ The cluster of concepts is based on past experiences, relating to taste, texture or place. These concepts are imagined when witnessing objects in the present scenario, in this case apples on a table. An object painted in great detail or its thorough description can therefore be used to engage a viewer on a personal level. As Zamora notes, “The objectivity that Roh celebrates in the visual arts emphasizes the capacity of the poetic image to communicate sensory material in objective, crystalline forms.”²² Using identifiable and representative forms also enables a wider interpretation of underlying meanings as the previously known thoughts of a viewer are juxtaposed with the artist’s rendition of the known.

The work titled *Scala Napoletana* (fig. 3) made by German artist Joseph Beuys in 1985 can be stated as an example of objectivity in sculpture. Beuys uses a ladder and a lead sphere as known objects and isolates them from their respective familiar surroundings. The combination of the two creates an unfamiliar image that not only communicates Beuys’ intended meaning but also a viewer’s interpretation of the same.

A viewer then starts to question his/her perception of these mundane objects as visualized by Beuys:

In *Scala Napoletana*, Beuys combined the ladder with two lead spheres that were cast especially for this work and installed without removing the casting burrs. The origins of the components thus differ in terms of the artist’s creative process:

21. Rudolf Arnheim, “The Past in the Present,” in *Visual Thinking* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 84.

22. Zamora, “Swords and Silver Rings: Objects and Expression in Magical Realism and The New World Baroque.”



Fig. 3. Joseph Beuys, *Scala Napoletana*, 1985.

The spheres represent sculpturally manufactured objects, while the ladder was taken from everyday life and not altered by Beuys [...] the story of the discovery of the ladder, and the original function of the object in everyday life must all be taken into account here, even if they do not at first provide any definite clues for interpreting the work.²³

The sculpture communicates the tension between the ladder as a found object whose origin is not known to an audience and the lead spheres that are installed with an evidence of their origin. A steel wire is used to tie the spheres together with the ladder in a slanted position. A viewer can imagine the ladder forcibly being held down to the ground due to the weight of the spheres. The ladder then acquires the ability to fly in a viewer's imagination. These interpretations are informed not only by the way the objects are constructed or modeled but

23. Kathrin Beben, "Scala Napoletana" in *Joseph Beuys. Parallel Processes*, ed. Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Marion Ackermann and Isabelle Malz (Düsseldorf: Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2010), 285-86.

also by their relative relationship to each other. A relative interaction of the functions, as well as the materiality of these objects, influences a viewer's perception. The utilitarian function of a ladder when resting against a wall is to support the action of climbing up or down. In this scenario, the slanted ladder is not resting against a physical surface but an imaginary one. The artist uses the slant to suggest the action of climbing up or down symbolically. Since the ladder is tied to the lead spheres through thin steel wires the action of climbing up the ladder is seen as extremely improbable and strange. For a viewer the "natural" function of a ladder is now transformed into an extraordinary function. This can be related back to Márquez when he writes about the "obvious" properties of ice as extraordinary traits, to make it magical in the novel *Hundred Years of Solitude*. The ice is admired for its transparency and its crystalline structure; similarly the ladder is now admired for its ability to enable one to climb up or down. Such observations are made as the viewer occupies the same space as the sculpture. It enables him/her to engage closely with the artwork. The sculpture is seen as a sum of parts, the parts being the two objects connected by the wire. The spatial engagement makes a viewer conscious of his/her presence and the role they can play in relation to the individual parts of the sculpture and as a whole. Consequently one finds oneself asking more questions than having received concrete answers about the role of objects in a sculptural context as opposed to when encountered in a conventional context.

An example of a similar investigation of "objectivity" in design pursued in this research is the embellished "Paper Cones" project (fig. 5). Paper cones are conventionally made out of discarded newspapers and are used as a "make-

do” utensil by street food vendors in India (fig. 4). To a native Indian, eating out of a paper cone brings back memories of eating street food. The object is not only an ingenious money-saving strategy by a vendor but is also an environmentally friendly option as the paper is reused before it is recycled. The ingenuity of objects like the paper cone often goes unappreciated due their ubiquity in day-to-day Indian life.

Following Roh’s idea to rediscover the known world through objects, a paper cone then becomes a point of interest. To draw attention to cultural practices associated with a paper cone, a rediscovery of the object must be made. The desired aim can be achieved when one investigates the context in which the object exists along with the formal qualities of the object itself. The context for a paper cone is the streetscape of India, which is an amalgamation of local and global visuals and practices. From vendors occupying streets in front of the shopping malls to the never-ending traffic on roads, it is easy for a paper cone to get lost in the chaos. Its materiality does not command attention from viewers since the practice of eating from a paper cone is naturalized. As a result, the user discards the object after it fulfills its purpose. For a paper cone to be valued as a cultural object it needs to be perceived as something that is precious, rather than disposable; a thing of physical or emotional worth. In Indian culture, “preciousness” as a material quality is predominantly associated with metals such as gold and silver, ornamentation and money. The altered design uses laser cut Indian motifs as elements of visual ornamentation, endowing a cone with value. The materials used to create them are silver and gold toned papers, handmade and colorful papers and even real Indian currency. The motifs



Fig. 4. A street vendor selling food in paper cones in India.

are repeated to create patterns that are laser cut on the new papers. They not only function as decorative visuals but also transform the respective papers. The patterns perforate the papers, which is then shaped into a cone. Retaining the basic structure of a cone and manipulating its materiality and visual appearance puts the viewer in a conflict due to the blurred distinction between its status as a purely functional everyday object and a unique designed artefact. This cone then performs an altered function; it is not only a utensil but also an ornamental object worthy of appreciation. As these cones now replace the conventional paper cones, their interpretation challenges their conventional perception as unimportant objects. The reconstructed paper cone provokes thought and engagement; a rediscovery of the original object. Interacting with these unconventional objects starts a discourse on the perception of everyday objects and what is recognized as or deemed valuable in a culture.



Fig. 5. Malika Soin, Paper Cones, 2013.

What is the “Magical” in Design?

Magic is what takes us by surprise; it surpasses logical reasoning, empowers imagination and can evoke happiness. It enables one to look at the world around in a new fashion where the improbable can be rationalized. As in art and literature, magical realism provides the discipline of graphic design an opportunity to explore what can be constituted as “magical.”

Faris quotes Chilean writer Isabel Allende:

Magical realism is a literary device or a way of seeing in which there is space for the invisible forces that move the world: dreams, legends, myths, emotion, passion, history. All these forces find a place in the absurd, unexplainable aspects of magical realism [...] It is the capacity to see and to write about all the dimensions of reality.²⁴

If “real” is equated to the everyday designed artefacts that perform their conventional functions, what are the equivalents of myths, dreams and fantasy?

What are the magical aspects of mundane objects that design can reveal?

