THE CREATION OF SOUVENIRS FROM MY PERSONAL HISTORY SEEN THROUGH MASS PRODUCED OBJECTS, SUBCULTURES, AND THE TATTOO.

A Thesis

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When I first entered graduate school, I was interested in investigating the effects that corporations had on a society through their mass marketed objects and products. During my undergraduate career I had noticed an increase in the way corporations used us, popular culture, as big business. It had become apparent to me that it was important to investigate the comparison between the society we were in the past and the society that we had now become. I felt that my work was a reflection of my culture, and that my culture was a reflection formed by advertising and marketing by these corporations. The objects and products that I focused on allowed any socioeconomic class, gender or culture to share a common experience. It did not matter if you were rich or poor, male or female, or lived in a specific neighborhood, a Wendy's hamburger still tasted like any other Wendy's hamburger. At first I wanted to answer the question, "Are fast food chains the reason for the decline of the family run business?" Secondly, I wanted to know if this decline was caused by the corporations, or was it caused by the change in our family values. I began to make ceramic sculpture that created memorials and paid tribute to these corporations, like Wendy's. These pieces made corporations into icons of a new American lifestyle. I wanted these statues to represent the culture that we had become, but also to be viewed with a more cynical perspective. I felt that we should not be proud that fast food had become our lifestyle, and I hoped the viewer might realize that we had become a weak society with new and different values. These questions and theories drove
me to want to understand and create work that challenged the understandings of the society we lived in.

As my first graduate year progressed, the format and the intent of my pieces changed. I went from totem and classic monumental bust forms to intimate work that was table sized. I no longer wanted to pay tribute to the fast food culture, but I wanted to slap the public in the face with statements on various political and social issues. The end result was a series of work that offered the viewer nothing more than a controversial one line joke. These trophies showed my maturity level at the time, relying on juvenile humor and popular images to cultivate the viewer's interest. I became frustrated, for I did not want my pieces to have to rely on previously made imagery. I found it distressing to try to alter public opinions on the world’s problems through the medium I was working in. Slowly I became less involved in ceramics and found myself becoming more interested in experiences found in everyday life.

My time was now spent rummaging through thrift stores, antique malls, flea markets, and record stores. In doing this, I found myself being lured toward images and objects such as Mork and Mindy, Mr. T, music, tattoos, Hawaiian memorabilia and other collectibles from my childhood. These trite objects/products carried visually loaded histories which formed themselves into icons, fads, or symbols. As I went to these thrift stores, I noticed that most of the objects I was looking for were not as readily available as in the previous years. The only places that I was able to find these collectibles were in antique or retro stores and collectible shops. Not only were these objects becoming big business, so was the reissuing of new objects that incorporated characteristics of the fads
from former trends, I was now having to pay $20.00 for a reissued Atari t-shirt instead of just $2.00 for a used original at the thrift store. I realized that the supply and demand for these objects had become a completely new issue. Companies were using nostalgia to grab the buyer's attention and money. I found that people were now enticed into buying these re-generated corporately produced objects.

Without these artifacts available to me, I would have to create my own artifacts. I came to the conclusion that in order for me to keep making art, I was going to have to make work that talked about my personal interests. I found that the objects I was looking for in thrift stores were mainly souvenirs, camp, and kitsch ceramics that were quickly and cheaply made by the process of mass production through the use of mold making. Because of this realization, I started my next body of work, and I incorporated my interests in mass produced objects and collectibles. This forced me to look at the mass production of objects by the marketing of corporations. Through the growing interest in the souvenir, retro, and kitsch ceramics, I wanted to create my own souvenirs that paid tribute to my life. I was interested in creating a piece that could then be mass produced through the use of molds. I wanted to emulate the aesthetics found in kitsch ceramics, and create a piece that could be mass produced. I switched from hand building and started mold making. The objects I was making were now trophies, or souvenirs for subcultures instead of popular culture. I was no longer concentrating on fast food imagery, but rather imagery that commented on tattoos, gambling, wrestling, bowling, etc. These subjects were not a part of everyday life.
During this same time period, I was taking printmaking. I was also incorporating the same imagery found in my ceramics into my printmaking. I felt that printmaking and mold making both relied on the mass production of images and objects. This is when my interest in creating non-ceramic objects was first developed. I wanted to figure out some way of working that allowed me the opportunity to sneak my images into our society. I started printing matchbooks, shirts, pillows, and fake tattoos. I was very interested in mass producing one of my images, and the thought of being able to manipulate the skin attracted me to the fake tattoos. I was aware of the growing popularity with tattoos and fake tattoos and had not yet seen this tattoo imagery transposed onto objects. I knew that if I could have fake tattoos produced, then I could have my images duplicated on mass quantities of skin. However, I became frustrated with the fake tattoos, and I could not figure out the process. I also could not afford to have them made by someone else, so I gave up. My interest in objects that did not have to be made out of ceramic material was a result formed from creating shirts, pillows, etc. The idea of creating these kind of objects would later be expanded upon in my thesis exhibition.

