WITCH’S BREW

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

by

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May, 2008
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Gianna Commito, for all of her patience, support, and faith in me. I would like to thank the members of my thesis committee, Martin Ball and Isabel Farnsworth, for their insights and guidance. I would especially like to thank my friends and family for taking good care of me, and Ken Jarzen for lifting my spirits.
WITCH’S BREW

The focus of my work is an investigation of the ritual of ornamentation. In both
the fabrication and presentation of my work, I regard my assemblages as fetish objects, as
autonomous art objects and an iconography of my subjective memory. By accepting the
assemblages as fetish objects, I am referencing the ritual of ornamentation and creative
invention married to the naïve, primitive, and outsider art now being reinterpreted in the
contemporary works of today.

The title of my thesis project is *Witch’s Brew*, which I respond to as an apt
metaphor highlighting the interwoven themes of my work. Witches are representative of
outsiders as well as strong, feminine archetypes. The title also references folklore and
some fantastical elements. The idea of a witch’s brew, a blend of disparate ingredients
empowered through ritual or ceremony to become a fortified amalgam, has similarities to
my processes and my juxtapositions of various materials, which combine to exist as
autonomous art objects.

Rather than focusing entirely on the history of outsider and primitive arts to
inform my work, I chose to also look at contemporary artists working in assemblage. The
provocative styles of artists like Jessica Stockholder, Rachel Harrison, and Mike Kelley
challenge compositional arrangement and experiment with the multiple references of
source materials. Recent works in assemblage take a cue from the resourcefulness and spontaneity of the everyday artist and places it within a contemporary context. Still referencing the outsider artist’s prolific imagination, today’s assemblage is a commentary of the cacophony of information present in our everyday lives. Lucy Lippard touches on this idea in contemporary assemblage with her essay *Eccentric Abstraction* when she states, “Opposites are used as complementaries rather than contradictions; the result is a formal neutralization, or paralysis, that achieves a unique sort of wholeness” (100). The incongruities of materials in my assemblages combine into a visual white noise; separate pieces have a dissonant unification rather than a harmonious one.

My interest in ornamentation and its relationship to the fine arts stems from my upbringing in the culture of northeast Ohio and the mid-western perspectives I have adopted. I live in the mid-west and I am an inhabitant of the “Rust Belt”. I’m interested in how the pulse or attitude of my surroundings expresses itself. As an artist, the focus of my work has been to question whether or not there is an aesthetic that is unique to my particular environment, and if so, how I should respond to it creatively. This inquiry led me to an investigation of folk art; the art of the people, for the people, and by the people. I also became interested in naïve or primitive and outsider art – non-cosmopolitan art endeavors and the aesthetics that exist outside of (and untainted by) the framework of academia. If there is an aesthetic that is unique to this non-cosmopolitan area, then the pure and typical “Rust Belt” aesthetic must somehow be connected to a level of social activity.
How people decorate their homes and yards and what people choose to display in their homes became my focus. These ornamentations are the byproduct of our human tendency to manipulate our environment for the sake of personal expression. By using the term ornamentations, I’m casting a wide net and including such things as the hierarchal arrangement of family photos on a mantle, the deliberate cutting and pasting of a *decoupage* project, the unification of disparate materials over the armature of a Christmas tree, and even the casual construction of a wood pile with its repetitive acts of collection and accumulation.

I’m attracted to these vernacular ornamentations. In these mundane occurrences, composition is an outcome, not necessarily an intention. The composition of a woodpile implies a visual narrative that can spark the imagination. A neat and orderly stack of split wood situated between two trees, suggests a wood-burning stove with a decorative glass screen. Adversely, a slipshod pile of logs might give me images of a stone hearth, a loop rug, and a hound dog. In both instances, the woodpile becomes a status symbol of sorts. It’s an assemblage embodying a visual narrative that denotes a certain pride of ownership. It’s almost as if the creation of the woodpile was a ritual performance in which the whole transcended its parts.