This exploration provides an opportunity to consider how design tools used for conventional communication can be rearticulated to create “emphasized” communication, one which fosters a revitalized appreciation. It prompts us to investigate deeper into the expectations of a viewer and how they are perpetuated in order to overturn them. An everyday object is deemed magical when, on the course of performing its conventional functions, it reveals insights about its symbolic role and place in culture.

24. Wendy B. Faris, “The Question of the Other: Cultural Critiques of Magical Realism,” *Janus Head: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature, Continental Philosophy, Phenomenological Psychology, and the Arts* 5, no.2 (Fall 2002): 107.

The project “Pigment,” (fig. 7) pursued as a part of this thesis, can be stated as an example to illustrate the above stated point. Pigment is the visual transformation of an Indian paper soap package. The particular soap strips investigated here are an example of a commonplace design found in everyday Indian culture. The paper soap is used when travelling, owing to its compact form and dimensions. Indian marketplace is saturated with skin-whitening products that are applied on skin such as creams and soaps. A user is made to believe that the frequency of their application on skin is directly proportional to the whitening effect of their skin color. They are advertised and packaged using images of light-skinned women. It comes as no surprise that the image used on top of the soap strips package also perpetuates the notion that beauty is directly proportional to fair skin. The top of the package displays a fair woman washing her face in a joyful gesture signifying her satisfaction with the effectiveness of this product (fig. 6). These connotations of beauty are prevalent in post-colonial India. Through magical realist design one can intervene in this object to reveal it as an agent of cultural ideology.

The visual intervention has been accomplished by exaggerating the form of the paper strips to reveal its ideological function. The two dimensional surface of paper is transformed into a textured three-dimensional surface. The paper is slit in the shape of an X at various places, the slits are folded outwards and the multiple strips of folded papers are layered on top of each other to create a texture. The soap strips used are brown and white in color. This visual treatment is used as a metaphor for skin. The object can be appreciated for the beautiful intricate pattern before peeling showcases rich texture due to the layered brown



Fig. 6. Conventional paper soap packages found in India.

and white paper. However, the patterns start to fade as the user peels through the layers of soap. The color transitions from an intricately crafted brown surface to a blank white space. The effect of this transformation is strengthened, as the user is directly responsible for the act of peeling. The relatable shape and scale contribute in enhancing the experience of the human body with the modified artefact. The object visualizes notions of beauty and skin color as being relative and ironically presents it to a viewer. Once opened, the modified content of the package imparts unexpected information that forces a viewer to consciously evaluate the visuals consumed in a culture. Additionally, due to its coarse nature, the texture can be interpreted as a grater, implying that by using these soap strips one can scrape off skin color. This complies with the cultural notion of using soap to lighten skin color. The experience of using the soap is intensified due to the sharp folded edges of paper which further lends to a violent visual.

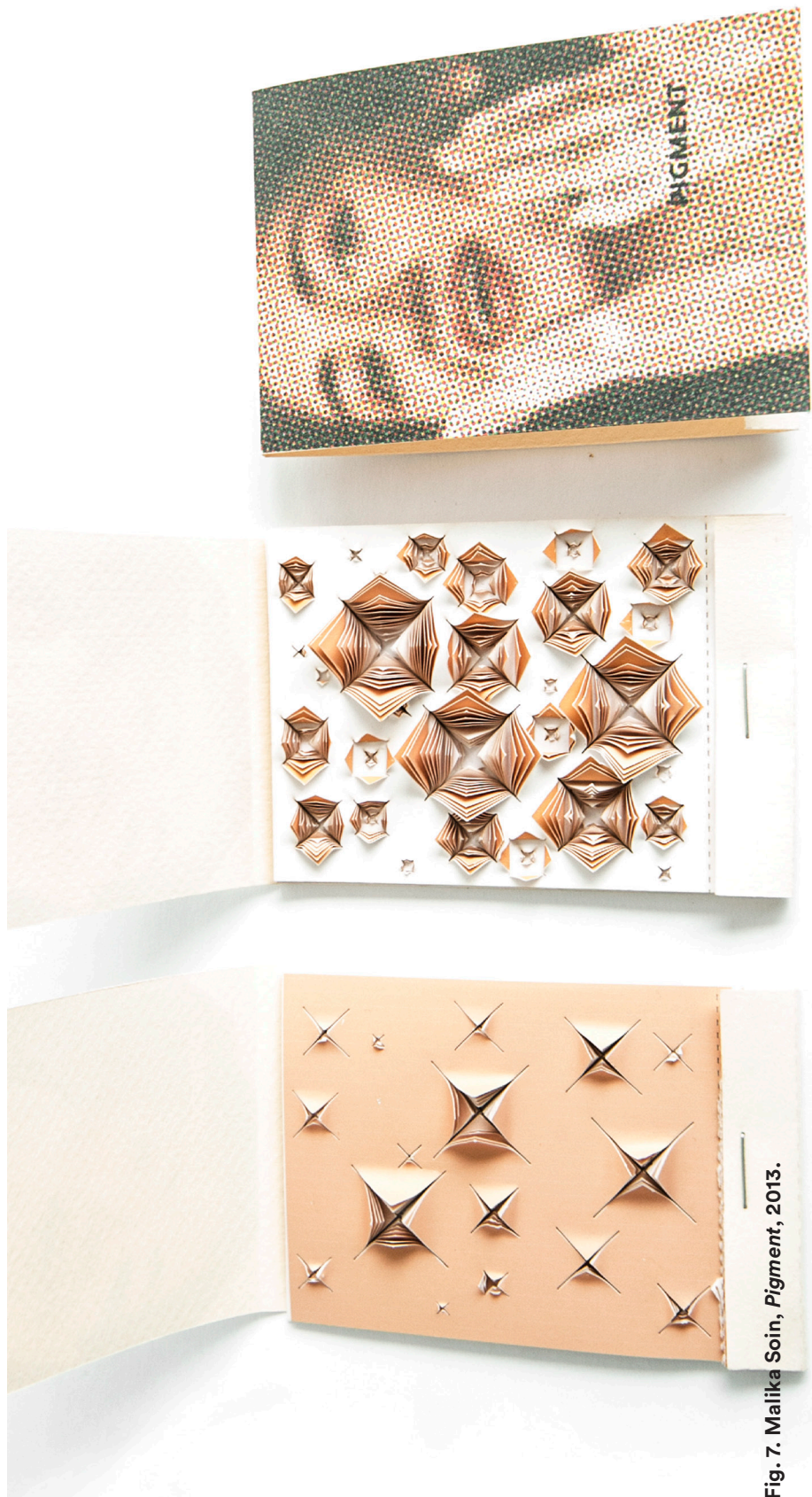


Fig. 7. Malika Soin, *Pigment*, 2013.

