POOR TRAITS: POTTERY CITY

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 Arts

by

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May 2017
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To begin, I would like to thank my wonderful partner Keri for everything she has done to encourage me and support me. I could not have accomplished any of this without her love. I want to thank my family and friends for both their love and support in helping me get through this; a special mention goes to Rock and Robin Estell for their amazing East Liverpool pottery collection. Thank you to my advisor Professor Isabel Farnsworth for her wisdom, empathy and knowledge. Also, many thanks to Professor John-Michael Warner who is an amazing mentor with a warm soul. As my time here at Kent ends, I can’t help but think of all the amazing friends I have met and experiences I have had at this institution. I look forward to my future and will always cherish my time spent in the Tree City.
POOR TRAITS: POTTERY CITY
An Introduction

In this body of work I am addressing some of the social issues of the small Rust Belt city that I grew up in which include poverty, addiction and loss of the labor industries. Located on the banks of the Ohio River, East Liverpool, Ohio became impoverished during the Great Depression and never quite recovered from it. It has a unique story, it was the pottery capital of the United States for a brief period and this is still very important to the local community. It is kept alive by local historians and collectors, a museum which features ceramics from the local potteries and three potteries which are still in operation today.

The artwork that I created around this history includes symbols from the region filtered through my personal lens. There are underlying themes addressing my personal view on classism which was shaped by many artists such as Diego Rivera, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, and Walid Raad as well as the novella Flatland by Edwin Abbott and the writings of Karl Marx. Flatland is represented visually through the geometric cobalt drawings on the ceramics; the triangles and lines represent the working class and women of the community within the universe of Flatland. The geometric pattern also represents my own thoughts on classism and inequality. The English potters who came and established the pottery industry in East Liverpool created pottery within the European tradition which included white porcelain with intricate cobalt drawings. My pattern is a looser and more gestural riff on this tradition. I have also drawn from particular memories in my childhood, for example, the days that I witnessed the coal barges being pushed down the river towards the power plant in Shippingport, Pennsylvania. All of these things coalesce in this body of work to tell a personal story about the history of East Liverpool, Ohio and the swift loss of its chief source of pride.
The artists I reference have all approached themes of labor differently and have also influenced my work in many ways, mostly not in a visual sense. When it comes to the work of Diego Rivera, I think of my childhood years spent at union rallies for both my mother and father; marching through the streets of Pittsburgh in union regalia, holding flags and chanting in unison. Rivera was the leading artist in Mexican Muralism and had a strong connection to Detroit and our labor community, while also being a proponent of Marxism and worker’s rights. He inspired Mexican laborers in both Mexico and the U.S. and helped to bring about the workers’ revolutions that were so important in the last century. He was very hands on and enveloped in the community of labor and his life’s work inspires me to choose themes and symbology that I am familiar with.
When I first learned of Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ “Maintenance Art” (long before I had conceptualized this body of work), it struck a chord with the part of me that wants anonymous or unseen labor to be brought to the forefront of people’s minds. The jobs of worker’s who spend all of their time maintaining the backbone of our society while living in obscurity. Ukeles could empathize with the work of the New York’s Department of Sanitation coming from a place of domestic labor where her own contributions were unrecognized. She sat down to write out a manifesto which began with the words,

I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother. (random order). I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also, (up to now separately) I ‘do’ art. (Ukeles 3)

Ukeles comes from a slightly different place than I do where her background is not from within a labor community, but the connections she made from her domestic life to the sanitation
workers pushes me to think of how I can connect my life experience with that of other labor communities. Her work makes me consider the connections that I have along the Ohio River Valley.

In my own research, I have tried to find inspiration and connection to outside labor communities and Walid Raad certainly helped to expand my knowledge of international labor relations. I came across the work of Raad and the Gulf Labor Coalition while in New York in my first semester of grad school. From an outside vantage point he was able to bring much needed awareness to the worker’s struggles currently happening within the United Arab Emirates; struggles which western organizations have directly and indirectly influenced. His approach is influential on my own practice because of his physical distance from the situation occurring. I look at the approaches that the Gulf Labor Coalition has taken and think of how I might push the representation of worker’s struggles within the Ohio River Rust Belt community in my own work. It is a community which I currently find myself physically distanced from, but also mentally distanced from. I do not still experience the day to day anxiety that comes with living in a very impoverished community. I try to find ways to connect back to those experiences while addressing what is currently happening in East Liverpool, Ohio.