Relating this kind of experience to my interests in contemporary art, I was drawn to the processes of embellishment in my immediate surroundings, its essential vernacular nature, and its aesthetic context. Outsider art and so-called primitive art rely on resourcefulness – an arrangement and manipulation of materials from the immediate environment. Regardless of the original value of the specific materials, the final artwork
inherits an aesthetic value. Ornamentation often involves a unification of disparate materials, a collection and accumulation of pieces and parts. The casual acts of decorating a Christmas tree or cutting and pasting a scrapbook might be juggling a random assortment of color compositions, textures, and nominal values. Yet the end product is unified, which I believe occurs through the ritual act of making. As if the creative process invited a magical transformation, the creator is casting spells on various objects and materials and melding them into a fortified whole. This act of assemblage seems to continually revive itself in contemporary art.

I am intensely familiar with my surroundings to the point of affectionately noticing the more subtle changes that take place. These subtle changes inspire me to make something as a commentary about my personal history. One example of how I became critical towards something relatively mundane, and how it consequently encouraged me to make my assemblages, was a memory from childhood of my father misplacing the padlock for our shed doors. Instead of buying a new, more substantial steel lock, my father chose a knobby stick from the ground adjacent to the shed, whittled it down slightly, wound a jute cord around one end, and inserted the stick into the latch. At first I thought this was meant to be a quick fix, to keep the shed door from flapping in the wind. However, the new arrangement stuck for a number of years. The combination of the stick and string with the metal latch and my father’s deliberate manipulation of the materials intrigued me. I liked the combination of the natural and the man-made. I also liked how these disparate materials were now dependant on each other (as well as gravity) to keep the shed door closed. Placing the stick in the door may have lacked
foresight, but it was industrious and possessed a thoughtful touch. I also enjoyed how the combination of materials created tension by anticipating the stick breaking and splintering as soon as any substantial force managed to yank the door open. The fact that the job of the stick and string arrangement was simply to hold the door closed presented different shades of fragility and vulnerability. Furthermore, I was intrigued by the look of materials and how their combination spoke of issues of value, possessions, and sense of security. Again, the whole transcended its parts.

I wanted to present myself with a set of similar problems to resolve in my work, namely responding to inexpensive craft materials, found, or raw materials and elevating them to a level of sensual completeness. I also wanted to develop an iconographic language referencing my personal narrative while engaging in a ritual of ornamentation.

My objective is to make work about the casual, “good enough” attitude of where I am from. Much like the example of the stick in the shed door, I strive to make casual arrangements for my assemblages. Challenging my own preconceived and learned notion of aesthetic beauty, I am questioning whether or not an art object needs to be refined in order to reinforce beauty. In order for me to reference my upbringing in the weathered and desolated environment of northeast Ohio, I feel that I shouldn’t force compositional balance or design. The “Rust Belt” attitude reflects the people’s adaptation to bleak landscapes and a history of nagging misfortunes. Rather than being cynical or pessimistic, I have observed that overall people are simply practical. Without reason for high expectations, there is a pattern of minimal investment, justification, followed by acceptance. My father’s reaction to the loss of the padlock followed this same pattern: the
stick cost nothing and needed little alteration to be efficient, for the time being it took care of the problem, and over time it proved to be a sufficient solution. It was good enough. I feel that if there is a common aesthetic, than it must be related to this casual attitude, which relies on chance, flexibility, and practical expectations. In making my assemblages, I adopt this pattern by choosing generic craft materials or found materials and manipulating them only to the point of sufficiency. Very often I am composing freely and responding to materials quickly, unconcerned with what the final outcome will be. By not working the glitter, popsicle sticks, paint, or cardboard that I use in my pieces to refinement, I am allowing the materials to speak for themselves. In this way the assemblage seems fresh and ephemeral as there is always a tension and play between the materials. If I were to overwork the materials and mask their identity as craft supplies, I feel that the pieces would seem dishonest, or they would lose the tension that makes them interesting – they would not seem genuine.

