Decorating the Imagination: An Investigation Into the Poetics of Play

Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master of Fine Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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The Ohio State University
2010

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Abstract

This thesis describes four series’ of work as expressions of a methodology of play. The work makes specific reference to domestic conventions of display and the decorative arts, though positions this historical content within material contexts that propose a poetics of the possible against the impossible. Play is sustained and limited by tensions that are achieved through inverted formal and material relationships. The body, motion, decoration and utilitarian forms collapse into one another and are immobilized within the gravitational density of the miniature and the expository place of display. The work described entails active creative involvement at every stage in the process of making, and is simultaneously a site for analytical hypothesizing about how objects exist in space and consciousness, as well as aesthetic and intuitive problem solving. Personal history is described as an entry point into the initial motivations of the artist. However, the lyrical quality of the work and the suggestion of function and rhythmic action within it, invite the viewer to discover their own willingness to participate in these artistic material expressions.
Dedication

To my Mother and Father
Acknowledgments

I would like to extend many thanks to my advisor, Steven Thurston, and faculty, Mary Jo Bole, Malcolm Cochrane, Ann Hamilton, Rebecca Harvey, and Amy Shuman. I would also like to thank my family, friends, and colleagues, especially Rakesh P. Tiwari, Kurt Anderson, Jessica Brandl, Undine Brod, Sara Gallo, Daniel Hoffman, Yoshinaga Kawamura, Janet MacPherson, Tara Polanski, Jessica Sanders, Kyla Toomie, and many others.
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Introduction

During my upbringing on a dairy farm, the productive labor and visceral reality of the farm existed in dramatic contrast to the domestic experience. The Victorian farmhouse in which my family lived was like an island of civilization in which the menial experience of the everyday was tamed and romanticized through the care and display of extensive collections of miniature tractors, pastoral scenes of farm life, and a host of other collector and decorative objects. These collections required the additional, non-productive labor of dusting.

The time that I spent dusting the collections on display transformed the individual character of each object into a marker that found meaning through its relationship to other objects, and its opposition to the outside reality of the farm. The timelessness and iconic character of each individual object broke down through the logic of the system and labor of dusting. This experience planted the seed for my interest in the possibilities within object relationships to re-imagine how objects can embody experience, memory and process.

The category of memory refers to an intangible, unbounded realm. It is unbidden and involuntary as often as it is deliberately triggered. Having lived through an
experience does not always help to determine where it begins and ends. Objects and materials evoke memories, but like intangible memories, the meanings they evoke are slippery. In my work, I strive to achieve poetic tension by reorganizing the specific symbolism of decorative and commemorative objects through formal and material explorations. I use decoration as a tactile language to notate possibilities within this set of constraints, and evolve my work as I build on the residue and outcomes of earlier explorations. In this process, materials are put together so that they can exist and support one another in inverse combinations. Forms take on a hybrid character in order to negotiate invisible forces of time, weight, gravity and compression. The drama that ensues from the implied actions and reactions in an object, the outcome of forces that I subject upon them, gives them memory.

As I describe my work, meaning emerges as a series of propositions that arise out of a context of play, and result in dynamic transitions between categories of meaning.

*The Anatomy of Play*

The initial ideas for my projects begin with the observation, research and analysis of existing forms of display, and materials. As I work through the material and formal
character of constructing objects that are informed by this process, I name and rename what is visible in the physical objects as they take shape, propelling my work forward. Aspects of the original decorative references remain in tact, though they take on new forms that are reflective of my particular engagement with them. The language of decoration is slippery – materials and styles shift and transform over time though carry historical content forward with them, contributing to the multiplicity of decorative meaning. This shifting character allows my work to hang in between visible references and unfamiliar relationships that arise through my working process.

