THE SUBVERSIVE NATURE OF THE EVERYDAY OBJECT

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

By
Sandra Marie Williams, B.F.A.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University
1999

Master’s Examination Committee: Approved by:
Rebecca Harvey, Advisor
Charles Massey Jr.
Tony Mendoza

Charles Massey Jr.
Advisor
Department of Art
ABSTRACT

Discontent is the first step in the progress of man or a nation.

-Fortune cookie fortune, from Moy's, on High Street.

The pursuit of the everyday object became appealing to me as a backlash against everything I had been educated about the "Making of Art." I felt that the general education of art history had done myself, and indeed many others a grave injustice: that the pleasure of making was removed from everyman's hand, that validity could only be achieved by the elite. I became interested in the making of the cup which was something that every human being could relate to. The pursuit of the familiar has demanded a closer look that has revealed the subversive nature of the functional object.

The history of the functional object is a record of any society's etiquette and technology. The triumphs and injustices of the world are recorded on commemorative vessels, as well as secret alliances which are concealed by the innocuous nature of material and function. This paradox intrigues me, and I have spent two years making objects that belonged to this vein of history.

The process of storytelling is similar to the process of making art: the longer one knows something or someone, the secret or story is going to come out. This is similar to
the gestation of the idea. The longer one thinks about it, the larger it grows, and eventually the project or piece will come out in some form, in some way. As a collector of stories and a maker of objects, it would be an inevitability that the two would merge into a single form.

My stay at The Ohio State University has resulted in a type of facilitating or giving myself permission to make the type of work I had thought about for a long time. I acquired the tools and processes that had intrigued me for years, but I had no way of knowing where to begin my pursuit. It led me to the conclusion that I wanted to invent an environment suitable for my work to live in, an environment that was reflective of the basis of the collection of the secretive personal histories of those around me as well as events and histories that are shared culturally, particularly those that occurred during the 1970's and 80's, which would reflect the formation of what could be construed as the portentous nature of not just myself but perhaps a generation.

Given my interest in the everyday object, I set about making a dining room which is titled "The Fabulous House of Hot Peep." The dining room is eight feet by twelve feet and wallpapered with "Serial Killer Wall Paper." The wallpaper is spring green with equal value yellow and orange verbena flowers, the center of which contain the portraits of various serial killers. In the center of the room is a table set for a party of six. The table setting is titled "Tales of Burning Love", (Figures 1 and 2) and each place contains a dinner plate, salad plate, soup bowl and wine goblet. The plates are covered with narrative drawings that are derived from love stories gone awry. The center piece is a three tiered, hors d'houerves tower carved with drawing relating to urban
terrorism. (Figure 3) A vegetable server recants the tale of finding religious items in the Hispanic aisle at Kroger. A print titled "Blue Skies Above and Below" takes the form of the window. The window frames images that relate to the Space Shuttle Challenger explosion as well as do the curtains and knick knacks on the windowsill.

Therein lies a new direction for my work: the domestic space, the everyday objects bearing evidence of the passing of time through the telling of stories both personal and cultural. The making of dining room was a construction, actualization and documentation of daily life spelled out in plates, curtains and wallpaper. The objects and environment contain the facts as I see them, and my goal was to invent an event and place that was a little closer to the truth.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for everything.

Thanks Mom and Dad for giving me the strength to believe in myself, and for fixing my syphilitic old Dodge every time it broke down so I could get to school. Thanks to my big sister Marsha for giving me her old computer in my most desperate hour of need.

My gratitude goes out to my committee members Rebecca Harvey, Charles Massey Jr. and Tony Mendoza for their guidance and knowledge, which has made me more complete as a human being.

Thanks to the fabulous Julie Harper, Charlotte Roth, Rob Stephens, David DeMelo, Kim Tucker, Matt Cowan and Shannon Eakins for their generosity, kindness, patience, knowledge and support.

Thanks to Kathryn Finnerty, who is a constant inspiration and a wonderful teacher.

Thanks to Ted Sawyer, for everything, always.
VITA

May 31, 1971............................................ Born- Novelty, Ohio

1994.................................................. B.F.A. Ceramics, The Cleveland Institute of Art
Cleveland, Ohio

1995.................................................. Artist in Residence,
Contemporary Crafts Gallery
Portland, Oregon

1997.................................................. Cultural Enrichment Fellowship Recipient
The Ohio State University

1998.................................................. Graduate Teaching Associate
The Ohio State University

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Art
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapters:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Don’t Talk With Your Mouth Full of Food</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The Nature of The Beast</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Me and Jeffrey Daum(er)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The Green Chile Deaths</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The Death of Rasputin</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinnerware, “Tales of Burning Love” detail</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinnerware, “Tales of Burning Love”</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Urban Terrorist Centerpiece”</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saucer</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saucers from “The Fabulous House of Hot Peep”</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Study for Lust”</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Float Bowl</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Jorge Luis

When my mother was twelve, she had a cousin named Jorge Luis with whom she was a very close friend. Jorge’s father had a modest summer home in Pucusana that she spent some quantity of time in while growing up. Jorge was unusual for our family; his father was from Spain, so Jorge had blonde hair and blue eyes. He wanted to be a movie star and would ask my mother, “Do you think I can make it, Sara?”