Defamiliarization

Defamiliarization was introduced by Russian formalists of the early Twentieth Century as a theme in art. Russian writer and critic, Victor Shklovsky coined the term in his essay “Art as Technique” written in 1917.

Through his essay Shklovsky discussed the perception of the familiar and the function of art:

If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic. Thus, for example, all of our habits retreat into the area of the unconsciously automatic; [...] the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.²⁵

Here Shklovsky writes about prolonging the process of perception since habitual perception leads to unconscious responses. The question that arises is how does one prolong perception? The genre of magical realism, in the process of rediscovering the everyday, transforms familiar elements into unfamiliar entities. As an example of defamiliarization influencing the perception of text, one can note the following paragraph from Indian author, Salman Rushdie’s short story, “The Harmony of The Spheres”:

I was an invader from Mars, one of many such dangerous beings who had sneaked into Britain when certain essential forms of vigilance had been relaxed. Martians had great gifts of mimicry, so they could fool yuman beans into believing

25. Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique” in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reiss (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 11-12.

they were beans of the same stripe, and of course they bred like fruit-flies on a pile of rotten bananas.²⁶

In this passage, he is describing how the narrator of the story felt out of place in a new country and metaphorically compares himself to a Martian. He defamiliarizes the reading of the text using two strategies: 1) By using juxtaposition to disorient the user 2) By using spelling as a tool to manipulate the text. Through the juxtaposition of two otherwise unrelated images, the reader is confused. This tension prolongs the process of perception. By using misspelled words, a reader's understanding of the use of language is defamiliarized as he/she has to read through the text at least twice to realize that "human beings" is actually spelt as "yuman beans." Since the misspelled word is phonetically similar to "human beings" it becomes harder to comprehend the change in a narrative. A reader is then made conscious of "the act of reading" itself, since the content is read assuming that words are spelt abiding by the rules of language. The text reveals our affinity to recognize words through sounds rather than their written structures.

"To make sense of the world, we must penetrate its incoherent surface and lay bare its deep structures; we must grasp not its hidden meanings but its hidden workings."²⁷ Defamiliarization can be used as a tool to make sense of the world we live in, to explain the "hidden workings" of structures we become a part of

26. Salman Rushdie, "The Harmony of the Spheres," in *East, West* (New York: Vintage International, 1996), 127.

27. Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose: Viktor Shklovsky*, trans. Benjamin Sher, intro. Gerald L. Bruns (Champaign and London: Dakely Archive Press, 1991), ix.

or functions we perform. A bubble wrap can be stated as an additional example to elaborate on the same. Bubble wrap is a banal object encountered in an everyday scenario, which is commonly used to protect or cover a valued object from damage during shipping. It is discarded after the object no longer needs to be protected. However one can investigate an alternate function that the bubble wrap performs. The immediate instinct to burst the bubbles of a bubble wrap is an example of how an object that was manufactured to protect fragile items now has the capability to display the human nature to destruct. Bubble wrap might never find place in a museum, but the fact that it displays human behavior along with performing a prescribed function, makes it worthy of investigation. These alternate abstract functions work their way in the society we live in and we adapt to them unconsciously. The process of revealing such findings through defamiliarization can be explored in order to make people conscious of their habits, preferences, decisions and conventions.

Defamiliarization; Culture and Graphic Design

Designer and Curator Andrew Blauvelt notes that, a graphic designer working within the frame of a shared culture uses culture as an important communication device. However it can be approached by a designer in two ways, first, as an observer and consumer of artefacts in a shared culture and second, removing oneself from their stance as a consumer and acting as a producer and provider of these artefacts.²⁸ This understanding of the designer also affects the cultural artefacts he or she produces. When a designer takes the first stance, acting as an observer and consumer of artefacts within a culture, he/she looks at artefacts not as definitive solutions to design problems but as evidence of culture. Analyzing and interpreting the meaning communicated through an artefacts' aesthetic, symbolic and utilitarian functions can bring to the surface "hidden workings" of a culture.

Social psychologist and sociologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton state:

Most people much of the time act out relationships already "scripted" by the culture, thus developing selves that fit the mold. By adopting the intentions pervading his or her culture, a person does not feel determined or coerced; usually he or she goes about building "what comes naturally." [...] The self through its own seemingly autonomous choices replicates order of its culture and so becomes a part of that order and a means for its further replication.²⁹

28. Andrew Blauvelt, "In and Around: Cultures of Design and the Design of Cultures Part I," *Emigre* 32, 1994, <http://www.emigre.com/Editorial.php?sect=1&id=23> (accessed February 23, 2014).

29. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, "Object Relations and The Development of The Self," in *The Meaning of Things; Domestic Symbols and The Self* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 105.

The above stated concept of development of self through culture and the role of self in culture's duplication provides an opportunity to the designer to analyze his/her own unconscious role in perpetuating the "natural." The findings can be used to bring to notice the choices made by one in order to follow the "scripted" nature of culture. This can be achieved by defamiliarizing the conventional visual representation of cultural artefacts. The unfamiliar visual representation of artefacts challenges the interpretation of meaning understood through consensus. It is also vital to note that elements in a culture do not exist in isolation, their function and meaning is understood through association, which is in relation to other elements. The cohabitation can also be disrupted by isolating artefacts from their existing networks in order to be looked at from a distance.

Pioneer of contemporary material culture studies Judy Attfield notes, "There is something quite natural about 'things'. Things seem to have been there, defining the world physically—through such objects as walls that determine boundaries separating spaces and doors that give or prevent access."³⁰

Attfield further states that it is difficult to define "things," as they have no special qualities and their abundance makes one think that they have always been present.³¹ One can question the role of design in the ubiquity of "things."

Blauvelt states, "While the activity of design is pervasive and the numbers of

30. Judy Attfield, "The Meaning of Design: Things With Attitude," in *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2000), 14.

31. Ibid.

professionals who engage in it are quite vast in any modern society, most design escapes notice, emerging from the landscape or entering the world rather quietly, often anonymously.”³² Blauvelt uses “design” as a verb in the first line followed by the use of “design” as a noun, denoting “things.” One of the reasons for an inconspicuous nature of design is mass production. When things are in abundance their ability to command attention from a viewer is reduced since they are easily available. Predictability of the performance of design can be noted as another reason for it to escape notice and blend into the background. Therefore to challenge the invisibility of design one has to challenge the habitual, the abundant and the predictable functions of the design in everyday.

Blauvelt cites Georges Perec, a French philosopher, as an example of someone who explores the quotidian. He states that Perec speaks of the quotidian in a poetic fashion, asking us to question the commonplace and the things we have become habitual to. “His poetic inquisition of the everyday affords design an opportunity to reimagine itself and to engage the world in new and inventive ways.”³³ This research is an attempt to reimagine design by employing the framework of magical realism to engage with the world.

