PARALLELS OF FALSENESS:
AN EXPLORATION OF THE DICHTOMY BETWEEN
REAL AND UNREAL

A Thesis
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for the Degree Master of Fine Arts

by
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Approved by

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Introduction

This essay will deal with the impetus for my art as well as its influences, origins, desires and creation. The separation of various facets is near to impossible; each relies upon another, intertwined to make up a whole. Thus, the relationship between one aspect and another becomes a crucial point. In unraveling the content of my work, this network should become obvious.

Over the last few years I have consciously and unconsciously developed a personal language of space and movement. This self-conversation has evolved from studies made not only of specific objects but also of visual and physical movement around those pieces. In conjunction with this concern is the basic interest of aesthetic judgement. Every common object owns a history to which I can subtract, add, compliment or destroy. In effect, I am forcing a new identity onto the piece while at the same time allowing it to retain its known function. These identities, or personalities, are the products of personal and non-personal folklore. Mythical beings, rituals, jokes and fairytales permeate through my day-to-day reality and color the way in which I perceive. Translating this information from years of memory and interpretation has led to the establishment of images and symbols common throughout the work.

Crucial to this work is the observation and intuition of viewer movement. I conceive of, and build, an environment which redefines interior space. In order to resolve this, it is necessary for me to visually walk through the work time after time, to anticipate audience
interaction (what I call controlled choice). Even so, individual viewers continue to surprise me with independent actions separate from those I have expected (random choice). The combination of these two categories - physical makeup and viewer reaction - is tantamount to the completion of my work.
Personal History

"Design is the optimum use of different tools around you to the creation of the best solution within a given set of parameters."1

As beings, we design elements within our lives and environments by making decisions. However, I believe that we often overlook this process, and in so doing, neglect a comprehensive control of the ingredients which make up our existence. As a child, I established an entire series of goals for the entire span of my life. While some of these objectives have changed, the basic structure remains.

As an undergraduate student majoring in design, I was inundated with techniques to solve concrete problems. These techniques included: the identification of a distinct issue, the following analysis, decision making and implementation of the solution. Learning to use these steps helped me to recognize the necessity for quality over quantity. While most of us realize the value of quality in material objects, the same criterion are rarely used when evaluating intangibles. Subconsciously I began to apply these same techniques to more metaphysical issues. As I became more aware of the direct responsibility I have for the framework of my life, the need to adapt surroundings and lifestyle was obvious. Striving to accomplish a harmony between pursuits, strengths, weaknesses, goals and those things which I can not change has become the driving force in my existence.

As a design student I walked cold into a hot glass studio. I had expected stained glass - instead I was barraged with heat, movement, and a sense of community. That impression remains vivid. There is an
attraction of sensuality and danger in the combination of fire and man.

"Roark took the man's gloves and goggles, took the acetylene torch, knelt, and sent a thin jet of blue fire at the center of the beam. The man stood watching him. Roark's arm was steady, holding the tense, hissing streak of flame in leash, shuddering faintly with its violence, but holding it aimed straight. There was no strain, no effort in the easy posture of his body, only in his arm. And it seemed as if the blue tension eating slowly through the metal came not from the flame but from the hand holding it." 2

Ayn Rand (The Fountainhead) describes not only this connection but the movement inherent in this work. I was immediately awed at the transference of energy from the glass to the glassblower; it became a dance, performed poorly by some, brilliantly by others. This dance was dictated by the material and its properties. The movement it contained in and of itself was anthropomorphic. Combining these two - the worker and the medium - captures more intensity than I have ever seen. In my work, I have attempted to recapture this excitement; the combination of movement and man.

Working with the glass, I became aware of the multitude of its properties: transparency/opaqueness, fragility/strength, safety/danger and its uncanny sense to endure as a beautiful substance no matter what application. These dichotomies were puzzling. How could so many opposites exist at once? Nevertheless, I didn't attempt to answer the question. I was involved with the actual production of an object in its simplest function - as a vessel. I was heavily influenced by those working around me, for the obvious reason that I had never seen
molten glass being manipulated before. Imitating forms, particularly that of Dick Marquis, who used precious, brightly colored cups and teapots, was an avenue for me to concentrate on the process rather than the product.

After I had mastered the raw techniques of glassblowing, I attended the Pilchuck School of Glass Design in Washington. Under the direction of Dan Dailey, I was encouraged to express some of the influences the movement of glass had for me. There I discovered an innate curiosity with the form I had been "stealing" - the cup. Fascinated with the idea of container, I questioned what was being contained as well as what a container is. Almost immediately I realized that the inferences of the vessel had a much larger scope than that of glass studio.

In a larger scale, our everyday environments contain not only ourselves, but also construct barriers against the elements of nature, of strangers, and the other variables which we choose to eliminate, or at least regulate, from our shelter. Within these homes, offices, stores, etc., we contrive to make the space individual. It is almost as if we do not want to accept the barren walls, windows and doors for essential form; instead, we deny its existence by covering it in every conceivable fashion.