At some time during their twelfth summer, Jorge was at the summer house with his father, but without the cousins, and he contracted meningitis. At the time, penicillin had just come out, but it wasn’t really accessible to the public because it was during the war, and it was being used for the soldiers. So Jorge didn’t receive the necessary medication, and he died at the age of twelve.

In Peru, the funeral procession does not get a police escort unless you are wealthy. And so it happened that another vehicle collided with the hearse on the way to the cemetery. At the time, the coffin was only made of thin wood and it smashed into a million pieces and her cousin’s body was thrown into the street. My mother had snuck into the funeral procession; she wasn’t supposed to be there. The boy’s own mother wasn’t there because she was overcome with grief. My mother told me that at that point, her uncle covered her eyes and begged her not to tell her aunt.

Without conflict, there is no story.

Stories, even histories, begin and end as dreams. There is a great divide between the actual event and written language, and in between exists the inexplicable matter of experience. The experience or conflict is the root of what one tries to digest either when reading or visually trying to interpret narrative, perhaps with the final goal of
understanding or preparation: understanding of events in one’s own life or preparation for events that may happen in the future. However, it is in that divide, that gap, that the information for my work comes from. If it were possible to convey them in words, I would just write stories.

My search of new grounding for my work over the past two years has led me to look for the potential of the opposite of every conclusion that I came to and to establish that which is inherent in my nature. Discontented with exhibiting functional work on a pedestal, I turned to the fabrication of a domestic space in order to continue the narrative on the pots that spoke of home, private life and secrecy. I became interested in the saturation of content in the daily object. I was also able to gather examples from history.

There is a teacup with the portrait of Bonnie Prince Charlie on the side of it. The possession of an object bearing a Protestant figure during a Catholic regime was punishable by death. However, a daily object whose functionality made it seemingly innocuous and unnoticeable could go unnoticed and serve its owners the dual purpose of function and a symbol of their beliefs. This is what I mean when I allude to the subversive nature of the domestic object.

In the end, it would make sense that I would turn to mold making to solve problems or to search for new form. I have always looked at Peruvian ceramics, either pieces that we had in the home, or in books, and on stamps. Mochica stirrup spout vessels frequently have a sense of implied violence or fey humor to them. There are vessels whose form is based on a man committing suicide, slitting his own throat, a portrait head with the nose
half eaten off by a rat, and of course, a wide array of erotic vessels. The makers of these vessels were just chronicling the events of the day. That is what I am interested in, too.
CHAPTER 2

Don’t Talk With Your Mouth Full of Food

I do not remember when the first time I became angry about art gallery spaces was. I am frequently angry, angry about art, be it good or bad or innocuous. While perusing last month’s Art News, the only thing I got visually or conceptually worked up about was a Glen Livet scotch ad. After a while, I just cannot look at artwork made for art spaces any longer. The basis of what gets me up in the morning and into the studio is completely based on the importance of visual storytelling, the meeting of new people and the possibility of hearing new stories or that something will happen on my way to the studio that I can tell a story about. All I want out of this life is some information. About anything! The thing I have loved most about The Ohio State University was the library and that I had free access to anything I wanted to know. Although when I came here I was interested in use of space and how large scale pieces created dialogue with the viewer, that gave way to what was really important: stories.

Pots are probably the thing I do the worst. There are things I do much better. My interest in them was instigated by Bill Brouillard and his astounding cup collection; I am amazed by them to this very day. The basic premise behind having these objects is that
they call attention to the most basic aspects of ones life in a paradoxical culture which supports the idea of transience and non-preciousness but also supports the idea that we all be shut ins and never stray from our homes because we would be more efficient if we were able to avoid commuting, somehow. We are a country of extremes. On one hand, we have fast food culture that makes the consumer obese while nutritionally starving them, like the second horseman of the apocalypse riding in dressed like Hamburgerl, and at the same time dishing up gourmet coffees at $3.25 a pop in a snappily designed paper cup and a recycled paper coffee sleeve, or for the extra earth conscious, a plastic or metal spill-proof thermos designed for pedestrian, bicycle or motor vehicle travel. There is something about Americans that always makes them hysterical about something: Titanic and that really awful Celine Dion song, coffee, gun control, talk shows, beanie babies, the President’s affair with some chippie, bottled water, censorship, the first amendment, Y2K, Superbowl Sunday, When Animals Attack, Furbie, and so on and so forth. This is just in our nature. We are, after all, a country founded by religious fanatics and criminals. So the very act of paying attention when one eats and, apparently, not talking with ones mouth full just gets lost by the wayside. Unfortunately, life has gotten really disgusting since etiquette went the way of the dinosaur.

It is not enough for me to stop with the handmade object. The object itself needs to stray from normative ideals in order to extrapolate the viewer from what they are used to. My objects stray in unconventional form and narrative. To create a domestic situation is also to set up a critique of American culture because I have my very own bad habit of pointing my finger.
One of the aspects of art making, or "work-making", that I find satisfying is process. Two of the processes that I enjoy the most are ceramics and printmaking. They have similar aspects to them as well as lengthy histories that attach them to functionality or domesticity: the ceramic object through familiarity with ceramic material and the vessel, and print through illustration and textile pattern such as wallpaper, linens, etc. The broad use of these materials and a long-standing interest in storytelling has led me to the pursuit of the subversion of the everyday object.