In my work I salvage and recombine elements both from my research of historical commemorative forms and decorative styles, as well as from plaster commercial molds that were once used to fabricate very recognizable and kitsch decorative ceramic objects. I recontextualize these references and mold fragments by imagining new contexts for forms and textures found within them. Frilly bells that look as though they were made of fabric can lend the porcelain that is cast in them a skin-like or balloon like character. Small shells can take on the visual character of screws or fastening devices of various sorts. Like the bells, berries and grapes resemble cells that are separated by a thin skin membrane, and decorative beads suggest the teeth of a fish or a small animal. Bunny ears can be wrapped around objects like pelts or bandages. The radial texture and regular
repetition of a basket weave can seem industrial and inorganic. When cast in porcelain, the collection of these disparate forms is unified within a language of decoration.

Like in an evolutionary time-line that describes the transformation of a specific physical attribute on a biological form, relationships that I establish between objects and materials become catalysts for further exploration. I work in series or in multiples to initiate a situation in which I can expand or build on a set of ideas that arise out of the process of making. Through the juxtaposition of objects in a series, I am able to exceed the initial formal and philosophical methodology that I set out for myself, and in the process, arrive at poetic expression. The resulting strangeness that ensues from this process situates neo-classicism in a context that is as confounding as the continued existence of the dysfunctional appendix in the human body.

Given that my work evolves as it is developed in the studio, there are instances when chance situations inform my thought process. A chance arrangement can shift thought and act as a catalyst for cyclical, rather than linear thinking. I am interested in the idea of fixing unexpected arrangements that arise out of the specific imperatives and chance occurrences of a particular working situation into a permanent form, into a marker, which can act as a historical record that resists simplistic or essentialist material understandings of history.
Despite my use of the porcelain material, the objects I make do not strive to become treasures. This is unlike the motivation that drove much of porcelain manufacture in previous centuries. Nor are they an accumulation of the imitations or leftovers of this heritage. They use decorative reference points as if they were part of a language that can exist, evolve and speak in ways that cannot be easily categorized.

Accordion Twist, 2010, 4 x 16 x 4 in.       Pair, 2010, 6 x 16 x 4 in.

In my working process, I build on previous ideas by shifting materials, exaggerating or repositioning formal relationships that I have already considered, and incorporating new references. My interpretations of the porcelain plate display, the bust, the souvenir spoon and the shelf upon which an object is
displayed – all conventions that I have researched and interpreted in my work – morph into one another with each new set of ideas. For example, the accordion formation of the paper plate display became translated into the miniature paper accordions that connected the porcelain elements in the porcelain and paper constructions. The machined grooves in the shelves that hold the flexible paper forms in place in some of the porcelain and paper constructions anticipate the mock flexibility of the terra cotta tile wedges in Brick Series.

American Souvenir Spoons, late 1900’s
Here I Play with the Logic of Conventional Forms of Display

The souvenir spoon or commemorative shovel exemplifies a peculiar logic in the way that specific locations and events are commemorated within the confines of a format, which has no contribution to the narrative except for its familiarity as a commemorative form. As a spoon, the souvenir spoon exists simultaneously as an object of action, consumption and commemoration, aspects, which are separate from the specific content that it depicts. This observation initiated the Paper and Porcelain constructions, as well as Brick Series. These series’ do not represent the spoon itself, but deconstruct the souvenir spoon or shovel as an object location where the relationship between narrative elements can exist in proximity without a recognizable format or formal continuity. I thus explored how details or punctuations within an object could reorganize our expectations from a decorative form, and expand and contract the space within and around the object. The relationship between the functional reference to the spoon, however removed from practical purpose, in combination with a narrative of places or events that exist within the souvenir spoon, is conflated in my work. The narrative does not exist separately from the object but is created through my attention to the decorative functionalism of how the parts of the objects were put together.
Light Work is a singular object that makes a comparably direct reference to the souvenir spoon or commemorative shovel that is hung for display. The function of the familiar form is transformed into the realm of the purely decorative by being constructed out of an accumulation of fragments from vaguely familiar decorative objects, despite its mimicry of a shovel form. Through exaggerated decoration of both handle and spade, the gap between the format of the spoon and the narrative that it depicts is narrowed so that the tactility, labor and accumulation of decoration, take the place of pictorial narrative content of the object.