Another major influence on my mindset has been both science fiction and the writings of Karl Marx, particularly his pamphlet *Wage Labour and Capital*. Marx helped to define labor and its relation to capitalism in my mind while, on a larger scale, his writings have influenced many of the artists and revolutionaries who I have come to respect. In terms of defining and skewering classism/aristocracy, *Flatland* helped me to understand the relation of classes and the ignorance of the upper class. The way that Edwin Abbott described classes within a two-dimensional universe and how they would relate physically made a lasting impression upon me. It helped to
understand the social issues around me in a more complex way, therefore, I chose to symbolize the writings on the surface of my ceramic pieces in the cobalt drawings of basic geometry. At the bottom of the hierarchy in the *Flatland* universe are the women and the workmen, described as lines and triangles respectively.

The physical appearance of the work is influenced by my work as a carpenter and maker, my first experiences with modernist design and the glimpses I have seen of the pottery industry over the years. In public school, one of the only modern works I had seen in person by the end of high school was *Fallingwater* by Frank Lloyd Wright. I was entranced by the outside appearance and the detail of the finely crafted interiors and his design style never left my mind afterwards.

![Figure 3](image)

Frank Lloyd Wright
*Table*
1912-14

There is a visual reference in the piece *Pleasant Valley Sunday* in my construction of the table and smaller references throughout the show. The whiskey jug form and surface patterning were inspired by my viewing of an East Liverpool family’s local pottery collection.
POOR TRAITS: POTTERY CITY
The Work

Figure 4
*One Jug, Three Rivers*
2017
Ceramic, Oak Plywood, Water, Video
Poverty becomes a cycle intertwined with addiction in many of the hardest hit Appalachian communities. In *Three Rivers, One Jug*, I am creating a visual representation of that cycle using symbols that I am familiar with from the environment I grew up in. The title itself refers to the region and the shared lived experience of the people, particularly those who have a connection to the labor industry along the riversides.

I began with the form of a whiskey jug which I turned from wood on my lathe to create a blank. I created a plaster mold of the wood blank to precisely recreate the form and mimic a process used in potteries. I chose the whiskey jug form because of its relation to alcoholism, but also because many potteries in the region produced whiskey jugs for liquor distributors. Three of the jugs were cast with a white clay slip and were joined with passages between them to create a physical representation of a cycle. On the surface of the jugs are cobalt drawings of basic triangles and lines. These illustrations come from the text which is mentioned in the introduction, *Flatland*, and represent the working-class people. They are also derived from the intricate cobalt decorations used on English pottery which was one of the main influences for the wares created in East Liverpool Potteries. The conjoined jugs sit atop the form of a barstool which allows the viewer to approach and interact with the piece by spinning it. This action also mixes the water within the vessel.

Accompanying the physical sculpture is a video which shows myself spinning the jug form. As the jug spins, the video moves between footage of the region surrounding East Liverpool and then back to the object. The audio track is a modified recording of me blowing into the jugs to produce a tone. It is my intention that the viewer will interact with the object by watching me do so on screen, but also gain a deeper understanding of the object itself through the visuals. I have always had a soft spot for work that allows the viewer to physically interact
with it. It engages them at a different level and makes them sit with the work for a longer period. Interaction also evokes play and in the end, I do not want my work to be a completely sober and somber look at the situation. In life, I always inject some lightheartedness and I think that comes through in my play with patterning, textures, interaction and scale in this body of work.

Figure 5
One Jug, Three Rivers (detail)
2017
Ceramic, Oak Plywood, Water, Video
Figure 6

_Pleasant Valley Sunday_
2017
Ceramic, Walnut, Oak Plywood
Many Sundays in my childhood and teenage years were spent attending Catholic mass and traveling to see family in Pennsylvania. On our route through the valley, we would drive alongside the Ohio River and I would often get to see the coal barges being pushed down the river towards their final destination at the coal power plant in Shippingport, Pennsylvania. It is an industry that is dying along with so many others. I made the ceramic pieces as possible future inclusions in the Ceramics Museum as a way to remember the fall of another major labor industry which supports the working class in the region. The title itself, Pleasant Valley Sunday, comes from a song by the same name from The Monkees. While growing up, it was frequently on rotation in our family car as we made the trek down into the river valley on our way to church. I only came to appreciate the social commentary of the lyrics later in my life when I heard it again. The title brings me back to the memories of those trips and meshes with the broader themes in the entire body of work.