As pursued here, magical realist design engages with commonplace objects found in Indian culture. As an East Indian graphic designer, the familiarity with

32. Andrew Blauvelt, “Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life” in *Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003), 14-15.

33. Ibid., 21-22.



Fig. 8. Matchbox covers with images of babies are used here as an example of oddities found in commonplace design existing in Indian culture.

the events and elements that exist in everyday life, back in India, restrained them from being looked at as subjects of interest. After relocating to Canada, the absence of previously familiar objects created a void in my everyday life. This created a longing for what was not within reach and brought back memories that were associated with life lived in India. The conflict between

the physical absence of familiar objects and their presence in memory created a space where boundaries between probable and improbable were blurred. Memories are not an actual account of events occurred in past; they are a version of past as remembered in present. Owing to this conflict the actual and the imagined were amalgamated. What had once gone unnoticed as it blended in the conventional visual spectrum, was now unhinged from its original context and seen in isolation. For example, the matchboxes bearing images of children (fig. 8) commonly found in India were previously overlooked. However one questions the relevance of the images of children on an object like a matchbox, as their relationship cannot be logically explained. Questions like these enhance the perception of objects and can inspire connections that would not have normally been made.

In order to defamiliarize everyday Indian objects, their form, content and context are reimagined in order to challenge the communication expected by an audience and invoking a sense of wonder. Commonplace objects are closely related to social practices and traditions or are transformed due to outside influences. Therefore, they are imbued with symbolic meanings. By reimagining their visual representation one can unpack these meanings in order for the object to be seen in a new light. Defamiliarizing the object can reveal its role in perpetuating Indian cultural ideologies.

There are several peculiarities in the Indian culture that are associated with commonplace objects. One such peculiarity is the use of everyday objects as

jugaad.³⁴ Jugaad is a Hindi colloquial term meaning an innovative solution to a problem. In order to find quick innovative solutions to a problem at hand, a single object can be used for several functions. There can be several affordances of a single artefact that are not conceived when developed. This quality of manipulating the physical functionality by users of objects to find innovative solutions is deeply rooted in the culture. Exploring such peculiarities gives an insight into practices and rituals that are performed on an everyday basis by people. An investigative approach towards banal Indian objects can reveal a dense network of relations that objects build with people who experience them.

34. Ramendra Singh, Vaibhav Gupta and Akash Mondal, "Jugaad—From 'Making Do' and 'Quick Fix' to an Innovative, Sustainable and Low-Cost Survival Strategy at the Bottom of the Pyramid," *International Journal of Rural Management*, no. 8 (2012): 87. "Until recent times, Indian jugaad was commonly constructed to be a frugal form of innovation engendered from the lack of resources and unhealthy financial conditions, and has been recently imported in the management literature."

How is the Magic Revealed?

How can magical realist design defamiliarize everyday objects in order to reveal cues about culture? To answer this question, two common approaches used by magical realist literature and paintings are identified. The first approach can be stated as the recreation of banal objects by endowing them with unconventional characteristics through text or visual forms. The second common approach can be noted as the juxtaposition of the everyday objects with elements from a context they are not usually associated with, in order to render the familiar as strange. “Reconstructing the Object” and “Strange Juxtapositions” are two suggested approaches that are explored in order to defamiliarize the everyday. These methodologies are used in the context of graphic design to achieve the intended goal and are described in detail.

Reconstructing the Object

Graphic designers John J. Rheinfrank and Katherine A. Welker state, “We must not think of objects as nouns with static meanings, but as verbs with the dynamic capacity to create multiple meanings through the actions they evoke.”³⁵ The reconstruction of culturally situated objects through magical realist design is an attempt to create an altered version of the real to render it unfamiliar. This

35. John J. Rheinfrank and Katherine A. Welker, “Meaning,” in *Looking Closer 3: Classic Writings on Graphic Design*, ed. Michael Bierut, Jessica Helfand, Steven Heller and Rick Poyner (New York: Allworth Press, 1999), 167.

process involves analyzing the object's conventional form, function and symbolic representation in a given context. The object is reconstructed in order to communicate a new meaning. The interpretation of new meaning is effectively achieved only when the reconstructed object resides in the same context as its conventional self. The viewer should be familiar with the conventional object in order to experience the change in perception through the object's altered form. Reconstruction as a mode of rediscovery can reveal relationships and associations one unconsciously builds with objects.

This possibility can be explored using graphic design tools. Elaborating on this point, visual theorist and cultural critic Johanna Drucker states:

At the level of granularity we are used to experiencing in daily business, matter appears to operate with a certain consistency according to Newton's laws. But at the atomic and subatomic level, these consistencies dissolve into probabilities, not certainties, providing contingent, rather than absolute, identities. We should simply think of letters, words, typefaces, graphic forms in the same way. A slight vertigo can be induced by considering a page as a force field, a set of elements in contingent relation, a set of possibilities, instructions for a potential event. But every reading reinvents a text, produces it, as an intervention, and that is a notion we have long felt comfortable invoking. I'm merely shifting our attention from the "produced" nature of signified meaning to the "productive" character of signifying field.³⁶

Drucker proposes that design can be looked at from a scientific perspective.

In this perspective, the commonplace designed object is no longer confined to a static meaning. Rather, the focus shifts to a field of potentiality; the object is broken down into elements. Like atoms, these elements such as letters, words,

36. Johanna Drucker, "Graphical readings and the Visual Aesthetics of Textuality," *Indiana University Press*, no.16 (2006): 274-275.

typefaces, graphic forms, contain identities that are not absolute, but contingent, carrying a multiplicity of possibilities. Design in this sense is not a certainty, but rather a potentiality. By reconstructing, the possibilities contained within these elements and their contingent relationships are explored.

A proposed first step towards reconstructing an object is its identification from amongst everyday culture. Roh notes that an act of selection is already an act of creation.³⁷ For example Márquez's description of particular everyday objects as magical or Kanoldt's selection of specific objects to be painted next to each other against many other possible ones. The final result is affected by the subjective decision of the designer. The decision-making involved in the selection of objects poses questions about their importance in a particular culture. Is the object important because it efficiently fulfills its intended function? Or is it important as the object evokes nostalgia? Does it yield insights about its cultural connotations? Does it provide evidence about a society that consumes it?