Combining these interests - narrative, process, paradoxes, and history- was a challenge that ended up wrestled into the form of a dinnerware set which, in turn, influenced and saturated its environment. It turned into elephantiasis of the project. The narrative dinnerware set is a table setting for six consisting of a soup bowl, salad plate and dinner plate for each. The settings are set up in triptychs so that they can be read like panels of a comic book. The theme behind all of the place settings was the love story gone awry, so each group is accompanied by a wineglass, the stem of which is in the shape of a flaming heart, or sacred heart. Together they are titled "Tales of Burning Love." The centerpiece of the table is a stacking, hors d'oeuvre tower. The columns that support the three tiers of plates are flower bricks, and the piece is topped off with a flower brick as well. The hors d'oeuvre tower is meant for the service of marzipan fruit and animals, petit fours and strawberries dipped in chocolate. The flower bricks were made to accompany white ranunculus, larkspur and pink sweet pea. The tower is carved with images relating to urban terrorism. There is a vegetable server which has imagery about the new voodoo
section in the Hispanic aisle at the Sav-On Kroger and a tureen which is carved with modern day versions of three of the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

The table is set in a constructed dining room. The walls are papered in spring green with large, light yellow, verbena flowers. In the center of each flower is the portrait of one of five serial killers: Ted Bundy, David Berkowitz, Susan Atkins from the Manson Family, John Wayne Gacy and the Hillside Strangler. On top of this paper is a print of the Space Shuttle Challenger framed in a windowpane: the top pane depicts the explosion, the bottom contains a diagram of the shuttle. The curtains are printed with diagrams of the different malfunctions of the O-Rings. On the window sill are knickknacks: salt and pepper shakers in the shape of rockets with photo decals of the astronauts and a souvenir plate which has a photo of all the astronauts taken before they boarded the shuttle.

I made evidence of what had happened during my lifetime and also about events that had occurred to the people that are around me. I was going to make art that was not about elitism but about daily life, and this was my means of saying we are all involved. I want my viewer to also be a reader and an eater. Since art has been removed from the citizens grasp, the public has become hostile toward it because it is something they do not understand. If they could just sit down and have a meal, I think that would help a lot.
CHAPTER 3

The Nature of the Beast

I often wonder why we are so drawn to those who are diametrically opposed to ourselves in every way. Well, I suppose there can be arguments based on the opposite of this theory, such as royal families that like to intermarry or cultures that encourage marriage between cousins, including the roots of our own American culture. So every theory contains the possibility of the opposite, but right now, I am interested in opposites.

This is a story about opposites, in a way:

My friend Ann’s grandfather was a rigid atheist during his life, and an alcoholic too, apparently. So it seemed almost natural that he would fall in love and marry a devout Catholic, and then proceed to have a very large family, that as his alcoholism progressed he would manage to physically, mentally and verbally abuse and completely alienate. In addition to this, he liked to torment his god-fearing wife by various forms of blasphemy that he would inevitably top off with the phrase “There is no God. If there is a God, may he come down and take my right arm this minute!” He would wave his arm in the air tauntingly, and then reply “It seems as if my right arm is still in tact. See? There is no God.”

One night as he was returning from the bar with three of his friends, their car became stuck on the railroad tracks. The automobile was struck by the train with all the men inside. The force of the impact resulted in the grandfather’s right arm being torn from his body. The other three men were killed. Ann’s grandfather was fine, with the exception of no longer having a right arm.

But it could be said that all of this was in his nature. It was bound to happen sooner or later.
What is the nature of the work? I began making pots because I was tired of making figurative sculpture. It was no longer interesting to me. Sometimes when there are a lot of people doing the same thing in a medium, one just cannot look at it any more. I understand that people need to make those objects as a step in personal growth, but symbols like the fish have been used so many times in ceramics and print that when I see it, I think, “Who cares?” Every medium has overused iconography. When a symbol is overused or normative, it becomes a cliché. Every medium tends to have visual clichés. Boat and the ladder forms in metals are an example of this crafts cliché. The fabrication of metals lends itself to the making of ladder or boat forms. The same is true of ceramics—there are a lot of people making fish and lumpy figurative sculpture. So if one is going to do it, they have to whole-heartedly believe in it, and I just did not anymore.

What I found myself drawn to was pots. I would see them in galleries, antique shops, magazines, books, movies, and I would find myself thinking, “That’s really good. I wish I could do that.”

I always liked the idea. I like the idea that functional work is accessible to the hand, that it is participatory. When I was younger, I would always try to contrive some sort of installation where the viewer had to participate, but the ideas were exactly that: contrived. If that was what I truly wanted, why not turn to an art form and medium where participation was inherent to the work?

Narrative, either in visual or written form, is so intriguing and exciting. Narratives that I enjoy the most are just about how life is strange, sometimes in a good way and sometimes in a bad way, and there is nothing that we can really do about it. Sometimes I
would look at ceramics in junk stores or antique stores, and they would be Victorian in nature, showing a pastoral scene or ladies and gentlemen sitting on a bench, and I would think, "My life sure isn’t like that." But maybe their ideal was, and that is fine. I think it tended to be more Sinclair Lewis-y, and that is what I would really like to see-the portrayal of daily life on daily objects.

I choose narratives rooted in conflict because that is what makes a good story. They deal with the irony of daily life or common human struggle, or they can be a documentation of things that happened during my mother’s lifetime. Whatever they may be, the tales have affected me profoundly, enough to think about them all the time and make work about them because, on some level, these tales are universal.

