BOURBOUTSALA: ORDINARY IMPRESSIONS WITHIN A CULTURAL CONTEXT

A Thesis

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by

Athanasios Maggioros, B.F.A.

** ** ** **

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Master's Examination Committee:

Malcolm Cochran

Larry Shineman

Approved by

Adviser

Department of Art
VITA

September 15, 1962 . . . . . . . . Born - Athens, Greece
1987 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . B.F.A., The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1988 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Columbus Art League, Columbus, Ohio
1988 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Geoffrey Taber Gallery, Columbus, Ohio
1988 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Graduate Student Show, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio
1986 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Artreach Gallery, Columbus, Ohio
1985 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Art Foundation Show, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio
1985 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Undergraduate Student Show, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Sculpture
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BOURBOUTSALA: ORDINARY IMPRESSIONS WITHIN A CULTURAL CONTEXT

Released from the bonds of memory by the sound of a word, the smell of a garlic clove, or the sight of a wide blue, the images that spring uninvited upon the surface of present consciousness belong to the past. As unprecedented and unexpected as escapees from a maximum security prison, they assail the mind with an insistence that can't be disregarded. And regardless of the implications, I am better able to place these images within a cultural context than to trace them to an unconscious origin.

An unoriginal child, I toyed with a rich cultural heritage by scribbling over the black and white photographs that captured Greek antiquity within the pages filling my schoolbooks: giving the Karyatis a pair of army boots and the Parthenon a set of cannons, I filled the cultural gap that separated me from my ancient predecessors. In much the same way, I absorbed the culture of ancient Greece at the kiosks of modern Athens: cheap plastic reproductions of statues and vases—mass produced for mass consumption by the masses of tourists that stormed Athens every summer that I remember of my childhood—gradually made their way
into my mind, my heart, and my toybox, already filled with rubber soldiers and matchbox cars. More particularly, a statuette of Apollo that made its way to the mantel (the repository for objects unmatched in my affections) and stood next to a photograph of my great-grandfather, stands out in my memory: my early experimentation with the elements of "kitsch"—a term I learned only later to affix to such objects—ended abruptly when I tried to fix the shattered statuette by attaching Apollonian pieces with flour-paste, the only adhesive in my vocabulary at that time.

As a child, I felt almost as stifled in the burning hot cement of an Athens summertime as in the damp stucco basement of an orthodox gradeschool—where I was condemned, for hours at a time, to contemplate my misdeeds. Thus, I looked forward to the time when, with two brothers, I would be ferried to Naxos—where the Aeolian sea and sunlight seemed to diminish the authority of antiquity such that my vocabulary of forms expanded to include artifacts of modern culture—to spend three merry months with grandma/Yaya. At Yaya's house, the colors and smells were as rich as her hearing and sight were poor; and, on Saturday nights, while she dressed me in a white sailor suit in preparation for the evening promenade, I stared and sniffed so much—at the
oil burning in the glass before the picture of the Virgin Mary, at the bunches of brown-green oregano drying on the red brick fireplace, at the grey-black slabs of slate covering the packed dirt floor, at the pink and purple geraniums filling every corner of the house—that Yaya frequently threatened to leave me home in bed. Of course, I always protested; and since the Saturday promenade along the Naxos docks was a ritual as sacred as the Sunday service, Yaya always gave in.

Yaya always ended our promenade by stopping at Yiorgos, the corner grocery-cafe, to visit with the local ladies, whose eyes and ears were as weak as her own; and this little ritual gave my brothers and I a chance for unrestrained play. While Yaya and her friends shouted and gestured the neighborhood gossip, we played among the piles of fishing nets and the legs of coffee tables, where the odor of fish entrails and watered alcohol would blend, in the fresh air, with the scent of rosewater coming from the barrels of bulk supplies spilling onto the mosaic floor and filling up the store's only room. Only four at the time of my first ritual visit, I measured myself against the three curved legs of the store's metal tables summer after summer; and when, after some time, my nose finally reached, first, the edges of the round tabletops—from which hung sundried octopi—and,
then, the wooden backs of the woven straw chairs, I became an initiate in yet another ritualistic ceremony: Yiorgos himself escorted me ceremoniously to the square marble sink at the back of the store, where he filled a short, thick glass with water and ouzo—my first drink.