The second step towards reconstructing the object is to deconstruct not only the structure and utilitarian function of an object but also its symbolic function in a culture. Jean Baudrillard writes about objects and their capability to signify meanings transcending beyond their utilitarian functions, "An object's functionality is the very thing that enables it to transcend its main 'function' in the direction of a secondary one, to play a part, to become a combining element, an

37. Franz Roh, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, 16.

adjustable item, within a universal system of signs.”³⁸ Once deconstructed, a designer then rebuilds the object to reveal unconscious associations that an everyday object has with an audience. Objects not only efficiently perform their primary functions but can also instigate happiness, excitement, and feeling of nostalgia. “Objects store and possess, take in and breathe out the emotions with which they have been associated.”³⁹ For instance, a child’s stuffed teddybear as an object provides comfort and security due to its huggable form and materiality. The fluffiness and the button eyes project qualities like cuteness and contribute in gaining love and affection from an audience. One can reconstruct a teddybear by covering it with spikes that are stuffed with cotton. The pointed visual form of spikes is associated with danger and emotions of fear or hate. Even though the object retains its material qualities, it is visually transformed into something that is potentially harmful. This act of manipulating visual forms stimulates one to think about the aspects of objects that are taken for granted but notably contribute in performing a symbolic function.

In, “A Porous Vessel,” Daniel Miller describes a character’s relationship with the objects she owns:

Elia’s world is that of magical realism; it is not just the ghosts that are conjured, but also the way she shifts one out of a grounding in an ordinary, plain, rational and often colourless world; the extremely sensual way she uses her hands, fingers in particular, often drawing arcs in the air or tracing on the surface of the sofa, in wave-like motions which make her tales of love and emotion appear as shapes and bodies in themselves.⁴⁰

38. Jean Baudrillard, “Naturalness and Functionality,” in *The System of Objects* (London, New York: Verso, 2005), 67.

39. Daniel Miller, “A Porous Vessel,” in *The Comfort of Things* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 38.

40. *Ibid.*, 34.

Taking the position that magical realism draws from an understanding that emotions can be visualized and made concrete; the object can be defamiliarized by putting a conventional emotional response in conflict or by overwhelming an audience by revealing the obvious. The teddybear can be extended to encompass both points. The object is now covered with Velcro but retains its fluffiness. The act of hugging it is now forceful as the teddybear keeps sticking to clothes. Through an altered materiality, the emotions of comfort and security experienced by an act of hugging are made obvious. Velcro's material qualities are used to symbolize attachment that one experiences with the object. It raises the question of an object's relation to its materiality. This altered construction of a teddybear visibly communicates its seemingly invisible potential to emote.

We live with specific material and aesthetic associations with objects. The purpose of objects and what they project is communicated by their visual form and materiality. The above stated examples explain how a reconstructed object can individually challenge the material and aesthetic associations. To further the point: A flower vase in a conventional setting is used for its utilitarian function of providing a vessel to hold flowers. It is also used as a decorative object that simultaneously compliments the narrative of aesthetic pleasure associated with flowers. Beauty, femininity and elegance can be stated as typical qualities that are associated with a vase. These qualities are created through form, color, texture and materials. What might a reconstructed vase look like and how can it challenge the conventions associated with a vase? *The Snotty Vases* designed by Dutch designer Marcel Wanders in 2001

can be cited as an example of a reconstructed vase (fig. 9). Wanders designed a collection of five different vases using 3D scans of airborne mucus. To retain their functionality in an everyday context, the 3D scans of mucus are enlarged and recreated using polyamide. The Snotty Vases efficiently perform their utilitarian function to hold a flower but the strange visual form transforms them into an extraordinary object. Since one has always perceived mucus to be an unpleasant visual form, its transformation into a vase creates a conflict of emotions. It becomes harder to conclude whether the visual form should be interpreted as pleasant or unpleasant. What was once thought of as familiar and insignificant now has the ability to challenge one's perception of beauty and its relation to visual form.



Fig. 9. Marcel Wanders,
The Snotty Vases, 2001.

Strange Juxtapositions

In the context of magical realism, strange juxtapositions can be defined as the overlap of two opposing elements that allude to a harmonious coexistence. As previously discussed, painters belonging to the genre of magical realism used strange juxtapositions in their paintings. Professor of English and Comparative Literature Theo D'haen identifies that paintings become magical when two paradoxical elements are depicted together in a photographic naturalistic style.⁴¹ The use of oppositions can also be noted in magical realist literature when real life descriptions are interrupted by magical instances. An excerpt from Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* can be stated as an example. The paragraph begins: "A trickle of blood came out under the door, crossed the living room, went out into the street, [...] crossed through the parlor, hugging the walls so as not to stain the rugs."⁴² The first few words make the reader believe that he/she is witnessing an ordinary event, till the detailed description of the trail empowers the blood with a life of its own, consciously making its journey through places.

Professor of English and Film studies Stephen Slemon notes: In the language of narration in a magic realist text, a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working toward the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other [...] a situation which creates disjunction within each

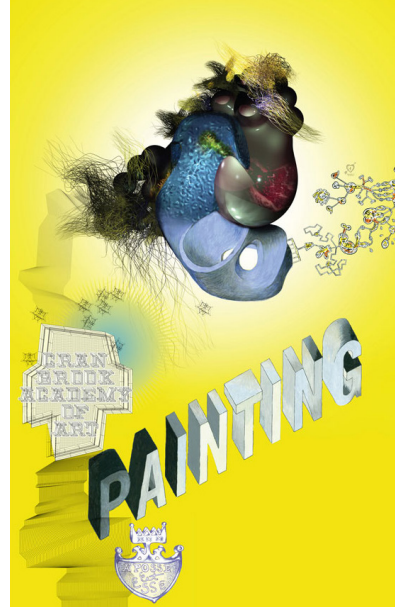
41. Theo D'haen, "Magical Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers," in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 191.

42. Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 129-30.

Fig. 10. Poster by Elliott Earls for Cranbrook Academy of Arts, Department of Painting, 2008.



Fig. 11. Poster by Elliott Earls for Cranbrook Academy of Arts, Department of 3D Design, 2008.



of the separate discursive systems, rendering them with gaps, absences, and silences.⁴³

Slemon discusses the effects of two opposing elements as causing an interruption in communication of meaning. These interruptions do not result in an inefficient interpretation of meaning, rather a prolonged one. The interruptions effectively create a pause where immediate conclusions cannot be made—the viewer must stop and contemplate what is being communicated. It creates a space for the possibility of unexpected meanings.

To illustrate an example of the opposition created through the elements of visual representation one can look at the poster design by Elliott Earls for the Cranbrook Academy of Art (fig. 10 and 11). Earls creates visual oppositions in

43. Stephen Slemon, "Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse," *Canadian Literature*, no.116 (Spring 1988): 10-11.

the posters by using contrasting elements. His play on our perceptions of two and three-dimensional visual elements within the same signifying field induces a sense of uneasiness or confusion in the viewer. Though the two elements are recognized individually, the sum of their parts creates a new dimension. The poster's design oscillates between ugly and intriguing. The conflict between disgust, intrigue and absurdity leaves the viewer questioning their expectations of what an art school poster should look like. One cannot decide whether to appreciate the meticulousness that has gone in the creation of these posters or dislike them on the account of their seemingly deformed aesthetic.