My contact with clay is aggressive. I like things that are thin and delicate and beautiful, but there is no way in hell I could or would make them because it would be a giant lie. I have pursued the dinnerware set and the dining environment in a language specific to my hand, eye and mind.

Dinner plates, salad plates and bowls all share a heavy, knobby frame. The frame is new to the plate, but whenever I draw or paint and include a mirror or picture on the wall in the background, it has that odd, knobby frame. Plates were so alien to me; I basically knew how to make two types of plate. So I turned to moidmaking for a less expected solution. When making the solid for my mold, I was still at a loss; I made this knobby plate, but I still liked it well enough. It makes sense, though. Essentially, I am still putting a frame on a drawing. The plates themselves are substantial in size and weight. This contrast is reminiscent of Buffalo China, “Diner Ware” as opposed to dinnerware.
This implies non-preciousness and commonness, although that is in direct conflict with the preciousness implied by the drawing and surface treatment.

The teacups and saucers are large, too large to really be used comfortably. They are based on classic teacup and saucer sets from my mother’s collection. The original is small and delicate; my version is voluminous and awkward, somewhat misshapen and deformed, with a puffy saucer. They mimic the classical. At the root of this lies the ideal of ritual and use and its marriage to functionality. I would sacrifice function to beauty, or the nature of beauty, but it is there at the root: the idea of grace and tradition, or at least the desire for it (that something good must come by grace and skill). However, more often than not, that is simply not the case. The nature of things does not tend toward grace and kindness but something else. This is one of the roots of my imagery.

Another aspect of the work is the conflict between bright color and imagery. By using bright colors, or those that have a history that one pays attention to or reads,( red, yellow, orange, or those that are construed as pleasant and ones I have seen used in circus posters like lilac and chartreuse) I try to attract the viewer who then has to deal with the imagery. Traditional and historical glaze treatments have the same affect. Classic blue and white or black and white have this attached connotation of innocuous imagery and can be as misleading as bright colors.(Figure 5)

Bad Manners

It has been my dream since shortly before I arrived at graduate school to create the living environment. I came to school with a few ideas, one of which was to pursue the photo decal. My original intent was to make molds of traditional Peruvian/Mochica
stirrup spout vessels but to produce them from slipcast porcelain and glaze them pastel colors and then apply pattern with decals of American perceptions of Hispanic culture, i.e. Carmen Miranda, the Chiquita banana lady, Speedy Gonzales, or Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz from I Love Lucy, who were, for all intents and purposes, America's first mixed race couple. I was always conflicted about the popularity of that show, probably because it was not really on during my life time but also because of the outright animosity my own parents marriage incurred from the neighbors of an upper middle class neighborhood during the seventies, more than ten years after civil rights, and also from my own paternal grandparents. So however much America loved Lucy, those feelings certainly did not extend to an actualized family next door. America was still perceiving, and probably still does view, Hispanics either in terms of drunk and lazy mice or overtly sexualized for the sales of fruit in terms of Taco Bell or even worse, Chi chi’s (a Midwestern concept that is either deliberately based on Midwestern ignorance, perhaps; I am not sure, how a restaurant chain was named after a slang term for breasts. This predated the infamous Hooters by more than a decade.) Also, take into account that most Americans equate being Hispanic with being Mexican. My question is, how can one not make work about that?

But I digress.

So, long ago I dreamed up this idea of serial killer wallpaper, after a drunken evening altering the 1950’s wallpaper in a friend’s ancient crumbling apartment on Random Drive in Little Italy. The wallpaper there had the most peculiar imagery, such as a little boy playing with a hoop and a stick and a dog which, with very little alteration, looked as if
the boy had tied the dog with a rope and was beating it with a stick. An innocuous enough tree now sported a figure hung from one of its branches. A sophomoric pastime, to be sure, but there was something to it. It was the crossover between idealized life and something that was a little closer to the truth which is a simple concept. It seemed like a natural progression to make serial killer wallpaper. I wanted to find subversive icons that occurred in a multitude and were part of a shared history. The idea of wallpaper suggests the fabric of our daily lives, something that we deal with often enough so that eventually, we don't even notice that it's there. The colors would have to be pretty, delicate, comforting.

This is evidence that the domestic environment has been of some interest to me for a few years now. In this room, I had also wanted to reupholster a sofa with images from Tienamen Square or some other shared event in history. In the end it was a dining room instead of a living room that I would make, so the sofa was never actualized. I am very interested in the saturation of the news and events of our daily lives seeping into the fabric of our being. I am interested in how we live with these events or even how we live with ourselves. This saturation attaches itself to the idea of antique or in the style of a former culture or time. How do we mark the passage of time most easily if not by events?

It surprises me how long it took to come to the realization that the dinnerware is part of that same interest, except now it is in a dining room. The content at times is a little more subtly put. The drawings I make today are still based on a well of compulsively collected stories, the chronicles of various life history. I do not think that my drive to
create an environment has merely to do with presentation; at the same time I do not think it requires a more complicated explanation than the fact that the work is narrative and deals with home, private life and secrecy.

