You Didn’t Ask, But It Was Wednesday

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

by

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

These last two years have been some of the biggest obstacles and greatest achievements of my life. I have been so fortunate to have so many supporters in my cheering section. I would first like to dedicate the exhibition to my son, William Avery Gabbard-Morris. William, one day you’re going to grow up, but I hope that you will always be the good person you are now. Next, I want to thank my wonderful parents, Wendy Thacker, John Gabbard, David Fannin, Renee Gabbard, Melissa Ewers Haddix, and Scott Haddix. Though not all of you may have your name on my birth certificate, I attribute the act of raising me to each of you. Thanks to my sister, Kyla, who was there for it all, and my cousins, Trey and Hayden, who were there when I needed them most. A special recognition goes out to my best friends: Kelli, Lauren, Marisa, Laura, Lacee, and Sarah, who were there at the beginning of my transition to clay, continue to support me no matter what crazy idea I come up with, and have always been available at a text’s notice. To all the studio mates and friends I have gained at Kent State, I can’t believe our time is up. I owe such a debt of gratitude to each and every one of you because you have shaped me as an artist in so many ways. I will miss each of you and can’t wait for our paths to cross again. To my favorite undergraduate students (you know who you are), though our friendships have been short, I can’t wait to see where each of you goes in ceramics. Seeing the future of clay in each of you has been one of my greatest joys.
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I could never repay anyone mentioned here for all they have done for me, for my son, or my career. If friendships make a person rich, then I am the wealthiest person I know.

Thank you.
YOU DIDN’T, ASK BUT IT WAS WEDNESDAY
How the F Did We Get Here

In one of my first critiques in grad school, my fellow grad student, Taylor Pasquale remarked on an NPR segment he’d overheard mention: “the universal in the specific”. At the time, it meant very little to me. However, like most things we hear in passing, when the time arises for their importance to be known, they come up to the shallow ends of our mind. I promise, I’m going somewhere with this.

When I first started digging into my own specificities, it was first as a potter, and second as a ceramic artist. Through the identity of potter, I had a very real and tangible scale of what worked and what didn’t, usually relying on the aspects of technicality and functionality. I was taking the easy way out, for lack of better phrasing. I would allude throughout my patterns and embellishments that I wanted to talk about something more, but just couldn’t break through the surface of my comfort zone. Fear of failure held me in a place of reserve that I couldn’t seem to get out of.

While in New York in 2016, I had the chance to go to the September 11 memorial site, where a museum now stands in recognition of that traumatic event. I didn’t know it at the time, but seeing the objects present in the museum would greatly influence the work I would make later. I often reference an article by Anne Lukaks in National Geographic that features some of the memorial objects from the museum. Seeing these everyday things that were a part of such a huge trauma that we can each relate to on a large scale, made me think a lot about similar objects in my own life and the lives of others. How do we relate to the objects present during the hardest points of our lives?
How do others relate to those objects without the same context?

After a long battle with understanding who I wanted to be as an artist for the first year of grad school, I took the opportunity to go back to my home state to rest and get away from the pressure of grad school for a short time over the summer after my candidacy review. Going home, after being away for so long can redefine what you know about yourself and what you think you know about home. I had the chance to see all of these things in my life growing up that I thought were so common in a new light. Having lived my entire life before grad school within a 2-hour drive of the place I was born, I was always surrounded by the same experiences, the same memories, and a driving course of familiarity between myself and the others around me who had similar experiences. I had looked at moments of abuse by a variety of sources as times of nostalgia, because that was all that I knew.

A common saying back home is, “If a child never tastes sugar, they don’t know what is sweet.” This applied a lot to my life, I had an unhappy childhood exposed to a lot of adult experiences well above my maturity, but so did the other kids around me. I didn’t recognize these moments as wrong because that was all I saw and knew. Throughout these moments of realization, I began thinking about the possibility that having a bad childhood is relative. What is bad for others, can be far better than for others. What was a fond memory to me in the beginning, was shocking when I tried to share stories with others. We all have bad times in our childhood and can relate to a feeling of inadequacy in that experience. This is what inspired the body of work I’ve been creating.

Universality in the specific.
YOU DIDN’T ASK, BUT IT WAS WEDNESDAY
On Childhood and Other Traumas

My work deals with childhood, inadequacy, loneliness, drug abuse, violence, the criteria of what innocence is, and trauma. Throughout the work, a seedy underbelly is present and noticeable. I used the most recognizable forms of pills, bandages, and dirt amongst other things to showcase a normalization in our lives based on the experiences we have. What we see from day to day becomes our normal, I repeat the use of these objects across several of the works to mimic that sense of familiarity as you move from work to work. By the end, there is a sense of normalcy applied to seeing something like an old cigarette butt or pill and the shock of their use has worn off. This represents the lives of many children who grow up with that as a constant background noise in their own memories. In my exhibition, You Didn’t Ask, But It Was Wednesday [Fig. 1], I wanted to explore these ideas with sincerity and clarity that I didn’t have before this past year.