In my initial research of Brick Series, I considered how the object that is intended to sit on a shelf physically engages with its context of display. I explored the notion of a flexible shelf that would be shaped to metaphorically meet the demands of an object that sat on top of it. In the process of designing a bendable shelf, I came to the possibility of using segmented wedges of clay that, as a group, seem bendable (like tapered bricks that arch around windows.) Instead of sitting on top of the shelf, the porcelain elements thread through and bookend the clay segments so that they seem like handles that do the work of bending the tiles. Finally, the notion of the shelf became entirely incorporated into the object, to the point that it could not be hung on the wall, but was displayed as part of the object of display in a cased pedestal.
Light Work, 2010, 116 x 10 x 4 in.

Brick Series #1, 2010, 3 x 11 x 6 in.  
Brick Series #3, 2010, 3 x 9 x 4 in.
As in Light Work and the Porcelain and Paper constructions, the reference to the role of the shelf in Brick Series, and the attention to functional jewelry-like attachments, incorporates utilitarian form to construct a non-functional decorative object.

Out of the three objects in Brick Series, the clay segments were left out of one of the works to more clearly expose the role of porcelain in the other two works in the series. The clay tiles would have obscured and confused the way that the porcelain ends reference two attached doorknobs (as if they were threaded through a door.) Instead of tiles, I designed a jewelry-like beaded appendage that slides onto and hangs off of the slightly bent and seemingly weighed down porcelain rod that extends between the two ends. The beads, though perpendicular to the connective rod, echo the repetitive rhythm.
of the clay tiles. While the tiles evoke the rhythm of a conveyor belt or assembly line, the beads suggest the linearity of prayer beads on a rosary. All three works in the series expand the imaginative space between the elements of the constructed forms by repositioning material, formal and representational elements. The final works appear much more like the paper and porcelain constructions than initially intended. The stasis of the paper accordions that were secured in place by the porcelain ends and by the grooved shelves, (grooves in the shelves matched and dictated the location for parts of the objects) upon which they were placed, is replaced by the more rigid material of fired clay, even though it has the formal semblance of flexibility. The lack of earthenware tiles in one of the objects in the series is an example of how the parameters that I set up to initiate a project are merely starting points, and are subject to change, depending on whatever formal and material possibilities may arise through the course of making.

Like in the Brick Series, some objects in the Porcelain and Paper constructions also deviate from the initial configuration of a folded paper element that is anchored by two porcelain ends. In some cases, I left the paper out altogether as I explored how various porcelain forms could, on their own, address a similar kind of narrative.

The starting point for the series of 10 busts was the observation that the convention of the bust format disguises the violence of a dismembered human torso. I
explored this aspect of the figural convention of the bust by exaggerating the role of decoration or convention in making this violence seem invisible. The busts exaggerate decoration to the point of obliterating figurative representation altogether. As the number in the series of busts increased, my initial preoccupation with emphasizing the connective area of the shoulder sockets, evolved into exploring how decorative tissue could envelop the entire torso surface. The decorative elements that were in part derived from influences like neo-classical architectural cladding or medieval costume seem to transform what would otherwise be a representation of the external body into an internal landscape.

Light Work employs much of the language of the busts. In both the busts and Light Work, the thick and opaque glaze coating on the compiled decorative forms, unifies, obscures, and seems to hold the disparate shapes together. Like in much of my other work, both the busts and Light Work reference display conventions and decoration to confuse the distinction between utilitarian and non-functional embellishments. The base in the bust stands in for the missing part of the body, and references traditional architectural details and supports, but has a purely decorative function within the bust convention.
Typical Staffordshire Portrait Busts:
They are, top row, left to right:
an unmarked Washington;
John Milton, by Ra. Wood;
and George Washington,
by Enoch Wood, date, 1818.
Bottom row, left to right:
W. M. Cloves, a Methodist preacher,
marked "B S & T, Burslem";
John Wesley, by Ra. Wood;
and John Wesley, by Enoch Wood.