By making use of craft supplies in my assemblages, I’m examining the issues of taste and quality of materials. I am also approaching folk and outsider art from the vantage point of someone already exposed to the aesthetic guidelines of formulaic color compositions and technical refinement. Home décor and decorative craft projects are democratized, and, in some respects rebel against the exclusiveness of fine art. The projects come with step-by-step instructions and cheap substitutions for finer quality materials, encouraging the amateur artist to create, for example, their own beautiful Faberge egg replicas at home with ease. The way craft supplies and craft materials have been commoditized has made art and creativity more approachable and affordable for
more people. When I enter into the average craft supply store and smell the fakeness of
the fake flowers and admire the do-it-yourself hobbyhorse on display, I feel a great sense
of camaraderie. Fine art makes distinctions for skill level, technique, and originality. The
craft store is accepting of all artists and does not make these distinctions. With my choice
of material in my assemblages, I’m alluding to this democratized art object, the craft
project, and also making a limitation for myself in order to discover alternate approaches
to creative production.

There is also a great deal of found, and raw, scrap material in my pieces. By
utilizing them, I am paying homage to the folk art and outsider art that inspired me as
well as the “art is life” sentiments of movements like Dada and Fluxus. The idea of
hunting down materials is in tune with the resourcefulness I have witnessed in the
contemporary works of artists such as Rachel Harrison and Isa Genzken.

My experience as an undergraduate was mainly focused in printmaking, where the
emphasis was on technique and process. In making the transition to graduate school, I
knew that I wanted to move beyond process and expand conceptually. With printmaking,
and two-dimensional art, there is a limitation of scale, physical depth, and presentation.
In the beginning, most of my works were images on paper in acrylic and gouache derived
from family photos, taking a cue from the faux-naïve style of Laura Owens and Karen
Kilimnic. I wanted to work with a sense of naïveté for a fresh perspective, so I mimicked
their style hoping to make a connection to a primary level of creativity. Eventually, I felt
as if I were going down the wrong path when I had to accept the falsehood of faux-naïve
approaches. A trained artist is going to struggle in an attempt to block conditioned
responses to symmetry, color choice, and execution. Faux-naïve can never be truly naïve and spontaneous like tribal or outsider art. From then on, I decided to work three-dimensionally; constructing the piece rather than simply painting the piece was an unfamiliar approach for me, and I expected this limitation to allow me to compose anew. The new group of images incorporated the occasional juxtaposition of some decorative craft material – glitter, wire, embroidery or knitted lengths of yarn. In order for me to sustain a sense of momentum in my studio, I would make small sculptural objects consisting of the various craft and found material, such as sticks and small chunks of wood, collected from wooded areas in my neighborhood. I did not, at first, put much faith in these objects and simply regarded them as “props” for my studio – something to make while I was in a productive dry spell. However, over time, the objects resonated more strongly than the works on paper. They were more characteristic of where my interests lay, the ritual of ornamentation. I discovered that this was going to be my approach while working in the studio: a cycle developed from a drawing yielding ideas for a three-dimensional object and vice versa. As I grew comfortable with my experiments, I became more invested in the small sculptural objects as well as the variety in my three-dimensional assemblages. Drawing was still relevant as it gave me a blueprint or framework for my sculptural works. I wanted to push scale and presentation, allow for some other advantages, and adopt a new set of limitations. One limitation became the aforementioned use of inexpensive and/or scrap materials in order to reference resourcefulness and invention. Another limitation was to rely on prescribed color. As an undergraduate taking a foundation painting class, the instructor stressed the importance of
mixing our colors and not using any color independently or directly from the tube. I’m embracing this compositional irresponsibility as a way to develop things more naturally, responding to color rather than integrating them. By not resolving the issue of color with formula and color theory, I open myself up to discover alternate resolutions for composition. Artists, like Rachel Harrison challenge traditional colors, mixing acidic neon with chrome and silver while Jessica Stockholder combines earth tones with eye-popping bright plastics. I enjoyed the rich, playful quality of these artists’ works and was intrigued by the work’s comment on the artificiality of color.

Most of my pieces are dependent of the wall, however I did not want my pieces to have the same vulnerability that some sculptures have when they are presented on the floor. The body’s ability to see all sides of the art object, I believe, allows the viewer to overpower the artwork’s presence. By building out from the wall three-dimensionally, the pieces are more demanding as they confront the viewer rather than becoming reducible to pieces and parts. I want there to be a tension created as the pieces can be read as both painting and sculpture simultaneously.