How I go about creating imagery. This is no big secret. The imagery is most directly inspired by my collection of stories along with the integration of new and unusual form. “Study for Lust” (Figure 6) is an example. It is the watercolor with imagery that was transferred onto a saucer and dinner plate. “Study for Lust” was in preparation to make pieces about the seven deadly sins, which is about as good of a topic as any to make work about. This is one example where the work was not inspired by personal storytelling but by common shared knowledge. The irony is that I can name all of the seven deadly sins but can only recall two of the seven cardinal virtues. Pride, Sloth, Greed, Wrath, Envy, Gluttony, and Lust are the sins. The only two virtues I can ever recall are honesty and patience. Chastity is probably one of them, but I cannot say for sure. So, drawing from the common vat of art history, I thought about one of my favorite paintings, the “Arnolfini Wedding.” I always liked all the symbolism in the painting: the dog represented fidelity, etc.; The round mirror in the background reflecting the artists face; but most intriguing to me was the appearance of the very pregnant bride. All the movement of my eye shifts between the dog, the round belly of the bride and the circular mirror in the background. I never once studied the groom with any sort of interest. The groom in “Study for Lust” is nude, with an arched back and his pelvis thrust forward, sporting a bee for a penis. This reference specifically comes from a jewelry piece by Bob Ebendorf called “Man and His Pet Bee”. The piece is a brooch made of an old tin type
picturing an elegantly dressed man with a handlebar mustache, little gears, and an enamelled bee set over his crotch. But the turn of phrase was the most exciting part of that piece- I thought the brooch was anti climactic after such a leading title. The rest of the content of the piece lies in the nebulous territory of narrative and stories. However, this particular piece is unusual because it has several, specific references.

A dinner plate titled “What Music is This? Do I Wake or Sleep?” depicts a nude pregnant woman with her robe fallen open and a man behind her with an animal nose of unspecified origin strapped onto his face. The drawing is done in blue and white style drawing with cobalt carbonate.

One plate and one saucer, at this time, depict a woman entering a room. One has a devil head in the foreground, the woman is entering from the outside. (Figure 4) There is a glow of hallway light behind her; she is in silhouette with the exemption of the whites of her two paranoid eyes glowing in the dark. This is very simply about living with someone who is completely insane and not knowing what one will be dealing with when one walks in the door with the hellishness of that situation. The second plate has a translucent pink rim, and it shows a woman opening a bathroom door and peering inside with a small container in her right hand. This deals with a very specific story, but the important element here is the element of suspense and the irony of suspense on a dinner plate.

This brings me to make the point that the story is the driving force behind wanting to get up and draw, or glaze, but at the same time, it is also my “Achilles heel.” By this I mean that I am well aware that people frequently do not care about the narrative, although
the narrative is crucial to me. The narrative behind the object will influence how I make the object. People like the object, but do not care about the story. I feel like this is what is wrong with America. A case in point for me is the float bowl. (Figure 7)

The street I grew up on was just like any other street. I’m sure of it.

The two largest houses belonged to the Wilson’s and the Ganchoore’s. The Wilson’s was an enormous old farmhouse that had been passed down from generation to generation. Mr. Wilson didn’t work; I think he collected disability of some sort, and no one ever really saw him. Mrs. Wilson was a shrew. She worked part time as a nurse’s aid at a nursing home. She had a very sour face that both of her sons and her daughter possessed as well.

In addition to their three natural children, the Wilson’s would harbor between four and six foster children at a time, usually teenage girls with an occasional teenage boy, but it was never anyone under the age of fourteen. They were usually quiet and reserved with an intense hatred of the natural children, particularly Britta, who was perhaps the biggest brat in the county.

Across the street from us, indeed, across the street from over half of the neighborhood, was the Ganchoore’s estate. Mrs. Ganchoore was a psychiatrist and Mr. Ganchoore was an anesthesiologist, and they had an enormous house with a pool, a tennis court, a clubhouse and two ponds. Eventually Mr. Ganchoore accidentally killed two people on the operating table, and didn’t work anymore, but Mrs. Ganchoore apparently made more than enough money. They had three daughters, Stella, Christine and Caroline, but they attended Notre Dame Academy for Girls. I attended the public school with the Wilson kids.

During the summer, the neighborhood kids were allowed to swim in the pool in exchange for yard work or house cleaning. So we would all garden for a couple hours and then have the rest of the afternoon to swim and play tennis. One of the Wilson foster kids, Cindy, was friends with my sister Marshia. Cindy had a big scar on the front of her shoulder and another one on the back. She had a red one-piece bathing suit and a white terry cloth robe with pink stripes. She would slide out of the robe and into the pool silently, no diving, no Marco Polo, no pool volleyball. Of course, this was not unusual behavior for teenage girls who mostly just languished around the deck painting their nails and reading “Tiger Beat” or “Seventeen”. Cindy was a little unusual, submerged up to the neck, bobbing, bobbing and carrying on long conversations with my sister. Later, I was to find out Cindy was in foster care because one night her real father had gotten up in the middle of the night and shot everyone, and thinking them dead, killed himself. All of them were dead, except for
Cindy, who had frozen and laid there silently and in shock, shot through the shoulder. The neighbors reported the gunshots and the police came, finding fifteen year old Cindy very much alive and without a living relative, was shuffled out into the welfare system and placed into foster care. She got married at the age of eighteen and had two sons, Zach and Tyler. Tyler, the baby, was very sickly from the day he was born. Zachary was violent toward his baby brother, and one day Cindy found him pressing a pillow against the baby’s face, trying to suffocate him. Zach was four, Ty was two.

It wasn’t until I was in college that I found out that Mr. Wilson was on trial for molesting several of the foster children that had been in his care between the years 1977 and 1987. Although Cindy swears he never laid a hand on her. That wasn’t really the point, though.