After drinking her last cup of thick black coffee, Yaya took me by the hand in preparation for the short walk home. Hand in hand, my brothers followed, and we must have seemed a small procession, making our way slowly past the closed blue-green wooden shutters that made the whitewashed walls of the houses gleam even at night. Before reaching Yaya's house, we always stopped at the town telephone office for the Saturday night call to my parents in Athens. A room that barely held the four of us and the telephone man, the office had an odd smell that came from the fumes of the telephone batteries: On the room's far wall hung a large wooden box, and under the box hung a long metal shelf. Like flower pots at a window, a row of glass jars filled the shelf, and wires seemed to grow from them like ivy, climbing the wall and disappearing behind the box. I used to think that if I could just take away those jars, I could make my week's misdeeds disappear as well: I guessed that in the absence of those odd flower pots, Yaya would be unable to tell my father about my bad behavior. And though
Yaya saw so badly that I might have succeeded, the telephone officer never took his eyes off me, with the result that my father's reproachful voice made its way from the Athens house into the wooden box, down the long dangling wire, and out the black cone, to fill the child-sized room with his authoritative parental presence.

During my childhood, I witnessed the results of the technological achievements of the 50s and 60s that fulfilled the material needs of the Greek people: concrete and formica replaced stone and wood; tiled washrooms supplanted bamboo outhouses; and artificial plants and flowers stopped displacing water as they started to fill the empty pots and vases found in nearly every home. And while nearly everyone seemed satisfied with both the material comforts of a new age and the clear manifestations of a new idea--namely, the idea of non-decaying beauty--the principles of mass production and consumption diminished the inherent value of materials and, thus, of objects themselves, with the result that it became impossible for people to develop emotional attachments to objects, and possible for "kitsch" objects to reach the peak of their development. Additional developments in a new life style included a pace of production and a rate of change that left no room for long Saturday evening promenades and Sunday morning rituals:
in a short time, televisions and home entertainment centers provided the relaxation previously afforded by gossip sessions and political discussions over a cup of coffee. Finally, the coffee table itself became obsolete.

In my life, the disappearance of the coffee table and its world coincided with the appearance of—and my initiation into—the world of art. After I realized that the apparent aesthetic object had begun to function as a commodity, my process of making art—sculpture, in particular—evolved into a search for the principles and values that would define a personal relationship to the materials and forms with which I worked. In an attempt to escape from academic aesthetic principles, I looked backward to my cultural associations and forward to life itself to delimit a field of references on which to base a system of aesthetic values.

I believe that the layers of the "ordinary"—whose function as the common, the usual, the mediocre can't be limited by social or artistic preconceptions—hold the potential for reconstructing a value system (other than monetary) that can heighten a person's emotional experience of any object. The "ordinary" that gives shape to the space between here and there, and texture to the time between then and now—the "toast to" and the "letter from"; the
"late-night movie" and the "early morning coffee" (the quasi-rituals that replace, in some lives, the Saturday promenade and the Sunday prayer)—defines my source of inspiration. Thus, for example, the steel line may rise eloquently to hold up a wooden cylinder or reach forcefully to bridge the gap between marble and wood. Similarly, the relaxed mass of concrete may be held in suspension by the plot of a steel structure or rolled in response to the suggestion of an Aeolian drift.

The ordinary sensory stimulants that drift in and out of a person's life can impress the present consciousness with images evoking random fragments of a prior—and personal—time. Because those images are uniquely bonded to a person's make-up—emotional as well as physical—it is unreasonable, I believe, to expect a uniform response to or evaluation of the objects, aesthetic or otherwise, that cause memory to speak. My memory speaks, I believe, with extraordinary insistence, but in ordinary images. My art, I insist, will give those images their most eloquent expression.