Strange juxtapositions can also be applied through the use of metaphors. American cognitive linguist and Professor of Liberal Arts and Sciences George Lakoff and Mark Johnson state, "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another."⁴⁴ By visually placing together the two things that are compared in a metaphor, an opposition between the literal meaning and the metaphorical meaning is created.

Through this strategy, the abstract thought is visually represented in order to create a strange juxtaposition. An example of this can be illustrated through Irma Boom's design for textile artist Sheila Hicks' monograph, *Weaving as Metaphor* (fig. 12). To further the narrative of the project Boom uses serrated edges for the book in order to allude to a woven texture of a fabric. Boom calls into question our perceptions of 1) what a book is and 2) what fabric is. The

44. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, "Concepts We Live By," in *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003), 5.

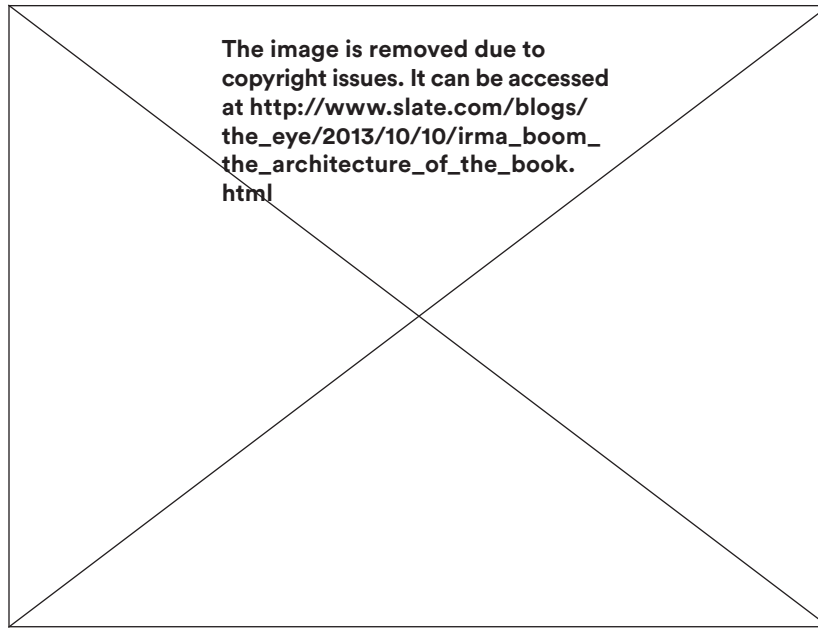


Fig. 12. Book design by Irma Boom for textile artist Sheila Hicks, *Weaving as Metaphor*, 2006.

conventionally smooth edges of the book are frayed leading to the conflict of whether the piece is a book or a collection of fabric swatches.⁴⁵ When opening and viewing the images of fabrics in the book and holding the book by its frayed edges, a viewer can experience a sensory engagement with the book. The cover is embossed with an impression of the fabric, which further enhances the “tactile feeling” of the book. The type size runs from bigger to smaller imitating the natural inconsistencies of a woven fabric supporting the metaphor. Instead of being simply the carrier of images of fabric, the book is transformed into a piece of fabric itself.

The project “Clay” (fig. 15-18) pursued as part of this thesis can be stated as a third example to elaborate on the methodology of “strange juxtapositions.”

45. Boom patented the use of a circular saw to cut the edges of the book. Unfortunately the author is unable to locate the source for this information.



Fig. 13. A potter in the process of making a clay cup (kulhad) found in India.



Fig. 14. Conventional form of clay cups (kulhads) shown in use in an Indian context.

Here two familiar objects belonging to two different cultural contexts are juxtaposed in order for them to be perceived as extraordinary. The first object is a clay cup called Kulhad, (fig. 13 and 14) from an everyday Indian context; the second is a coffee sleeve, conventionally found in a western context. A kulhad is a cup made out of fired clay and is not glazed or painted. Clay cups are made in bulk by local potters and predominantly used for serving tea at roadside tea stalls. Kulhads are meant to be smashed on the ground once their

purpose is fulfilled. Since they are made out of clay their disposal is easy and environmentally friendly. They have been valued for their materiality and the effect they have on the aroma of the tea. Breathing in the aroma of the tea is essential to the experience of drinking from the clay cup. Even though the clay cups have many merits, they are now being replaced with plastic. The intent of the investigation was to defamiliarize a kulhad in Indian culture in order for it to be looked at as an object worthy of rediscovery and not forgotten with time. The Kulhad is juxtaposed with a disposable coffee sleeve in order to make it unfamiliar. The coffee sleeve imitates the texture of a clay cup and is branded as “clay.” The sleeve is branded so that it resembles its conventional visual form found in a western cultural context. For example a sleeve from Starbucks bears its logo, similarly the identity of the brand “clay” is printed on the textured coffee sleeve so that an audience can relate it to a western context. For an Indian in a western cultural context, a coffee cup wrapped in this sleeve poses as a substitute for the experience of holding a clay cup and the feeling of its textured surface (fig. 18). The textured sleeve evokes nostalgia and can be marketed to Indians living away from home (fig. 17).

In India, a kulhad wrapped in this sleeve would appear strange. This juxtaposition is created to rediscover the kulhad by drawing attention to its qualities (fig. 15). In keeping with their origins, the altered sleeve and the clay cup each retain their conventional proportions. The sleeve meant for a coffee cup placed on a palm-sized kulhad produces a disjointed image—the sleeve consumes the clay cup so that only its rim can be seen.

Physically a kulhad wrapped in a sleeve would be protected from being broken into pieces. Visually, the sleeve signifies that the clay cup is a precious and valued artefact that needs to be cared for and protected. However, in actual use, the sleeve functions as an obstruction. This experience calls to question what it means to add value to objects. The component that is meant to add value in fact diminishes it, thus bringing to light the worth of the original.



Fig. 15. Malika Soin, *Clay*, 2014.
A kulhad wrapped in the designed textured sleeve.



Fig. 16. Malika Soin, *Clay*, 2014.
Close up of the texture of the
sleeve.



Fig. 17. Malika Soin, *Clay*, 2014.
Packaging of the designed
textured sleeve.



Fig. 18. Malika Soin, *Clay*, 2014. The texture sleeve in use in the western context, wrapped on a coffee cup.

Conclusion

Magical realist design is not only used to emphasize the magic in the everyday but also is an exercise in developing new ways of visual representation as a graphic designer. How can visuals surprise, confront perceptions, reveal and communicate hidden meanings? All these questions enable the exploration of different ways in which design can be experienced in the commonplace.