From the V&A Collection.
Artist: Unknown
Museum Number 344-1987
Staffordshire, 1900's

Cabbage Bust, 2009, 12 x 6 x 6 in.
Bubble Bust, 2009, 10 x 9 x 5
The paper plates began with the intention to create the illusion of an actual porcelain plate display that was constructed out of a much less valued and typically disposable material. My interest was in posing the question: how can value associations be dissolved and repositioned through material and process?
While making the substitute plate objects, my attention soon shifted to the formal possibilities that arose through various methods of constructing the objects. The original printed images became removed from the original scene as images were cut and layered in a variety of configurations. The Arctic Scene platter image offered an especially rich set of pictorial relationships to play with and manipulate. The centre of the plate depicts an arctic scene with Inuit riding a dog sled. The border of the plate contains images of tropical plants and animals. The logic or illogic of the geographic discontinuity intrigued me and presented the opportunity to investigate ways of shifting the emphasis, and logic of the image. The final printed, cut and assembled image of the Arctic Scene plates are both penetrable and impenetrable. The fuzzy and pixilated quality of the printed image obscures the original perspective of the intended gaze, while detail and precision is created with ornate and delicate cuts through the layers of paper that are supported by a card-board armature, which mimics a plate stand. The depth of the layers moves inwards and outwards, the centers recede into the blankness of white cardboard or protrude in frilly, stacked levels, like the layers on a wedding cake. The curls in the paper at the extremities of the cut cavities, makes them seem alive and responsive to the atmospheric humidity.
Arctic Scene Paper Plates, 2009, 16 x 26 x 8 in.

Accordion Series Paper Plates, 2009, 5 x 22 x 5 in.
Here I Play with Pattern Recognition

As I have worked through a variety of bodies of work in the past two years (paper plates, busts, porcelain, paper constructions, other related works) my work has shifted towards increasingly abstract or non-conventional forms. However, the processes that I undertook in each body are closely related in that they question the necessary characteristics for recognizing or remembering a familiar object. The paper plates take the convention of the porcelain plate display and recreate this format using printed images of porcelain plates that, are intricately cut into and mounted on cardboard armatures. Through this installation, I considered the role of the porcelain material in
creating an authentic experience of neo-classical decorum. In the busts, I investigated how the base of the bust functions to create an artificial or alternate universe in which the specific representation of an individual can be understood as a complete form, despite its missing body and severed limbs. In so doing, I confounded decorative references with a visceral interpretation of the body to highlight the illusion of disembodiment that is created by the bust convention. In the porcelain and paper constructions and brick series, I make no reference to a specific conventional form, yet revisit how the porcelain material and the context of display refer to the heritage of the decorative arts. Moreover, familiar aspects of these objects became manifest through pattern recognition and the logic of how parts, however decorative, fit together to make a complete or “functional” form. To more clearly describe how I understand familiarity within this most recent body of work, I will elaborate with a specific example. The drain plug is chained to a bathtub in close proximity to the drain. There is a limited range within which the plug can potentially belong, though there is a strong impulse based on recognition and practical utility to assume that it belongs in the drain. The volume and circularity of the plug matches the negative space that is visible in the drain, creating a recognizable pattern. Recognition also exists through the memory of drain plugs and plugging drains, a memory that supersedes the formal pattern and design of the objects. The question is
asked: is utilitarian function located in the past or the future when the memory of function persists in a form that has displaced its function by presenting it in a context of decoration?

