THE COAST IS NEVER CLEAR

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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December, 2011
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my partner, Stephen Clements, for his amazing support. I could not have asked for a better assistant.

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Isabel Farnsworth, and committee member Paul O’Keeffe for allowing me to study at Kent State University. Their patience and wealth of knowledge was much appreciated.

I would also like to thank committee member Janice Lessman-Moss for encouraging and helping me explore new territories in art making. Her knowledge of technology and enthusiasm for it have greatly expanded my processes and abilities.
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The title of my thesis exhibition, *The Coast is Never Clear*, sets the tone for a body of work which speaks to the fear and uncertainty of our present state and unknown future. We live in the most advanced societies, through science and technology, that humankind has ever known, yet we still fear the end of the world. Science has shown us just a glimpse of what we are capable of, by developing medicines and agricultural achievements, but where and how do we limit ourselves and know when to stop? When does overdevelopment turn disastrous? In addition to overextending technology, humans have a long recorded history of beliefs that foretell the end of the world. From the ending of the Maya calendar to the Christian idea of apocalypse, cultures have for centuries predicted our demise. In the year 2011, we are living on the edge of when those prophecies are due to come to fruition. For this exhibition, I allude to the uncertainty and trepidation the future may hold through themes of ritual, alchemy, history, transformation, and science and perhaps what our role in our future might be.

While making the work for this exhibition, thoughts about our current and future condition loomed in my head and made an impact of my choice of materials. In all of my work, materials play an extremely important role. I choose materials that are both seductive and representational to present the viewer with beautifully, delicately constructed works that gently hint at destruction and the future. My goal is to not confront the viewer directly with any strict ideas or beliefs as to what may happen to us. Instead I use materials and arrangements that entice the viewer, encourage them to look more closely and discover the subversive content of the text or relationship of elements and allow them to make their own conclusions. Latex tubing and laboratory glass are
visually evocative yet also connote sterility and experimentation. Natural materials such as freshwater pearls, sea salt and ash speak to aspects of ritual while also serving to represent seeds, eggs, and unknown substances that go through metamorphosis. I consider text and the use of language within a piece to be a material as well. Phrases within certain works create a starting point for thought and together serve to inform the body of work as a whole.

Entering the main gallery space presents five pieces that create a somewhat ethereal environment. Mounted at the far end of the room is the most ritualized of the works and the title bearer for the exhibition, *Hold on to Your Babes, The Coast is Never Clear*. A sheer panel of fabric hangs delicately from the wall creating an alter-like setting. On the fabric is printed the title phrase in a decorative motif that suggests Renaissance and historical ornamentation. The text itself, in shades of grey and deep mauve, swirls and bends to create the arabesque pattern, moving and wrapping around itself often as thoughts move within one’s mind. Amid the pattern, sealed glass vials project outward holding small amounts of ash. The ash in this piece, as in others, becomes a fetishized material. It has a mysterious quality as to where it came from, an unknown use since ash from a fire is generally discarded, and a religious element from a historical standpoint. Incense, used in both Christian and Buddhist ceremonies, produces ash, which artist Zhang Huan sees as a depository for emotional and spiritual discharge.¹ In the works for this show however, the source of the ash is not disclosed and therefore allows the viewer to make their own decisions regarding its origin and meaning. In *Hold

on to Your Babes…, regardless of where the ash is from, it is presented in precise glass containers that allude to its sacredness and give it powerful presence. The center of the motif presents a smaller, round glass container filled with pearls. Both the pearls and the ash draw meaning from the phrase used within the piece. The ash speaks to the idea of there being darkness on the horizon (“the coast is never clear”) while the pearls, acting as seeds or ova, reference the notion of keeping your children and loved ones close at hand (“hold on to your babys”).