In the same sense, there is an interior space within ourselves. This inside environment also consists of barriers, of walls, and of windows and portals. Yet it is remarkably different than the physical constraints of architecture. There is movement in both situations; movement through, in, around and stopped by the elements of our
interiors.

Exploring these ideas, I found it was necessary to facilitate my own environment and pathways to the viewer (and to myself) in order to communicate the relationship between my conception of space and its reality.
Perception

The language of visual communication is the most personally satisfying means by which I can express ideas. The questions, and sometimes the answers, in which I am fascinated settle themselves in images. For me it is a language far more complex and gratifying than any written one because it transmits layers upon layers of information, from the tactile sense of surface to spirituality.

"The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe." But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it."^3 This perception of the world is the foundation for my work.

As an object maker, the vessels I produced were hand-scaled, meant to be held. But what held me? As beings we construct real, artificial, and imaginary boundaries for containment. These are not necessarily solid, but reflect our needs and desires to either keep something in or keep something out. Visually, I began to fabricate my own containers: walls. Walls separate us in the same sense as a barrier, yet in our culture, they are an accepted and desired interior form. We endure these walls because we have entranceways/exits - means of transgressing space while keeping it confined. There is power here - we have the ability to knock down walls simply by opening a door or to build them up by locking them shut. This physical reality does not translate equally into the psyche. Walls built within often have no escape. To tear them down takes more than strength, it
requires will.

As a pleasure, we treat ourselves to the decoration of a wall. Most frequently this is a window. Earlier I mentioned some of the properties of glass; a window possesses all of them. Affording us a chance to be legitimate voyeurs, we can watch a world in which we are not actively engaged, passively participating in the events beyond it, yet it protects us from that world. It also allows a sense of freedom to drift through. Because of its transparency it fools us into believing that it doesn't exist. Still, light and sound transport themselves into our rooms, making us believe that we have the best of both worlds - the inside and the out. Rarely do you see a window connecting two interior rooms; there is no reason to bring another interior space inside.

We believe that embellishment permits us to transform an environment into a unique space. We disguise our walls with photographs, prints, paintings, paneling, mirrors and knick-knacks. Doors are embedded with woodcuts, knockers and specialty knobs. We add a touch of "home" to windows through shades, curtains, and stained glass. These decorations are shallow - they do not convert a room into something else, they merely alter its real appearance. We have forgotten the true space in which we live. In the same sense we embellish the rooms within ourselves. Again, it is superfluous.

While the architectural environments which surround us remain stable, our movement alters the perception of spatial relationships. Beyond the power we have to change our settings through our movement there exists a unique social situation contrived for specific areas.
The rituals we perform in various rooms depends on their assigned function.
Product

The visual repertoire on which I depend has surfaced from a lifetime of established images. As a child I converted oral folklore (myths, fairytales, jokes, songs) into symbols and color. I also developed an extensive personal folklore, creating rationalizations for those concepts I could not understand. For twenty years these images remained unshared, becoming encrusted with new dimensions as I grew older. Transferring this folklore into a shared experience (drawing, painting, sculpture) has enriched my perception and allowed me to re-invest that original energy.

Because of my "growing-up" many of these childhood reminders have changed from horror to humor. As the cliche goes "you'll laugh about this in ten years". I have found that there are others who delight in this same interest, particularly cartoonists James Thurber, Sam Gross, Charles Adams and Nicole Hollander. Each has a style in capturing the fears, embarrassments and fantasies of the child's mind. Similarly, these artists portray adult illusions. We do not change our methods of perception - we simply dismiss them as unimportant or unfounded. Noises at night are merely noises, they are no longer giant monsters on the prey. It is this imagination which I attempt to recapture.

"Eat Worms II" (1982, Plate I), was derived from a drawing based on the children's sing-song "Nobody likes me/ everybody hates me/ I'm going out and eat worms". Attempting to create an installation which was both earthly and spiritual was a primary motive. The interior, surrounded
with black and white and a mulch floor, was intended to bring attention
to the glass "worms" which were newly established religious icons
through their placement on a central pedestal. I became fascinated
with the movement of the audience. Few entered the space, it was
impregnable because of its austere presentation and because it was
"art". The piece immediately following, "Eat Worms III" (Performance,
1982, Plate II), tried to solve some of these problems. Without
physically building an interior, one was created by the simple addition
in a space of a door. An invisible wall extended from the plane of
that door, also determining the controlled motions of the "characters"
involved. The success of this piece rested on the audience's reaction.
After the performance was complete, no one would transgress the boun-
daries of that wall.

At this point, I felt it necessary to document this movement of
reaction. In a performance entitled "Crawling Through" (1982), the
floor of the room was covered in a specific grid pattern, then covered
over with sand. These objects were personal, having little to no
value (junk). Instructed to reach out and react to each object under
a time constraint, another character began crawling through the install-
ation. At the completion of the piece markings of the event remained
(Plate III) This combination of control and randomness excited me.
We cannot control all things; therefore we must learn to incorporate
those elements into our lives in ways which will make sense to us, and
will help clarify our lives.