Conundrum (one of the works in the porcelain and paper construction series) addresses how this recognition can be used to suggest a logic or range of possibilities within an object that has no utilitarian function. The shape of the shell-tipped plugs matches the round cavities on either end of the object, conjuring the activity of plugging a drain or attaching technical parts, implicating bodily memory into a decorative object.
Light Work explores the relationship between the memory of the tactility and rhythm of digging and the work and gesture of dusting. The shovel makes clear reference to the decorative through being hung on the wall the way that souvenir spoons are often displayed, and through the ornate strangeness of its porcelain handle. It evokes the memory of work, of digging. When I remember digging, I first think of the grip of my hands on a wooden handle, I feel the dry calloused areas on my palms and fingers. My hands are clenched tightly around the handle to reduce the slippage that occurs between hands and shovel, which results in blisters. Then I think of the horizontal vector of the shovel as it enters the ground, breaking the clay soil into clumps. The shovel halts abruptly when the force applied to it is counter-acted by the hardness of the ground. The shovel extends the force that I exert upon it, though unlike my body, is rigid in its linear shape. The handle of Light Work does not appear rigid, but soft and malleable. If one were to try and dig with it, it would bend into an amorphous form. The residue of hands and fingers clenching and squeezing the handle is visible in the handle, though displaces the memory of dry, hard, grainy wood and takes the form of delicately tucked and twisted fabric that is transformed into porcelain. The memory and rhythm of the work of a shovel
is translated into the rhythm of piecing together cloth-like porcelain fragments, a rhythm that echoes the sequencing in dusting when each object is carefully lifted off of the shelf, wiped, and replaced. This experience of the everyday is commemorated in the form of a display object.

*Here I Play with Constricted Motion*

Light Work, Brick Series and the Porcelain and Paper Constructions embody an excess of work in their construction, through are built to be benign, to exist in stasis, to have the efficacy and functional purpose of their functional parts undermined.

In Light Work, the spade points downward to the ground but does not reach the floor – an orientation that can be likened to a shovel that is poised to dig but that is confined to immobility through its display on the wall. The glazed porcelain handle represents an accumulation of work, the nature of which appears to be the tucking and twisting of soft and supple assembled elements. This illusion is achieved by molding the clay into fabric forms, and the thick satin glaze that coats it. The appearance of tension in the construction of the handle seems sufficient to hold the shovel in suspension. This tension could give way at any moment to the weight of the spade, causing it to fulfill its
downward motion, but end in broken pieces on the ground. Work is suspended. It is arrested by a context of display and decoration.

In Brick Series, a fine porcelain rod is threaded through segments of brick and is secured on either end by ornate, and organic-looking handle-like forms. The porcelain in this material relationship also seems to have done the work of bending and breaking the earthenware bricks into regular sections, though seems like it could snap with the weight and stress of their load at any moment. The regularity of the segmented bricks suggests a mechanical and repetitive rhythm, like that of a conveyor belt. However, it neither moves forwards nor backwards; it is arrested by the very conditions that brought it into existence. Immobility is not taken-for-granted, but a deliberately constructed illusion.

*Here I Play with the Slippage of Recognizability*

Moments of familiarity – access points are offered – the display shelf, the porcelain material of figurines. Rabbit fur texture, basket weave and shells. Fragments are pieced together; the representative elements from the original molds are reduced to their suitability for being reconstructed into forms that evoke shapes and object relationships from the everyday, as well as organic bodily forms. Some examples include
door knobs, bricks, clasps, fastened electric wires, paper dolls, a paper towel tube, the peeling of a carefully peeled fruit, intestines. Recognition emerges and dissolves as multiple references transform into one another and are mediated by their arrangement within a context where familiar materials and forms behave according to logic of process and formal consideration. The porcelain is compressed, gathered, stretched and warped. Dry seems wet, hard seems soft, movement is static, sharp is fragile, a bunny ear becomes like a flower petal, paper seems solid, wood seems softer than paper, decoration is violent and cheap is beautiful. Order is paired with dynamic unfamiliarity in the contrast of the precise repetition of the laser cut folded paper and the playful rationality of how the porcelain elements are combined. The porcelain ends almost seem like handles, but their forms are so elaborate and dynamic that they repel a human hand, take on a life of their own and do the work of pulling and pushing the paper accordions that are sandwiched between them. Despite the allusion to a compressive and expansive motion created by the accordion paper, a movement that takes place over time, the objects are static. The implication of movement over time is imaginary, an illusion. The actions of wrapping, attaching, securing, also take place over time – each activity becomes more visible against another. The time of process (the time it takes for the imagination to consider deliberate and unfamiliar material relationships) replaces the
historical timelessness that is created through symbolic representation. Unlike in the collection, where the specificity of representation or historical context is undermined in favor of the abstract illusion of universal time and space, these objects seem to combine the entirety of the collection into a single object. The maker and the observer are challenged to discover the material and formal logic of the objects as recognizability slips into grotesque inversions.