For other works, phrases correspond less literally with the additional materials in the piece. In Sooner or Later Everyone Will Know the phrase alludes to an idea, either within the exhibition or in the mind of the viewer, that there is something lingering that we are yet unaware of. The use of language in this way allows for a direct thought to be incorporated into the piece while the ambiguity of the phrase invites viewers to decide for themselves what it means. This phrase is repeated on the wall creating a triptych of decorative pattern, each one radiating around a wall-mounted laboratory valve. From the valve extends purple and pink latex tubing that creates a circuit beginning and ending at the glass piece. The outer two valves carefully hold a mound of ash in their center, while the middle valve is filled with pink salt. The valve therefore acts as the beginning and ending of a system that metaphorically processes the ash and salt for an unknown purpose. The idea of alchemy is thus at play here. Though knowledge of alchemy has been commonplace for centuries, the true secrets of its processes have never been fully
revealed.\(^2\) This notion of historical knowledge of alchemy is referenced through the patterning of the phrase in *Sooner or Later...* and the secretiveness of alchemical science is shown through the piece’s mysterious system. This obscure configuration serves to represent a futuristic scientific process that we cannot yet know, but sooner or later we will.

Similarly along the lines of metamorphosis and process is the work *Citrine to Salt*. In this piece, I have created a work of science fiction where one natural mineral, citrine, is converted into another, salt. A large glass flask is filled with the natural quartz mineral and sealed at the opening. From an arm extending off the flask, sickly yellow tubing works its way up and across the wall. At the end of the tubing a smaller glass vial, also sealed, contains rock sea salt to complete the system. We may not understand how this apparatus works, but its scientific elements suggest it does. It presents a possible futuristic need to create something available today due to problems we may encounter later.

Culturally we have representations of the future that often show our world as vast and destroyed, where what we value now has been replaced by other elements or is altogether gone.\(^3\) What happens in the future if we require minerals and natural resources that have been depleted? Perhaps we would turn to science and technology to try to replicate the things we have lost. In the case of this work I am using salt as an actual material and also as a metaphorical stand-in for anything we may become deprived of.


\(^3\) Think of *Mad Max* and other post-apocalyptic type movies.
Historically, salt has been a highly valued mineral in many societies and for a variety of reasons. In terms of religion and culture, there are folklore customs relating to salt that stem back to primitive thought in the western world, while in Central and South America tribes reference salt in prayers and sacrifices. Salt has also been used as currency and a source power over time. As H. Clay Trumbull writes, “in many lands and in different ages, salt has been considered the possession of the government…to be controlled by the ruler, as a source of life, or as one of its necessaries, for his people.” Furthermore, salt is a natural preservative and has been used for centuries to cure meat and preserve food in order to better human life.

Salt therefore is a prime example of something that is culturally and historically significant and in my work stands to represent any material that may be valued in a similar way. It is a seemingly common element yet important enough that if in the future we were in need of it, we would likely attempt to recreate it. It is the idea of transformation and evaluation of worth that is important here. As a result Citrine to Salt presents another process of alchemy. Most commonly practiced in the Middle Ages, alchemy refers to a pseudoscience that combines chemistry, spirituality, and magical powers to transform common substances into substances of great value. It is an old concept yet in an unknown future we may look to ways of the past in order to move forward. Though we perhaps do not value things such as salt and other simple elements in

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5 Ibid, p 19.
6 www.dictionary.com
our modern society, the future may force us to reevaluate what is important and adjust accordingly.

One of the factors affecting our current state, and with growing concern, our future, is the use and development of genetically modified organisms. Defined by author Farid Ahmed, PhD, GMOs are “organisms whose genetic material has been intentionally tampered with to introduce traits not normally present in the original[s],” and are used most commonly in the production of food.\(^7\) In the U.S. the rate of food produced using GMOs is astounding\(^8\) while their effects, both long and short term, are little known. Through technology and science we are finding ways to alter the natural state of things without thinking much about the consequences of doing so. Dr. Anthony M. Shelton, Professor at Cornell University, points out that “some degree of hazard is associated with every technology”\(^9\) and with GMOs objections stem from environmental, ethical and food safety concerns.\(^10\) This therefore raises the question of whether the benefits of tampering with nature out weigh the risks and potential hazardous affects.

With this mind, I created the work *Diabolical Seed*. From the wall hang three small laboratory glass objects. All three are slightly different and with an unspecified function. Each glass piece holds a mound of pearls spilling over and out of the top of it. The mounds of pearls in white, brown, and pink serve to represent enlarged microscopic organisms while their range of colors relates to their varying degrees of purity and harm.