The focus on tracking motions evidenced itself in "Eat Worms IV"
(Installation, 1982, Plate IV). At this point my language of space
understood the need for reward. In order to lure viewers, I needed to possess them. This manipulation was subliminal through an onslaught of color, texture and pattern. Once trapped inside my setting, I could observe their fluctuations in motion, their fear again to cross an invisible barrier, and the way in which they entered and exited. "Eat Worms V" (Installation, 1982, Plate V) was in a similar vein, attracting through surface decoration. The screen developed in this piece is analogous to a wall - it serves the same function.

Throughout these explorations and studies I have tried to force myself into foresight. The importance of details fades with time; only the conclusions hold value. The attitudes of Marcel Duchamp, apparent in his work and non-work, remind me of my unimportance and leave me with the ability to take nothing and everything seriously. Duchamp's "silence was perhaps the most forceful and disquieting of all Dada myths...Even so, he had spent over twenty years secretly working on an assemblage, a room called 'Etant donnes'".4 I, too, cannot help make art, it is my language. However, this institutionalization of art and its prostitution place my desires in check.
"There were doors all round the hall, but they were locked; and when Alice had been all the way down one side and up the other, trying every door, she walked sadly down the middle, wondering how she was ever to get out again.

Suddenly she came upon a little three-legged table, all made of solid glass; there was nothing on it but a tiny golden key, and Alice's first idea was that this might belong to one of the doors of the hall; but alas! either the locks were too large, or the key was too small, but at any rate it would not open any of them. However, on the second time round, she came upon a low curtain she had not noticed before, and behind it was a little door about fifteen inches high; she tried the little golden key in the lock, and to her great delight it fitted!

Alice opened the door and found that it lead into a small passage, not much larger than a rat-hole; she knelt down and looked along the passage into the loveliest garden you ever saw. How she longed to get out of that dark hall, and wander about among those beds of bright flowers and those cool fountains, but she could not even get her head through the doorway; 'And even if my head would go through,' thought poor Alice, 'it would be of very little use without my shoulders. Oh how I wish I could shut up like a telescope! I think I could if I only knew how to begin.' For, you see, so many out-of-the-way things had happened lately that Alice had begun to think that very few things indeed were really impossible."

"Don Juan told me very calmly to let myself become affixed to a bubble by following it.

'Go back again,' he said. 'Go into the fog! Into the fog!'"
I went back and noticed that the movement of the bubbles had slowed
down and they had become as large as basketballs. In fact they were so
large and slow that I could examine any one of them in great detail.
They were not really bubbles, not like a soap bubble, not like a balloon,
nor any spherical container. There were not containers, yet they were
contained.  

The transformation of space, time and situation continues to take
on a more fantastical atmosphere with the progression of my work. The
garden Alice dreams of entering is allegorical to the bait I lay for
myself and the viewer. It is the wall, the door, the scale which prevent
our entry into another world. The magical qualities of my alterations
on an environment to a point where it is no longer recognizable as common
brings with it the identification of change. By becoming aware of
physical obstacles we encounter on a daily basis and learning to
acknowledge them rather than ignore them, perhaps a step can be taken
to recognize the other barriers we carry within ourselves.
Conclusion

With future plans in mind, I hope to further delve into the cockles of my imagination, returning with a better understanding of the origin of my ideals. The transformation of space has increased in importance, while the actual objects within are becoming less significant. In the first piece of a new series, entitled "There's a Bomb in the Car, Mom", (Installation, 1983) I am attempting to create a situation in which the audience is completely controlled through a series of transparent, non-transgressable walls. By layering these walls, the decorations of small glass pieces and crayons (which make up the wall itself) should become similar to a garden of color and light. Inside of this "garden" lay a variety of functional common objects immersed in a red glow. These objects describe the title of this show for me.

When I was five and six years old, my younger brother (by two years) and I would accompany my mother to the store in a car which contained an unusually loud clock when the engine was turned off. While my mother was shopping, I would convince my brother (who was, understandably, highly gullible) that the clock was, in reality, a bomb, and that our mother was secretly planning to blow us both to smithereens. Of course, he became hysterical, and upon my mother's return, told her what I had described. Innocently, I denied any storytelling, and because my brother was often crying about things, my mother dismissed his fears. I have since developed an image of this scenario, atypical of an explosion.
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In "There's a Bomb in the Car, Mom" the brilliancy of the colors is also explosive. The shapes making up the walls (small glass rods) are extensions of the shapes which appear on the objects, almost as if they had flown off and become three dimensional.

The finale of this piece, and its success, will rely on the audience reaction. If the objects are bait, luring them into the space, they will be forced to enter into a maze of successive walls in order to complete the passage through the installation.
Plate 1.
"Eat Worms II"
1982
Glass, fabric, peat moss
Plate II
"Eat Worms III"
1982
Performance
Plate III
"Crawling Through"
1982
Performance
Plate IV
"Eat Worms IV"
1982
Glass, wood, enamel
Plate V
"Eat Worms V"
1982
Glass, enamel, wood
Footnotes


Bibliography