As I continued investigating this body of work, I was extremely curious about the art of tattoos. As I researched the tattoo, I became aware of the time, patience, and precision that a tattoo artist must have to execute his/her images. I felt my interest in the souvenirs and artifacts correlated with my interest in kitsch, and camp objects. Tattoos are available for a modest price, are quickly made, and rely on only one original image. This awareness led me to the materials I used in my thesis installation; cross stitch, crochet, beading, wood burning, fish gravel, and paper pin-holing. All of these materials
deal with a parts to whole ratio. Each piece is made up of tiny marks that work together to create a pixilated image. I feel that tattoos also shared this characteristic. A tattoo is nothing more than an image that has been created by tiny marks, by way of fast repetitions of needles perforating into the skin.

Now tattoos have slipped into our popular culture. Through the use of the television, movies, and advertising, tattoos have become a curious act in which America is ready to explore. So already taboos have been broken and slowly we are changing the original thoughts, feelings, and preconceived notions surrounding this subculture. Tattoos have their own content that talk about many generations of adornment, patriotism, rebellion, and lastly conformity. Once you have a tattoo you are immediately placed into a stereotype. At any given time there are hierarchies of value. These values account for the shifts in trends found in our culture. Still curious about how corporations look to the subcultures for the next big trend, I wanted to know why some subcultures became popular cultures. In order for a subculture to evolve into a popular culture, the interest must be mass produced. When there is not a product being produced, advertised or marketed there is no demand, therefore no desire. So corporations create the demands. For example, a beer company offered a contest in which the winner of this contest would win a Harley Davidson Motorcycle. The only thing a contestant had to do was to be the person with the biggest beer logo tattooed onto their body. This meant that if you had a smaller tattoo, you lost. However, the company won no matter what because all of the contestants were now left with a permanent advertisement of the beer company on their skin.
At the beginning of my new body of work I had intended to play off society’s interest in this latest craze. Once I started researching tattoo history, I got really involved. I started thinking that it was similar to mold making, and printmaking. The tattoo artist is like a print-maker who has to learn the skill in order to recreate an image. Once this is done that image can be reproduced many times. The only difference for a tattoo artist is that their material becomes the skin.

Before I knew exactly what I wanted to do with this tattoo interest I attempted to create products such as shirts, pillows, paddle balls, and fake tattoos. I was slowly moving away from the ceramic medium and quickly moving into marketing, and thinking of ways to get these pillows and shirts available to the public.

What tools do businesses use to invent fads? What kind of processes do corporations use to market their product? Is advertisement a form of propaganda? Lastly why do we allow ourselves to go overboard buying material possessions joining corporate produced subcultures? In order to market my work I had to answer these questions. These questions drove me to want to understand the psychological development formed by consumerism and why certain products made people tick. I did not know it then, but I was becoming one of the people that I was so against. I had become another business man who saw a window of opportunity where he could exploit a subculture. I knew that I could feed off the tattoo culture. In order to do this I had to control their environment. I realized that I did not want to exploit tattoos on a popular cultural scale, and instead searched for new objects to house the tattoo imagery on a more personal level.
Questioning my interest in the tattoo, I started a new body of work. This body of work was not meant to be mass produced, or to reach a large audience. This would become my inspiration for the objects that made up my thesis exhibition. I made a triptych out of colored fish gravel (see Fig. 4.1 and 4.2). At this point the imagery was from matchbooks from the 1950's. These pieces used the characteristics shared with the tattoo. The tiny pebbles work together to create the larger image, along with the time and patience it took to create these. The images were chosen much like images from a kit, or from a cross stitch pattern. When people sell the kits they chose imagery that is appealing and familiar to hook the buyer in. I did the same, knowing that sex sells in the nineties, I used scantily clad women to entice and attract the viewers to my work. Those images were not personal to me other than the fact that I had collected them. I simply used them as a marketing ploy, aware of the fact that an image of a pixilated woman finished in fish gravel would create interest.