It was from this story that the float bowl made his first appearance, as a drawing on the side of a pitcher. I loved the little drawing and carried a translation of it one step further; the float became a three-dimensional object and is today incarnated in the form of a functional bowl. The float bowl references an actual existing pool toy that I once owned.

It was very cute in actuality, however, when translated through my hands via the narrative, the end result looks somewhat menacing. Fifty years from now people will still like the object, but no one will care about the story.
CHAPTER 4

Me and Jeffrey Daum(er)

Some of the ideas I have been fascinated by recently revolve around collecting kitsch (what may or may not be, depending on how you look at it) as byproduct of our culture as it relates to history, our preoccupation with event and fame, and the many solutions of how one may choose to pursue the postmodern pot.

When I first moved to Columbus, I was the most miserable that I had been in my entire life. Maybe. I don’t know. I moved on to Chittenden Avenue, unwittingly, since I was unable to recognize a bad neighborhood. People were getting shot on Pearl Alley right underneath my window; there was a bum that had set up light housekeeping in the front stairwell, and it was a good day when I didn’t find the parking lot full of nitrous oxide containers from people doing whippets in their cars. In the winter time, returning late from the studio on a Saturday night, I would find that the hallways of the entire apartment building were so thick with pot smoke that it was like being in a Cheech and Chong movie. The entire time I lived in that apartment, I never hung one thing on the walls. The one thing that has always eased my fears and calmed my nerves has been cooking. But I literally refused to cook the year that I lived in that apartment because it had cockroaches. I kept that place spotless, and I would still see them. I had a brand new toaster that I never used until I moved into my current apartment at the Colony Club. My work doesn’t really calm me down. So since I couldn’t cook, I had to turn to my other great passion in life, which is shopping. Prudent shopping is an art form in itself. My pre-Columbus shopping experience dealt mainly with shoes, although I am very good at finding clothes. However, I’ve shared a studio with Kim Tucker for two years, and she has really taught me about the art of shopping for “evidence”. She is perhaps the consummate collector of objects, and her collection is “evidence”, a chronology of American history as told by objects. So truth be told, it was really Kim who inspired me to go out and develop new interests, specifically, new interests in objects. And this is how I began to look at objects in a new way. I started to collect ladies head vases, certain salt and peppershakers, and most importantly, J.F.K. plates.
The J.F.K. plates became intriguing to me because some of them were made to commemorate a speech or just mark a passage in U.S. history. Most important to me is that the pieces become more laden with meaning in light of the fact that I know that he was assassinated. The other, more obvious thing to the viewer, is that these are utilitarian objects that are then intended for the sole purpose of viewing: the three dimensional object rendered two dimensional. By hanging them on the wall, this likens them to a painting. However, because of material and the fact that they are three dimensional, they belong to the world of knick-knacks and kitsch. I used to eat off my J.F. K. and Jackie plate, but then I got two more plates, and it was a collection. Then it made the transfer from the cupboard to the wall and joined J.F.K. and Senator Bobby Kennedy, J.F.K. and Family, and “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” What was all of this doing to a plate?

This really prompted my search for a unifying cultural event of my generation. The event that I came up with was the Space Shuttle Challenger blowing up. I think this was Generation X’s Kennedy assassination. Most of us were watching it on T.V. in the classroom as it happened. But this was only if I was looking for a unifying cultural tragedy. If I really wanted a unifying cultural event of a generation, then what I really have to bring up is the premier airing of MTV. Both of these events are important because when posed the question of how one links personal history with cultural history, all of these elements become critical in the forming of voice and opinion.

I believe I was in eighth grade when the Challenger blew up, and I was on an art field trip. We had gone to the zoo to draw the animals. On the journey back to school, the bus was pulled over to the side of the road and Miss Sukle, the art teacher, announced that the Challenger had disintegrated, killing all the astronauts and Krista McAuliffe. At first I misunderstood this, thinking that for some reason people found it acceptable that the astronauts could perish but not a civilian grade school teacher. Now I realize that
they were just clarifying that she wasn’t an astronaut. In another way, it was just one of us, one “Joe Schmoe” American, being included in cultural history, but it ended up being a horrible failure. In light of the fact that I was able to get the Presidential Commission on the Challenger accident and the fact that it was well publicized; anyway, the shuttle was sent into space with a leaky o-ring. This is not driving to New Mexico in some old jalopy; this is launching into outer space. What were they thinking?

This is the thing that fascinates me about humans. What are they thinking?

This is what prompted the exploration of “Blue Skies Above and Below.”

Blue skies above and below is a phrase I have heard uttered over and over again by pilots. It is used to denote safe passage, arrival intact. This is the case more often than not. After much thought and consideration, I truly do not believe I am paranoid. I think that my choosing to not believe in safe passage is based on experience and cultural difference. In Peru, whenever the plane lands, the passengers gleefully applaud the pilot, as if to say “Hooray! We made it!” and the entire time the plane is landing one can look out the window and see wrecked aircrafts littering the side of the runway. This is just a blunt way of saying, “Well, sometimes one makes it, sometimes they do not. Be glad for what one has. Imminent disaster is always there, and it keeps life exciting.”