Writer and curator Louise Schouwenberg asks, “Where, then, is the soul that people seek? How can human longing for immaterial qualities, for sensory experiences that give rise to meaning, be met?”⁴⁶ These questions can be answered by revealing the magical in the mundane, by making one look closer and take notice of the seemingly insignificant. This is achieved by enhancing the tactile engagement we have with objects and by manipulating visual forms. Here design elevates the status of an investigated object from being solely used for its primary function to being valued as an evidence of cultural and social practices. The chores we perform, the choices we make are all based on an elaborate network of cultural, social and psychological networks associated with the everyday. Magical realist design can reveal the construction of self through culture, by invoking a conscious realization of our routine functions and choices. This leads to a deeper understanding of the world we inhabit.

46. Louise Schouwenberg, “For the Love of Things,” in *Toward a New Interior: An Anthology of Interior Design Theory*, ed. Lois Weinthal (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011), 196.

As a graphic designer displaced from Indian culture, this research not only reveals the magic in the mundane through magical realist design but also visually represents one's version of a cultural memory. "The rhythmic process of internal thought is incapable of stopping. It is as if there is an ocean of cultural memory within us all. Its vast scale cannot be measured in any empirical way since it is impossible to locate its precise origin or its present or future state. The only form of 'measurement' is therefore subjective."⁴⁷ The investigated objects are not only revealed as valued artefacts in a culture but they also represent memories associated with them. These memories are related to everyday cultural practices and their interpretation through this process can act as a measure for cultural memory.

In literature, Marcel Proust "regains time" in an attempt to capture the past by writing down his memories and delving in even the most mechanical parts of life:

Marcel Proust sought time lost and rediscovered in trivial, everyday useful objects. Memories of personal experiences were considered in his time, the early twentieth century, as invaluable components of the personality, and these memories seemed intimately connected with the objects with which one surrounded oneself. Functional things, which we normally assume to play no significant role apart from their functionality, were expected to absorb, as it were, one's personal secrets. They were not things one would simply dispose of, for they were a means of access to tender feelings that were at risk of disappearing forever into the mists of memory.⁴⁸

47. Jonathan Warwicker, *The Floating World: Ukiyo-e* (Göttingen: Steidl Mack, 2008), 60.

48. Marcel Proust, "Time Regained," in *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin and Andreas Mayor (New York: Random House, 1981), 192-93.

As a designer this path of seeking memories in time required a similar enquiry of acknowledging the seemingly trivial details of the time spent in experiencing Indian culture. Upon retrospection these details were found to revolve around objects and experiencing those objects in an everyday culture. The investigated objects are not only revealed as magical but also serve as anchor points of memory in time, space and place. The objects made during this thesis, apart from performing their functional roles, are capable of comforting an Indian away from home. The objects together constitute a “survival kit,” treasured for its potential to evoke memories of the past lost in time.

Bibliography

- Ackermann, Marion, Isabelle Malz and Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, eds. "1968-1972." In *Joseph Beuys: Parallel Processes*, 189-220. Düsseldorf: Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2010.
- Ahmadian, Moussa and Ateih Ratafi. "An Analysis of Allende's 'Ines of My Soul' from the View Point of Magical Realism: A Case Study." *English Language and Literature Studies* 2, no. 1 (March 2012): 15-20.
- Arnheim, Rudolf. "The Past in The Present." In *Visual Thinking*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969.
- Attfield, Judy. *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life*. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2000.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Reality Effect." In *The Rustle of Language*. Translated by Richard Howard, 141-148. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *The System of Objects*. London, New York: Verso, 2005.
- Blauvelt, Andrew. "In and Around: Cultures of Design and the Design of Cultures Part I." *Emigre Essays*, (1994). <http://www.emigre.com/Editorial.php?sect=1&id=23> (accessed February 23, 2014).
- . "Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life." In *Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life*, by Andrew Blauvelt, 14-37. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003.
- Bowers, Maggie Ann. *Magic(al) Realism: The New Critical Idiom*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, "Object Relations and The Development of The Self." In *The Meaning of Things; Domestic Symbols and The Self*, 90-120. London: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- D'haen, Theo L. "Magical Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers." In *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Edited by Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora, 191-208. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995.
- Drucker, Johanna. "Graphical Readings and the Visual Aesthetics of Textuality." *Indiana University Press*, no.16 (2006): 267-276.
- Faris, Wendy B. "The Question of the Other: Cultural Critiques of Magical Realism." *Janus Head: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature, Continental Philosophy, Phenomenological Psychology, and the Arts* 5,

no.2 (Fall 2002): 101-119.

———. *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004.

Lury, Celia. "Exchanging Things: The Economy and Culture." In *Consumer Culture*, 32-55. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011.

Marquez, Gabriel Garcia. *Strange Pilgrims*, New York: Knopf, 1993.

———. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Translated by Gregory Rabassa. New York: Perennial Classics, 1998.

Menton, Seymour. "Magic Realism in the Arts, 1918-1981." In *Magic Realism Rediscovered, 1918-1981*. Philadelphia: The Art Alliance Press, 1983.

Miller, Daniel. "A Porous Vessel." In *The Comfort of Things*, 32-45. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008.

Proust, Marcel. "Time Regained." In *Remembrance of Things Past*, 707-1105. Translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin and Andreas Mayor. New York: Random House, 1981.

Rheinfrank, John J. and Katherine A. Welker. "Meaning." In *Looking Closer 3: Classic Writings on Graphic Design*. Edited by Michael Bierut, Jessica Helfand, Steven Heller and Rick Poynor, 165-169. New York: Allworth Press, 1999.

Roh, Franz. "Magic Realism: Post Expressionism." In *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, 15-31. Edited by Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995.

Rushdie, Salman. *East, West*. New York: Vintage International, 1996.

Schmied, Wieland. *Neue Sachlichkeit und Magischer Realismus in Deutschland, 1918-1933*. Hannover: Fackeltrager-Verlag Schmidt-Kuster GmbH, 1969.

Schouwenberg, Louise. "For the Love of Things." In *Toward a New Interior: An Anthology of Interior Design Theory*. Edited by Lois Weinthal, 191-198. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011.

Singh, Ramendra, Vaibhav Gupta and Akash Mondal. "Jugaad—From 'Making Do' and 'Quick Fix' to an Innovative, Sustainable and Low-Cost Survival Strategy at the Bottom of the Pyramid." *International Journal of Rural Management*, no. 8 (2012): 87-105.

Shklovsky, Viktor. "Art as Technique." In *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, 3-24. Edited by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reiss. Lincoln:

University of Nebraska Press, 1965.

———. *Theory of Prose: Viktor Shklovsky*. Translated by Benjamin Sher, intro. by Gerald L. Bruns. Champaign and London: Dakely Archive Press, 1991.

Warwicker, Jonathan. *The Floating World: Ukiyo~e*. Göttingen: Steidl Mack, 2008.