In making work that illustrates, in a codified visual language, the attitudes and limitations of northeast Ohio, there is an escapist fantasy evident in my pieces. As part of the personal narrative, escapism becomes a theme – how isolation affects the imagination and creativity level of an artist. I recognized that there was a lot of freedom of invention amid desperation and limitations. The assemblages in my thesis show expand upon this idea of inside and outside worlds. Many of my pieces have a quality of fragility,
vulnerability, playfulness, and ambiguity, which creates a conflicted sense of fantasy and escapism along with an awareness and resourcefulness within certain limitations.

In many of my assemblages and drawings there are visual motifs of nets and towers. The nets stem from my studio practice and my need to keep myself working fluidly. By their design, the nets allowed me work systematically, and through repetitive labor I created patterns of cellular morphology. By stating that the nets are a pattern of cellular morphology, I am trying to reference all decorative patterns by alluding to them with my distilled patterns, essentially derived from the grid. The nets also serve as a visual metaphor, highlighting the idea of resourcefulness, catching or capturing a variety of things and unifying them within the presentation of the net.

The towers motif is also a system I used to reference building, or composing by compilation, such as the accidental design of a woodpile. Looking at scaffolding and latticework, I discovered an option for letting my pieces grow out from the wall. Again, the towers serve a dual purpose as a manner of working as well as providing a visual clue. Towers in my surrounding landscape signify connections, or communication over vast distances. I feel that this is a way to allude to my escapist fantasy, an outsider that imagines another more refined and cosmopolitan way of life by relying on contact with that other world.

*Beach Trash* first began as a way for me to challenge my presupposed notions of hierarchal placement and presentation. The assemblage consists of net-like yarn pieces that span a corner of the gallery. Inserted into the nets are small, oddly shaped painted pieces. There is a diversity of textures, shapes and colors to the pieces, however
their placement within the nets unifies them. The lengths of yarn were tied to loosely resemble nets, yet they are clumsy. Chunks of knitted sections interrupt the pace of the nets providing a sense of ritual labor and an allusion to craft projects. Each net cluster was dipped in rabbit skin glue and strung up to dry. This gives the nets a stiff appearance that belies the soft nature of the material and allows for the yarn to seemingly defy gravity in some places. The nets are different lengths so that when they are placed spanning a corner, they will have a deep, overlapping effect. The individual shapes are painted on both sides: from some angles the viewer can see the painting on both sides of the shape, and in other instances the backside of a shape is out of reach, and their duality can only be implied. I arranged the shapes into the net as casually as possible, much like you would a simple flower arrangement. The presentation of the small painted shapes within these nets creates visual tension, yet it also has strength. The pieces seem to have been caught in the nets, or captured, and presented as gifts. The title *Beach Trash* seemed fitting to me. Things that wash up on a beach appear alien at first, but upon further investigation one can imagine the original state of the materials before being altered by the great force of the ocean and then re-presented on the beach.

Another piece in my thesis exhibit that illustrates the casual, “good enough” attitude of construction combined with the escapist fantasy element is *The Box o’ Cosmos*. The inspiration for this piece started with my memories from childhood of transforming large, leftover cardboard boxes into imaginary realms. As a child, the interior space of the box could be transformed into a rocket ship, a time machine or some other fantastical environment. Cutting away the face of the box allows the viewer full
access to the interior. I then continued to cut into the top and sides of the box to create a window effect. Bent dowel rods were added to give the box a vaulted ceiling. The vaulted ceiling and cutouts on the sides of the box were covered with red, blue, and yellow colored acetate to mimic stained glass windows. Inside the box, there are various painted patterns that overlap against a black background to suggest an infinite void, hinting at both the infinite imagination and the endlessness of cosmological space. Most of the exterior of the box is left unaltered to illustrate its original condition. However, in an effort to make a contrast between the inner realm of the imagination, and the mundane landscapes of the real, outside world, one section of the box exterior has been painted. The oil painting on the side of the box (which is the most literal two-dimensional image in my thesis show) is a crude landscape, dotted with red flags. I wanted this pictorial and illusionary image to be a reference to academic practices as well as a sharp contrast to the interior of the box. Adjacent to the image side of the box, there is a red, “monopoly house” shaped chunk of wood interspersed with flags made from similar bent dowel rods and more red acetate. This small, separate piece serves to reinforce the idea of the mundane landscape that exist outside of the box’s ornate and fantastical interior. It is challenging for the viewer to accept the interior and exterior characteristics of the box as a whole, yet I feel that this elaborate mixture highlights the idea of the imaginary world as a retreat from the limited world of reality.