There are two ceramic forms resting on the table; the first emulates the shape of a towboat and the second, a coal barge. The surface of the ceramics shares the same pattern as One Jug, Three Rivers, but the interior of the barge is blackened and patterned to resemble coal; again, I like to experiment with the surface of the work and bring it some intricacy for exploration. The top of the table is a locally sourced live edge slab of walnut from a farm. When I was looking for a slab to use for this table, I was trying to find one which would look similar to the ebb and flow of the river.
Figure 7
Pleasant Valley Sunday (detail)
2017
Ceramic, Walnut, Oak Plywood
Figure 8

*Meiosis (Portals and Portholes)*

2017

Serigraphy, Oak Plywood
In *Meiosis (Portals and Portholes)*, I wanted to find a way to use recognizable images from the East Liverpool region and illustrate the dramatic upheaval of industry and the separation of wealth from the city. I have a good knowledge base in serigraphy, so I chose that medium as the vehicle for the message. The imagery in the right print contains things such as the old department stores in the area, potteries and landmarks, while the left print has images of newer stores and landmarks. The prints are swirled through digital manipulation and the ink itself is applied to the screen in a swirling pattern. It references the physical spinning of the jugs in *One Jug, Three Rivers* and water draining. The idea that the history diverged at one point was the basis for titling the piece *meiosis*; a point in time where the wealth and culture were separated from city. To help represent the splitting, the frame was cut on a CNC from a sheet of plywood to mimic scientific illustrations of cell division. The palette of color was also reduced to various shades of blue to reference the blues in the patterning on the ceramics and the colors of the city.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 9**  
*Meiosis (Portals and Portholes) (detail)*  
2017  
Serigraphy, Oak Plywood
Figure 10

*Remnants*

2017

Ceramic, Red Oak, Water
Remnants takes on a more somber tone as you come to the piece at the end of the exhibition. In a way it is quiet, peaceful and meditative but also sad. I was trying to hit on a general feeling that I have when I think about the history that could have been for East Liverpool. I also had the thought in mind of how the city continues to hold on to a past that is becoming more distant.

The broken jug on the shelf still acts as a somewhat functional object, but it does not serve its original purpose and becomes a metaphor for the city. It is glazed on the interior and holds water from the Ohio River up to the point where it is about to overflow. The shelf that the broken jug sits on was carved into by a CNC machine using data taken from satellites. The topography it creates is a portion of the Ohio River Valley from East Liverpool down to Steubenville, Ohio. It brings the viewer back to the landscape which I refer to in the rest of the work. The Jugs which are stacked on the floor are slip casts which I have been doing alongside my practice for the past two months. I pushed myself to continuing making them in a production style to emulate the labor in the factories. The floor jugs act as leftover pieces from a forgotten assembly line in a hastily abandoned industry.
Figure 11
Remnants (detail)
2017
Ceramic, Red Oak, Water
In Conclusion

When this body of work was conceptualized, I had never worked in clay despite having a deep connection to it throughout my childhood. In my youth, I played in creek beds lined with clay and I would find pieces of pottery embedded in our soil; those little fragments seemed like distant memories. I would try to imagine how the pottery fragments came to be in my forest and what had happened to such a thriving industry. Therefore, it was vitally important for me to begin to gain an understanding of ceramics and the materiality of clay. I wanted to make as much of a connection as possible to the history of the region I grew up in and I feel strongly that I have accomplished that.

Looking at this work in its entirety, I think of the correlations the subject has to the failing industrial cities scattered across the Rust Belt and all of Appalachia. My hope is that, even though the industries may change across the landscape, people either see the similarities to their own experience or empathize with the plight of a collapsed economy. I want to soften divisions and help to foster a unity in the Appalachian community.
REFERENCES