I mounted “Blue Skies” behind a windowpane because cultural events deal with the idea of the spectator. Although it was an event America watched on TV, it was something we all shared; it happened in our collective backyard. “Blue Skies” and “Serial Killer Wallpaper” also deal with the way I feel about print right
now. I am comfortable with my familiarity with the process; by this I am not referring to my abilities as a printmaker but to the variety of methods with which print saturates out lives—through textiles, illustrations, advertisements, packaging. It is just as easy to subvert print into a domestic setting as it is to do so to ceramics because of this history. The idea of integrating the print with the found windowpane and making the curtains to go with it and the ceramic knickknacks to set on the windowsill is deliriously funny to me. This allows me to present different elements of information on different materials, and it reads the way I like everything to read—like and obtuse and mysterious comic book.

This called for a technique that I had been intrigued by for many years—the photo decal. I wanted some ceramic souvenirs to sit on the windowsill. The souvenirs take the form of salt and peppershakers shaped like rockets bearing decals of Christa McAuliffe and Mike Smith and a plate that pictured all the astronauts.

The twin processes of ceramics and print are just extensions of each other. All of my imagery that I use on clay would work in print—putting terra sigillata on porcelain and carving through it is like woodcut; making washes of stain and controlling areas of light and dark is very similar to working a stone for lithography. Glazing ware at cone six, which is what I have pursued since being here, allows a marriage between the glaze and clay: at this temperature the materials begin to melt and bond, whereas lower temperature firings produce a less integrated product. Earthenware glazes tend to sit on top of the clay and will
chip off easily. Earthenware does not achieve the sound or vitrification that porcelain does. Nothing really compares to porcelain as far as clays go. This is comparable to print as a process as opposed to drawing or painting. Drawing and painting are not attached to the same formats or histories of communication that print is, histories that I find integral to the making of narrative work. The method of printmaking embeds the image into the paper, much like the melting of glaze into clay. I just always believed that in order to make art, a big machine had to be involved somehow.

The dinner table was the pillar of normalcy in our house and lives until I was about twelve or so and realized that we were definitely not normal and also beginning to wonder why I was the only brown kid in the middle school. No matter what, at five o’clock I had to be home, washed up, and dressed for dinner. Then, we all had to watch the news. So I really have vivid memories of the Iran hostages and Jimmy Carter trying to save them, and getting that helicopter blown up, and Jim Jones in Cahanna, and Ronald Reagen getting shot by a man who was in love with Jody Foster, The Falkland Islands, and years later, Iran scam. And thinking “Well, that makes sense.” It’s not as if I had any delusions about the normalcy of lives that I was seeing on TV compared to my own life, I knew that Kimberly and Willis were holding up 7-Eleven stores by the time it would matter, and I had known for a long time that Kitten from A Family Affair had turned out to be the all time child nightmare, turning tricks to pay for a heroin addiction, and ultimately wound up a Jesus Freak.

I’m still friends with the same boy that I’ve been friends with since I was seven years old. Jeff is adopted, which means he has a lot of problems, namely that he gets involved with the wrong women. But Jeff looks like a six foot four, blonde haired, blue eyed Chinese guy. He’s also very muscled and tattooed, and currently a junior high school teacher. When we were growing up, he was pulled out of public elementary school and put in U.S., a private school for boys, from which he was kicked out of in the tenth grade. He was in my U.S. History class, and it was like the
fifth grade again; we got along like a house on fire. I feel compelled to mention at this time that Jeff’s adoptive parents had divorced and also they had a natural daughter named Sarah, who was a dwarf. Jeff’s mother had custody of both Jeff and Sarah. I also feel compelled to mention that Mrs. Daum was completely insane, but I think that this was the case of so many parents that I met during those years in Novelty, Ohio. During the summers, Mrs. Daum would take Sarah to these “Little People” conventions, leaving Jeff alone for two to three weeks, which was really fine with us because we would have parties. The flip side of this was when Sarah’s birthday rolled around in the fall; her own party consisted of people that she’d met at “Little People” conventions, and Jeff and I would walk in, and they would stare at us in a hostile and frightening manner. When we were in college, Jeff’s mom married Mr. Scherer, Susan Scherer’s father, and now when Jeff goes home for Christmas he has to see Susan sitting on the couch acting stupid and lame. We hated Susan in high school. We still hate Susan. And now she’s his sister. That’s how bad and nepotistic small town life can be.

This is the point though: at the time that the Space Shuttle Challenger blew up, it had no effect on me. I partook in the number of Christa McAuliffe jokes with eighth graders everywhere. Why didn’t Christa shower the morning the Challenger launched? Because she was going to wash up on the beach later. The thing about personal histories and events is that they are supposed to teach one empathy in dealing with larger events. Until something of some magnitude happens to one personally, one does not have the tools to deal with larger events.
CHAPTER 5

The Green Chile Deaths

The first summer I worked for Eddie Dominguez I learned about green chile. I’d never heard of such a thing before, but his five other assistants ordered and ate it on top of everything, forcing me to try it my first hour there and in the same breath telling me that Eddie’s father’s first wife died from eating green chile. I was highly skeptical at first but figured that I would hear the story in good time if I just waited. Eventually, I heard the story from I.J. himself.

It happened during the summer of 1937 in Tucumcari, New Mexico. I.J. and his wife were attending a wake. As is the custom, friends and family bring food to the wake for the purpose of feeding those attending the funeral but also so that the remaining food will be left with the grieving family. Someone had brought a jar of green chile, which had immediately been opened. The jar had smelled slightly peculiar, but any suspicions were immediately dismissed: who would bring old or bad green chile to a wake? And so it was eaten, and no one commented if it didn’t taste as it should.