The works are created with a sense of intentional lack of narrative. Not all of the questions are answered, the whole story is not given. This provides room for the viewers to ponder on their own experiences and question their own understanding of what is normal and what is not. I used objects such as strawberries and teddy bears to create a link between the ideas of innocence and childhood that we all know and understand. Throughout the course of this work I wanted to question those ideas and delve deeper into our understanding of innocence. I chose to do this most notably in At Some Point (More Bad Than Good) [Fig. 11]. This piece featured 27 white teddy bears arrayed in a readymade curio cabinet. Each bear is paired with one or more objects that
ask a question. These objects are recognizable, understandable, but in juxtaposition to each other and their present figurine, the bear, their context is not readily recognizable. They ask the viewer to examine their own understanding of innocence and the title itself alludes to this fact as well.

For this piece I used a warm spotlight as well as employing the warm light that already was available in the curio cabinet. I used this warm tone as a direct visual key to a happier feeling that is present in nostalgic reminiscing on past events. This alludes to each of our own innocence in not understanding the gravity of the moments we experience and what they can mean in reality. These times can only be looked back on with a critical eye to better understand what happened.

The In A Nutshell Collection [Fig. 4] consists of 5 different pieces that possess objects that can be used in both a negative and positive light. Fences provide a sense of safety and comfort, but they can also keep things locked in and hidden from the outside world, bandages are used to provide comfort, but are also signifiers of a physical trauma experienced, pills can be used to heal and to hurt, a cast iron skillet can provide sustenance under the right circumstances, but can also make a very powerful weapon, each piece and their correlating objects features a dual storyline depending on the person seeing it. Each one speaks to a duality both in experience and life, everyone has the story they want to tell and the story that exists within us as our truth.

Throughout our lives we are molded by the people around us. Like the soap on our bathroom sinks, as we are exposed to the people in our lives, we change and take shape. This idea inspired The Only One That Believed In Me [Fig. 14]. Noted here, is the use of gold, which is consistent throughout the course of the work as a signifier of
another duality. Gold is a representation of preciousness, but also has a darker understanding when its history is examined further. In *The Only One That Believed In Me* [Fig. 14], this idea of the understanding of gold is not lost. This collection of soap is about the act of being molded by our relationships, we have all these different versions of our self, created over time, that we carry around with us from one person to the next.

Innocence and the context present in our own individual understandings of that word, is most present in *I Didn’t Know It Was Wrong* [Fig. 2]. Here I implemented the use of the white strawberry, used most often in the work as the ultimate understanding of innocence through the removal of its traditional illustrious and sensual red, and the cigarette butt, a used and discarded remnant of destruction, and piled them together. Piling the objects together questions their relationship together, reminiscent of the feeling most can relate to of not fitting in or feeling out of place. These objects instinctually do not belong together, it feels wrong. To have this dirty piece of trash compared to something pure and clean like the strawberry provides a sense of inadequacy when you question which object you most identify with, are you the strawberry or the cigarette butt?

The idea of this identification with an object is extended to *She Made The Wrong Choice* [Fig. 11], where I blew up the proportions of the cigarette butts featured in the rest of the work. Also, in this work, I gold tipped the ends, further showcasing an importance in these objects normally cast aside as refuse. When you think about the piece *I Didn’t Know It Was Wrong* [Fig. 2], and the question I was asking, the act of increasing the scale of the butts in *She Made The Wrong Choice* [Fig. 11] along with the
preciousness and importance placed on this piece is given a deeper context for the idea identity plays in this work.

For many, the holidays and big moments in our life don’t always carry the sense of happiness we expect of them. A birthday can go wrong very easily and become something more sinister. The act of another person can create a memory that remains for a much more sinister reason than the day it fell on. In *We Don’t Always Get The Good Surprises* [Fig. 13], I chose to use a personal experience to discuss this idea. I use the juxtaposition of three recognizable objects, the birthday candle, the pill form, and the wooden plank with two not so easily recognizable objects: the bean like form and the chunk of white carpeting. This biomorphic shape, which for clarity we will heretofore refer to as a bean, is also seen in the *In A Nutshell Collection* [Fig. 4] and *Loss (What Is This Place?)* [Fig. 15] and can be used as a stand in for the person. Each one features a texture that tells a story alluding to deeper context for the work, without providing the whole truth.