Again looking back to what I collected, I starting creating objects using materials that came straight from kit art, or hobby art. I wanted to create an overall feeling that even though these objects were hand made, they could have been from a mass produced line. I decided to use kit art materials with tattoo imagery. Again, I did not want to talk about tattoos on a popular scale, instead I wanted to pinpoint my interest toward my grandfather’s tattoos.

My grandfather’s arms are covered with tattoos from the late 40’s with images that would tie him to a very patriotic majority. His tattoos became a permanent souvenir, an artifact representing his service in the United States Navy. Tattoos talk about my
Figure 4.1: This is an example of my triptych made out of fish gravel.

Figure 4.2: Another example of a piece that uses the gravel technique.
grandfather as an individual. They put him into a certain socioeconomic class and a
certain culture. When he got these tattoos he gave into peer pressure, becoming what he
thought was the American ideal. Because popular society believed tattoos to be taboo, he
has since spent the last 40 years hiding these marks of patriotism. In my family his tattoos
were perceived as undesirable and this enticed my curiosity even further. I felt that by
using my grandfather's tattoos as the focal point for the imagery, it would be more
personal to me and some how validate my investigations. The imagery for my thesis show
was decided. It was now time to figure out where they belonged in the grand scheme of
things.

I continued my interest in creating a new environment, and much like Eddie Bauer
I wanted to give the viewers a total package. For example, Eddie Bauer gave the
consumer a superficially made lifestyle, a total package. Bauer offers you an outdoor
lifestyle providing you with the best in arctic winter apparel, stainless steel coffee mugs,
socks, flashlights, perfume, and even cars. With these products, Bauer gives you a story.
For example, he talks about how he climbed the great Himalaya Mountains, and as he
looked out he could only think about the warmth coming from his Eddie Bauer limited
edition wool insulated American Made jacket. Bauer grabs the consumer's attention by
first giving him/her a story, then giving him/her a product, leaving the consumer with a
souvenir of that story. Through marketing, stores trick the buyer into thinking that these
products make you an individual. By buying that product that individual is automatically
placed into a culture. By creating all the accessories for you, corporations offer you a
total or complete environment.
Through this process I decided to create my own environment, by creating my own objects. The result was that my thesis exhibition became a documentive installation, filled with artifacts documenting my grandfather's interests and environment (see Fig. 6.1 and 6.2). All of the tattoos that I used in this installation were taken directly from my grandfather. I felt that by creating souvenirs from his life, the objects would become artifacts of his existence. I wanted the memories to live forever and did this through the use of a room, a room that was filled with appropriated objects and memories from his house. In my thesis exhibition I set up an environment. I emulated my grandparent's house, specifically their den area. I tried to recreate their environment as accurately as I could remember. I wanted to give people hints to my grandfather's stories, stories about his life, and my memories of him. I wanted to give people products that were appropriated from the objects that help define my grandfather and his house as an individual identity.

The scene is set. As you walk into the gallery you first encounter a bamboo beaded curtain draping a skull with wings (see Fig. 6.3 and 6.4). The first thing that catches your attention in this den is the nautical theme. On one wall sits a window frame displaying a curtain with projected images of World War II, several air craft carriers, and battleships. On both of the walls there is cheap oak reproduction paneling. There is a floor that has a gravel mosaic. On this floor lies a historical tattoo image with nautical stars and a sailboat. Also on this floor rests two chairs, one facing the audience and the other facing the curtain. On the chairs are a cross stitch pillow and a crocheted afghan blanket. The materials were very domestic and displayed images of his tattoos about
Figure 6.1: A picture of my Grandfather’s house.