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\(^8\) In 2001, 46% of soybean crops alone were produced using GMOs. (See Ahmed, *Testing of Genetically Modified Organisms*, p 8.)


\(^10\) Ibid, p 19.
They may look benign and beautiful to the eye, but who knows what lies beneath and how they were created. In each mound as well, there are no ‘perfect’ pearls. All are different with their own imperfections and therefore symbolize the endless dangers and uncertainties of genetic modification. Additionally, each pearl is strung and tied with a piece of thread that flow out of the bottom of each glass object. The thread, in a corresponding color to the pearls, creates a cloud or tail that follows the ‘seeds’ wherever they may go, perhaps leaving proof of their existence. Whether technology in science and engineering is working towards a betterment of nature or is propelling us into an unstable state is not for sure, but we must be aware of all possibilities.

To finish off the works in the main gallery space is the piece *In the Future You Are Already Dead*. The largest and most ephemeral of the works in the show, this piece deals the most directly with the idea of the future. The phrase itself presents the idea that in the future we will no longer exist, that an inevitable end to everything will come. Anthony Aveni, author of *The End of Time*, notes that in our current state there is a feeling of “something in the air – a sense that the world is due for big changes” and that “either we work at collective self-improvement to reclaim the psychic dimensions of ourselves or the planet descends into environmental ruin.”\(^{11}\) This idea that the end of the world will someday come has been present in thought and literature for centuries. For Christians, the apocalypse is foretold in the Book of Revelation from the New Testament in which “God will intervene violently and suddenly at a preordained moment in time.”\(^{12}\)

\(^{12}\) Ibid, p xvi
According to some Christian sects, the Book of Revelation is filled with dates that correspond to our current calendar. Most important of those dates are May 21, 2011, referred to as Judgement Day, which is the beginning of the rapture and October 21, 2011, the day that the world will be destroyed by fire.13

Other date predictions are included in the ancient calendar of the Maya people. Their method of timekeeping is based on what they refer to as the Long Count, a period of 1,872,000 days, which on December 21, 2012 will revert back to zero and the count will begin again.14 For the Maya this date corresponds to the end of one period of time followed by the beginning of another. It is not defined by them as the end of the world. However, many people in contemporary society interpret this date as the Maya prediction of the end of time and humanity. Though the Maya calendar declares no such prophecy, superstition and fear lead people to make their own conclusions about what this date means.

In addition to these religious and cultural dates, the ancient philosopher Plato had distinct ideas of how the universe correlates with the existence of humankind. He believed nature had a moral obligation to cleanse the world of “misguided human corruption” and would do so through the powerful use of nature.15 This idea is somewhat hard to argue when considering the major natural disasters that have happened worldwide over the past couple years – earthquakes and tsunamis in the Indian Ocean (2004), Chile

13 www.familyradio.com (October 21, 2011 is also the date of the opening my thesis exhibition that corresponds to this thesis paper.)
14 Aveni, The End of Time, p 1.
15 Aveni, The End of Time, p 124.
(2010) and Japan (2011), massive flooding in Mumbai (2005) and Pakistan (2010) along with Hurricane Katrina (2005), and raging wild fires in California (2008) and Australia (2009). When considered along with the ideas of the Christian apocalypse and the Maya calendar, it is not surprising that some people view our future with a sense of doom.

Without distinctly subscribing to any one prophecy or fear, I took this theory for future desolation and developed the title phrase for the piece In the Future You Are Already Dead. In accordance to this macabre phrase, the sole material in this piece is ash, which relates to the destruction caused by natural disasters and to the cremation of bodies. The ash carefully repeats the title phrase in an ornate and historical decorative pattern that ties the work to ancient predictions of the future. Because the ash is essentially loose on its low pedestal, there is the possibility of change within the piece over time, similar to the possibility of changes in thought and belief about our future. In the end the ash will be swept up leaving nothing of the piece behind signifying the fleeting and ending nature of all things.