Much like in *We Don’t Always Get the Good Surprises* [Fig. 13] I chose to have a lack clarity. This is a conscious choice to provide a gateway for the viewer to define childhood, trauma, and innocence thru their own inner context and relative experience. Throughout this work, the viewer is faced with their own understanding of what a normal childhood is. They are asked to think about the parameters of the what innocence is and where the lines are crossed. In some of the work, its about sharing a particular understanding of how childhood can be. In *It’s That Time Of The Month Again* [Fig. 3] there is a sense of the act of preciousness applied to the truly inadequate moments in our lives. When something is a huge part of your life, it becomes precious. But upon
further inspection, you can come to realize that all the fondness and nostalgia was born out of a lack of understanding of the situation at hand. In childhood, we all can have things that we think are normal and commonplace, it is our innocence that leads us down this path, or is it really just ignorance?
YOU DIDN'T ASK, BUT IT WAS WEDNESDAY

Understanding

Throughout the course of making this work, I was forced to confront my own experiences and reevaluate my feelings toward them. In a way, this show provided a space for healing from trauma I experienced when I was younger that shaped my identity. This process has been both scary and revealing to understand how wrapped up victimhood can be in our identity. Each piece became a confrontation with that idea throughout the course of the making process. A lot of the work was created as individual objects that were intuitively combined after the bisque and glazed together or simply left as a modular work with individual parts that can be repositioned in further work in the future. This constant changing of the work is useful as a representation of our constantly changing identity over the course of time.

In researching the unknown quote referenced by Pasquale at that critique in Fall 2016, I found a video by the poet, Robert Pinsky, where he talks about the idea of artifacts of a life representing a gateway to the past once it is known enough. Nothing could be truer of this body of work, for the viewer and myself, we are transported back into our own childhoods where we are forced to question our understanding of the events.

To put the work simply, I created objects in clay that were significant to me in some way. Through the venue of recontextualization, I was able to force a new meaning on the objects and build a relationship with the viewer that stretches over the landscape of time. Their experiences make the work what it is, and each person brings their own understanding to what it represents. While I can provide all the parameters, based on
my own understanding, the real beauty lies in where the person seeing each installation perceives the work through the scope of their own understanding of childhood, innocence, trauma, and the emotions that are brought up by those relationships. With that in mind, *You Didn't Ask, But It Was Wednesday [Fig. 1]* became a venue for understanding and redefining what normal is to me.
Figure 1
You Didn't Ask But It Was Wednesday (Exhibition)
Crawford Gallery, Kent State University
April 2\textsuperscript{nd}-6\textsuperscript{th}, 2018
Figure 2
*I Didn’t Know It Was Wrong*
Ceramic
12 in x 4 in x 4 in
Figure 3

*It’s That Time of the Month Again*
Ceramic
12 in x 12 in x 5 in
Figure 4

*In A Nutshell Collection*
Ceramic
36 in x 4 in x 6 in
Figure 5
Precious. Shitty.

Ceramic
4 in x 4 in x 4 in
Figure 6
*We Knew Where to Go When We Were Hungry*
Ceramic
4 in x 4 in x 6 in
Figure 7
*How Did We Get Here (Where’s Mamaw?)*
Ceramic
4 in x 4 in x 4 in
Figure 8
*It Happened Over There*
Ceramic
4 in x 4 in x 7 in
Figure 9
*I Still Don’t Know How To Find The Words*
Ceramic
4 in x 4 in x 5 in
Figure 10
You Didn’t Ask, But It Was Wednesday
Ceramic
108 in x 1 in x 10 in
Figure 11
She Made the Wrong Choice
Ceramic
72 in x 12 in x 9 in
Figure 12

At Some Point
Ceramic, Found Object
78 in x 48 in x 13 in
Figure 4

*We Don’t Always Get the Good Surprises*

Ceramic  
9 in x 4 in x 7 in
Figure 14
*The Only One That Believed In Me*
Ceramic
36 in x 22 in x 7 in
Figure 15  
*Loss (What Is This Place?)*  
Ceramic  
4 in x 4 in x 7 in
References

Pasquale, Taylor D. "Fall Final Critique." Reading, Ceramics Fall Final Critique, Kent State University, Kent, OH, December 2016.

"While driving down the road one day, I heard an interview on NPR where the person being interview mentioned 'The universal in the specifics'


“Friday marks the 14th anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terror attacks. Nearly 3,000 people died and thousands more were injured in New York at the World Trade Center, in Virginia at the Pentagon, and in Pennsylvania, where a hijacked plane bound for Washington crashed. We've gathered photos of belongings recovered from the World Trade Center. From personal notes to office supplies, the objects left behind help us imagine the everyday lives of the victims and remind us of the attack's heavy human cost.”


“Any moment any person’s idea at any one moment, any artifact, if you could understand it well enough would be a portal into the whole rest of the universe.”