*Here I Play with the Effects of Gravitational Density on the Body*

My experience growing up on a dairy farm gave me a perspective of the body that broke down the divisions between the internal body and the external body. The digestive system of the cow was one part in the process of milk production that also entailed growing, harvesting and feeding the animals, as well as milking, cleaning and caring for the animals in every aspect of their bodily functions and life cycles. Many of the tasks involved in this process were mechanized; conveyor belts and milking machines imposed a rhythm on the physical labor surrounding them; the sequential organization of the digestive system of the cow extended into the rhythmic repetition of tasks that occurred outside of the animal’s body. The duality between the visceral experience of the farm in
which I grew up, and the romantic representation of this experience in the form of collections of miniature objects in the domestic interior of the farmhouse, is addressed through the tension that ensues from the display and scale transition of anatomical body references.

In the busts and the porcelain and paper or terra-cotta constructions, the body is referenced through the inversion of the exterior and the interior. The busts depict stylized patterns of ribs and tendons, as well as the cellular quality of the interior body, while the orifices, protrusions and extensions of the porcelain constructions suggest the thresholds of the internal body. Likewise, the mechanics of sockets, of connective devices in jewelry, hardware etc., are abstracted to resituate body mechanisms towards non-biological function. This brings into question how the body is conceived of as a functional form, and the opposition that is seen between the uprightness and productivity of legs and limbs and the body’s reproductive and digestive mechanisms.

This play of inside and outside is sustained by gravitational density that is achieved through scale. The miniature shrinks the world into an intimate and self-contained entry point for the spectator. The richly detailed and intricate areas of an object seem to behave like planets that gain gravitational force through their material density. Objects present a terrain that is immobilized by the force of gravity, and where the
psychological relationship to the internal body can be considered. The small scale of the porcelain and paper constructions also positions them as specimens from the natural world; their internal workings are presented to be examined as if they were on view from under a microscope, but they refuse to reveal their specific productivity.

*Narrative of the Body of the Busts*

I could touch you and feel you if I wasn’t afraid that the mysterious thick substance that covers your face and body would contaminate my fingers, and then perhaps spread to my face arms and neck. It seems to have the consistency of chewing gum; a thick impenetrable glaze much like that which coats the tiles on walls of institutions from the 70’s and 80’s. Mint green and dusty rose. Its viscosity and opacity obscure the form beneath it. The glaze holds the figure of the bust in a stiff lifeless frontal stance, as does the decorative armor that disrupts the smoothness of the figurative forms. The relief of the mottled surface sometimes references the conceit of making clay onto a literal representation of cabbage leaves for which a precedent was set at various points in the history of European porcelain and majolica. At other points, it seems to reference terra cotta cladding on architecture, and elements from various other decorative
arts. The abstraction that occurs with the glaze application makes the surface under the glaze seem like hardened gums or tendons, entrails, teeth or nipples. It is as if the body of the bust has been turned inside out, what is represented in the interior body turned outward. The busts are trapped, contained or protected by the tension of the mysterious glaze coating that seems to have shrunk them into the size of a garden gnome; a pressure that has caused shoulder sockets to pop both outwards and inwards. The small wasted base acts like an umbilical cord, securing and holding down the implosive or explosive potential of the contained forms.

Conclusion

Through the four bodies of work discussed in this thesis, I have developed a methodology that can build and expand according to its own precedents, and that necessitates my active creative involvement at every stage in the process of making. My work becomes about the poetics of the possible or impossible that emerges through the play and consideration of the formal and material anatomy of an object. This process enables a meandering or circular kind of thinking that can at once entail analytical
hypothesizing about how objects exist in space and consciousness, and be a site for aesthetic and intuitive problem solving.

Wreath, 2010, 7 x 14 x 12 in.
References