Figure 6.2: A picture of my thesis exhibition based on the objects found in my Grandfather’s house.
Figure 6.3: A view from the entrance of my thesis exhibition.

Figure 6.4: A detail from my thesis exhibition.
patriotism and pro-American imagery. The lighting was low and the projection was not crisp. There was a wood burned table where the lamp was sitting. On the record player were soundtracks from old war movies such as, “Victory At Sea,” and other exotica albums.

Aesthetically these objects looked as if they had been gathered from the thrift store. They looked as if they were once a part of a kit or something that could have been mass produced. Objects like chairs, tables, lamps, pillows, blankets, etc. became the body that housed his tattoo imagery. I felt that there was a common thread between tattoos and the material I chose. For one thing all the materials offered a permanent image. For instance, the image in the cross-stitch was bound by the thread, and the wood burning scared the surface of the wood acting as a permanent wound. In each format there was a skill that I had to learn in order to complete the objects, I had to rely on patience, precision, and an understanding of the skill. The installation as a living room was a solution to the question, “How do I house the objects?” I felt like the pieces would have no dialogue with each other unless they were seen together in the whole. I wanted the chair to act as my grandfather and the curtain to be the separation between his reality and his memories. The projection on the curtain offered the viewer a chance to see what he was seeing.

This piece is not meant to be about a participated event, but rather a voyeuristic installation. This piece is made up of furniture and knick-knacks that some people would group with a certain social class, not to mention a certain time period. Some people might share similar stories and can easily identify with the images and objects found in this room.
I was hoping that the viewer might try and put themselves into the chair and experience the memories that my grandfather had. On the curtain were projections that were very dreamlike. They represent his memories. I pictured my grandfather sitting in this chair looking out the window, the curtain becoming the barrier between real life and a dreamlike surreal state.

The only information that offered the viewer a chance to get into this world, was the furniture and accessories. These objects looked as if they could have been taken from any home and had been rearranged into this environment. There were no stories, no mention of the history that belonged to these objects. All of this information had been negated, so everything became visual, and imaginative. The techniques I used spoke of a specific time, and brought back memories of my childhood. I wanted to make this den look as if it had only been abandoned for a couple of minutes. The records in the exhibition shared a common history with many of the viewers entering this environment. I only wanted to give the viewers a hint to my story which could then lead them back to memories of their own family.

In conclusion, I have found that through my research that I am a collector of American trash. This conclusion, coincides with the research I need as a cultural critic. Forcing me to be an archeologist that collects objects from popular culture allows the objects to be reevaluated and interpreted through my work. Through the lack of finding these items at the thrift stores I had to create my own objects that talked about our society, that could then be seen as a artifact for my society. These objects are then transposed through the forms of pillows, chairs, blankets, etc. My thesis instillation
discusses the issue, conception vs. Execution. Most of the materials that I used were influenced from kit art. Much like kit art they rely on a two-dimensional image designed by one artist, in order for this image to be executed the artist then relies on the laborer. I feel that I am both the executer and the conceptor. Secondly, I feel that even though I am inspired by kitsch, camp, and souvenir objects my work cannot be categorized under the same genre. My work is not expedient, and it is not cheaply made, and it is not cheaply sold. I want to create environments. I want people to have question the importance of this documentation. The images I use are already popularized and are readily available which talks about ideas of kit art. It is not necessarily the content but the conceptual process that I want people to understand. Just like kit art people need the popular image to quickly relate to the object and to want to learn or get involved with the process or technique.

I am interested in how objects, and products have been recently marketed by major corporations to appeal to our generation as the current trend. Time periods like the 50's have been reinvented. Swing, cocktails, lounges, and retro art found in furniture and other household accessories can be seen in contemporary shopping malls.

Finally, I feel that I am a product of corporate peer pressure, and that I looked to my grandfathers tattoos for answers and validation for why I am curious about the tattoo culture. I am interested in why people do kit art, and how they get enjoyment out of replicating someone else’s images. I have done the kits and find that I go into a trance like state. I find that I enjoy the meditative qualities and pursue this in every medium that
I can. I choose mediums that work from parts to the whole ratio, creating little marks until they eventually build up to a larger image.