From the main gallery space the exhibition continues into a second smaller room that is much more vibrant overall. In contrast to the muted colors of the works in the first room, these works are vivid and pulsate with color. On the wall stretching across a corner of the room is the fluorescent piece titled Inversion System. Brightly colored latex tubing twists and turns across the wall. On one end the tubing is attached to a laboratory glass bulb containing small white pearls. The other end is finished with another bulbous glass vial, sealed with wax, and filled with pink sea salt. The tubing snakes its way across the wall weaving in and out of the wall itself. As it moves, the tubing changes color from
neon yellow to neon orange to neon pink signifying and enhancing the concept of the change in materials. The precious pearls are transformed through another unknown system in order to produce the pale colored salt, again implying the use of alchemy and the fantastical sacredness of the materials. The title as well makes reference to this transformation and heightens the dramatic change. The word ‘inversion’ means changing a substance from one form to its opposite configuration – here the clean white freshwater pearls are converted into the coarse multicolored salt of the sea. As with Citrine to Salt, I am presenting a fictitious scientific system, perhaps alchemy of the future, that works for a cause that remains undisclosed to us presently.

The idea of future science continues with Hermetic Extraction. From the wall hangs a dense grouping of skinny neon green latex tubes. Each length of tubing extends from a thin pipette that is filled with sea salt and sealed with wax. Again, the salt is metaphoric and can be read as any number of materials. The sealed pipettes reference the title in that the salt is in an airtight enclosure while the word hermetic also references the alchemy within the piece. The salt is figuratively being processed and extracted through the tubing, which at the free ends seem to drip a mysterious white substance. The green of the latex calls to mind the stereotypical color of nuclear or toxic waste and therefore is a comment on the possible dangerousness of advancing technology.

Finally there is the work I Always Thought Everyone Was the Same. On another low riser, the title phrase in white vinyl creates an ornate motif that floats on a clear Plexiglas panel. In stark color contrast, loops of electric pink and orange tubing move in and out of the plexi incorporating with the text design. Above the plexi the tubing is
precisely placed and orderly while underneath it swirls and piles together creating a nest of neon color. The singular segments of tubing on top get lost in the mass below the clear plane. This correlates with the notion of individuals and how we relate to each other as hinted at through the text. The pile of tubing conveys the idea of sameness where all elements become entangled as one. As humans we are all of similar genetic make-up yet with the advent of cloning there are the possibilities of becoming genetically identical. The title phrase is thus being stated from a future where a world of clones is all anyone knows. Though currently we are able and have the freedom to become our own person, there may be a future ahead of us where this is not the case. The ominous language of this piece carefully rests just above the mound of vein-like tubing that in form references the inner workings of the human body and in color reflects concepts of the future because of its neon tone. In contrast, the defined loops of tubing above the plexi and the old fashioned decorative motif speak to a past where we were still able to individually forge our own way in the world and have control of our destinies.

As with *I Always Thought Everyone Was the Same*, all the works in the exhibition that include text have a decorative quality to their design that are reminiscent of historic ornament. I designed these pieces in this way to contrast the modern materials such as latex and laboratory equipment. This tension between old and new is meant to heighten the viewers’ awareness of our past, our present, and our future. The texts seem to whisper messages to us, hinting at a concept or suggesting what may be to come, without being too forward or subscribing to any strict agenda. They act as the rumor-mill for the
exhibition, spreading ideas in ways similar to how people spread theories in real life. We may read the phrases in the works directly or simply see them subconsciously, but either way they are there. Comparatively, no one knows when, how, and if the world will end but the underlying notion and fear of it is out there.

While not all the works in the exhibition include text, they are all influenced by the ideas presented by it in addition to the delicate and decorative style of the words. Ornate text patterns, embellished materials, and intricate arrangements all serve to quietly ease the viewer into thoughts about our roles in the present world and what we are doing to our future. They suggest notions of the future in ways to spark thought without frightening the viewer away. Though uncertainty is found in advancing technology and mankind’s nature to seek improvement, what lies ahead will forever be unknown.
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http://www.zhanghuan.com/ShowText.asp?id=34&sClassID=1