The largest, and one of the more labor-intensive pieces in the show, is the wall assemblage The Champagne of Women. The objective for me was to harmonize a found material’s pattern by applying an opposing pattern and manipulating its physicality with
an alternate structural arrangement. This work is perhaps the most economical, referring to the materials used, as it consists solely of paint and the thin cardboard of Miller High-Life beer containers. The cardboard from the boxes was cut into strips and the strips glued into long chains. The lengths of cardboard were either connected to form rings or woven together as basket-like forms. In this assemblage, the repetitive and seemingly endless cutting, gluing, and weaving induced a trance-like rhythm as the work evolved.

There is a ceremonial and ritualistic character to working through a labor-intensive process. A ritual act is comprised of a set of movements, both productive and symbolic. The ritual ceremony is performed with conviction, although the outcome cannot be predetermined. As I was engaged in my own ritual, following a planned set of actions, I welcomed any and all possible resolutions that *The Champagne of Women* would lead to.

I fell into the rhythm of creation and engaged in my ornamentation with conviction. The final assemblage consists of a hulking, basket-like mass connected by cardboard rings to another oblong shape hanging below. All of the outer surfaces have been unified with variations of the same decorative pattern. The inside reveals the original, commercial patterns of the beer boxes. This decision to reveal the origins of the material was deliberate – I wanted to illustrate my collection and gathering of the cardboard, which was a resource from my environment. Also, the choice of source material was not arbitrary either, as alcohol consumption plays a role in escapism, numbing the mind and providing a temporary retreat from boredom and all too familiar surroundings.

The suite of wax crayon and ink drawings in my show entitled *The Six Killings* is presented along with the three-dimensional assemblages in order to reinforce the
sculptural pieces. They provide a context for viewers, allowing them to correlate some motifs in the drawings to objects in the assemblages. It was important for me to include the drawings as I feel they are an integral part of my process in realizing the dimensional works. With their grouping together in the gallery setting, the drawings and assemblages are meant to coexist and share the space, yet it is not my intention for them to be read as an installation. There is a tangible link between each piece and I feel that they belong together, however pieces are not forced to overlap or bleed into one another.

In conclusion, *Witch’s Brew* serves as a testament to my explorations in graduate school. I have realized that there is a way for me to work dimensionally in order to expand conceptually, with far more rewarding results. Working on and presenting this collection of assemblages has proved to be a journey of self-discovery. I feel that the work I have made for my thesis show will provide me with a springboard for future projects. I plan on continually questioning my personal aesthetic and how it should reflect my personal history. The ebb and flow of the art world continues to influence me and I look forward to becoming a part of its dialogue, always evaluating the relevance of my own work within its great continuum.
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Plate 2

Installation View
Plate 3

Installation View
Plate 4

Beach Trash
Acrylic, yarn, plaster
Plate 5

Beach Trash
Detail
Plate 6

The Box o’ Cosmos
Mixed media
Plate 7

The Box o’ Cosmos
Detail
Plate 8

Ice Balloons
Acrylic, canvas, yarn, tissue paper
Plate 9

Games and Pastimes
Acrylic, canvas, found material
Plate 10

Games and Pastimes
Detail
Plate 11

Vein of Paint
Acrylic, plastic straws, plaster, fabric
Plate 12

The Champagne of Women
Acrylic, cardboard
Plate 13

The Champagne of Women
Detail
Plate 14

Witch’s Castle
Aluminum screen, tissue paper, ribbons
Plate 15

Witch’s Castle
Detail
Plate 16

Unit 7 and Unit 8
Scrap plywood, popsicle sticks
Plate 17

Unit 7 and Unit 8
Detail
Plate 18

Large Nets
Acrylic, vinyl, glitter