Slemon, Stephen. "Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse." *Canadian Literature*, no.116 (Spring 1988): 9-24.

Wilson, Rawdon. "Metamorphoses of Fictional Space." In *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Edited by Wendy B. Fairs and Lois Parkinson Zamora, 209-233. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995.

Zamora, Lois Parkinson. "Swords and Silver Rings: Objects and Expression in Magical Realism and The New World Baroque." University of Houston, http://www.uh.edu/~englmi/ObjectsAndSeeing_intro.html (accessed December 15, 2013).

———. "The Visualizing Capacity of Magical Realism: Objects and Expression in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges." In *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, 21-37. Edited by Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995.

Appendix

The images that are included in this section showcases spreads from the catalogue that consolidates the three objects created as a part of this thesis. The catalogue is titled “Objects That Fly and Float.” The title is inspired from the magical realist text by Gabriel García Márquez where he describes a mundane apartment setting morph into a room flooded light, with floating and flying everyday objects. The objects described by Márquez retain their original function but can perform additional alternate functions, much like the three objects in question.

“The following Wednesday
while their parents were at
the movie they filled the
apartment to a depth of two
fathoms... The grand piano
with its Manila shawl that
fluttered half submerged
like a golden manta ray.
Household objects, in the
fullness of their poetry,
flew with their own wings
through the kitchen sky.”

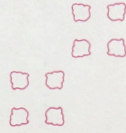
Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Light Is Like Water*.

**Objects
that fly and
float.**

Malika Sozin



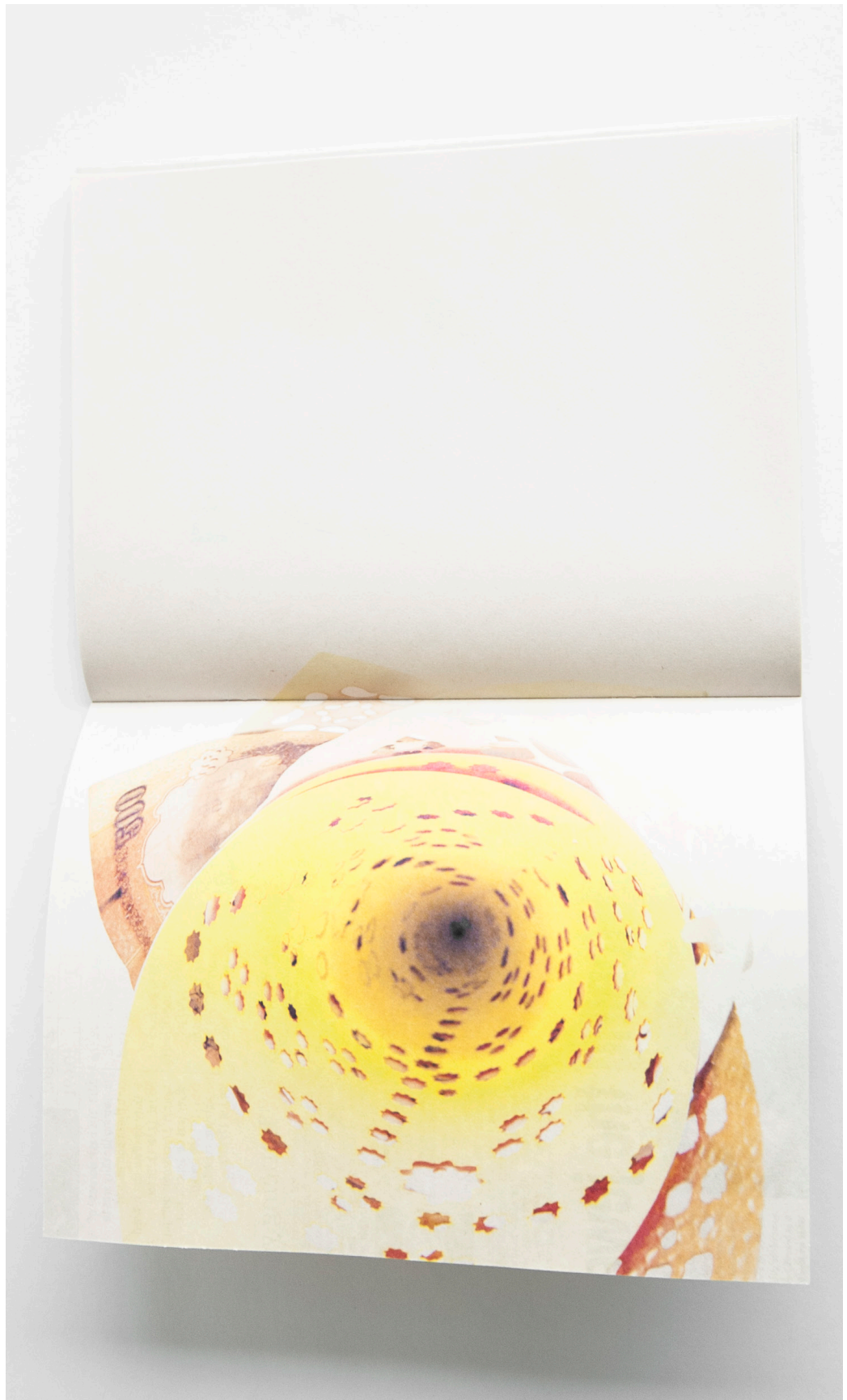
**A catalogue of objects from
everyday Indian culture
that are morphed to reveal
the magic in the mundane.**



Paper Cones

8.5 x 11 in
Laser cut on gold and silver
toned papers, colorful
and handmade papers and
Indian currency.





Pigment

2.5 x 3.5 in
Laser cut on brown and
white soap paper strips.



papers are layered on top of each other to create a texture. The soap strips used are brown and white in color. This visual treatment is used as a metaphor for skin. The object can be appreciated for the beautiful intricate pattern before peeling showcases rich texture due to the layered brown and white paper. However, the patterns start to fade as the user peels through the layers of soap. The color transitions from an intricately crafted brown surface to a blank white space. The effect of this transformation is strengthened, as the user is directly responsible for the act of peeling. The relatable shape and scale contribute in enhancing the experience of the human body with the modified artefact. The object visualizes notions of beauty and skin color as being relative and ironically presents it to a viewer. Once opened, the modified content of the package imparts unexpected information that forces a viewer to consciously evaluate the visuals consumed in a culture. Additionally, due to its coarse nature, the texture can be interpreted as a grater, implying that by using these soap strips one can scrape off skin color. This complies with the cultural notion of using soap to lighten skin color. The experience of using the soap is intensified due to the sharp folded edges of paper which further lends to a violent visual.





Clay

10 x 2.25 in
Print on textured wallpaper,
laser cut on gold and silver
toned papers, colourful papers
and corrugated sheets.