The next day I.J. was working some forty miles away in Conchas, building a dam at the reservoir. A friend pulled up in a car and told him to get in, that many people in town were dead or dying and I.J.’s wife was one of them. I.J. got in the car without a word and rode the forty miles back to Tucumcari. As the car pulled up to his house, he jumped out and was entering the house just as the doctor was coming out. “I’ve never seen anything like it.” The doctor said. “Sixteen people dead today and that young woman inside won’t make it through the night. She’s blind already.”

“It was true.” I.J. told me. “Well, that doctor, he didn’t know me. How could he know I was her husband? By the time I got inside, she didn’t know me. Twenty-three people died that day. Twenty-three! Can you imagine? In a town this size? They died of botulism—someone had canned that green chile wrong.”
People are always asking me about how difficult the transition was between making sculpture and making functional ceramics and why I made that decision. My answer is always the same- it is not that far of a walk between one and the other. I am completely intrigued with how functional and non-traditional vessels exist in the world. They seemingly exist in a non-intrusive, somewhat innocuous manner for the most part, but this very characteristic has allowed the vessel to be exploited for all its apparent innocuous traits- functional ceramics has a secret history of subversive behavior, such as the example of the Bonnie Prince Charlie teacup.

I have been intrigued with the idea of a dinnerware set as long as I can remember. Putting together a service for six, in addition to all the serving dishes, requires the same patience and planning that installations used to provide for me in the past. One of the aspects I am intrigued by is the investigation of a domestic space.

The table settings are used to tell stories. In the case of this dinner party, they are all love stories, but in some way they are about love gone awry. I have also used a repetitive image to tie them all together thematically. This is accomplished with a simple wine goblet; the stem of each wine goblet is a flaming heart, an image which bears multiple references. One reference is to the image of sacred heart Jesus.

When I was little and was over at my Tia Carmen’s house, she had a framed picture of Sacred Heart Jesus on the bookshelves in the living room. Jesus had that resigned, sad look on his face and had pulled his robe modestly back, revealing the sacred heart. It was the creepiest thing I had ever seen. The other reference is to tattoos. I told my old boyfriend that he didn’t have to buy me a ring when we were thinking about getting married, but instead he had to get my name tattooed somewhere on his body. Because I figured ultimately, a ring didn’t necessarily mean that much but that tattoo wasn’t going anywhere without laser surgery. It really seemed trashy and decadent. I really liked the idea so much that I
began signing my work to look like a hoodlum boy’s tattoo. So, love stories.

The other aspect that the dinnerware set is related to is the comic book. The dinner plate, salad plate and soup bowl can be read like triptychs or panels in a comic book. This allows the pieces to relate on many levels. They relate on a formal level by using repeated form and the allure of pastel and bright colors. The sequence in which the images are presented allows them to be read and connected to one another. The round, flower like forms that the plates take are also reflected in form and color in the wallpaper, leading the eye to repetitive, concentric circles. In this way the dinnerware pieces show family lineage between themselves and their environment and may be read a chain reaction of sorts.
CHAPTER 6

The Death of Rasputin

The assassination of Rasputin was a complicated, messy affair. Well, assassinations historically are never smooth. But listen to this:

The assassins had tried to take a civilized and humane approach by cordially inviting the monk to a private party. Wine and cakes were filled with enough cyanide to literally kill a horse. Rasputin consumed three large pieces of cake and an entire bottle of wine and when asked how he felt he replied “Fine. My stomach burns a little.” Felix Yussoupov, unnerved and not understanding why the bearded holy man wasn’t dying, finally panicked and shot Rasputin. The assassins rolled him up in a rug and proceeded to carry him to a river to dump the body. However, Rasputin managed to free himself, and started to run across the ground, yelling for help. He was shot four more times. He was wrapped in several sheets of muslin and deposited in the river.

The tsarina made inquiries about Rasputin’s disappearance and Prince Felix was questioned as being the last to see him. One of Rasputin’s overshoes was found near the bridge he was thrown into. Divers were sent down, and when they located the body, it was found that Rasputin had managed to free one arm. His lungs were filled with water: he had not died by poisoning, shots or blood loss, but by drowning.

It is real work to bring something new into the world. I have pursued mold making in order to achieve specific form. One aspect is to translate a two-dimensional drawing into a three dimensional functional object (such as the float bowl). I also make my plates in this manner that is a little alien to my work process. Usually, when I make a mold, the resolution is in hand with the completion of the mold; all that is left is to pour it.
However, the press molds for the plates forced me to search for new solutions that are completely alien to me. The results so far have been these incredibly puffy saucers or charger plates with these odd, knobby frames. The knobby lip does exactly that— it provides a circular frame, quite literally. I have really struggled with these forms and I think that while they are not necessarily the most graceful of objects, they are specific to my hand. They are something new in the world.

It would be remiss to conclude that the work begins and ends with narratives and form. After the overthrow of the czars, efforts were made to conceal the importance in society that they had held. Josiah Wedgwood had designed the royal dinnerware, but it had a very simple pattern with frogs, I believe. Somewhere in some family crest the unlikely visage of the frog had become an icon. However, what is today known as Soviet Propaganda Dinnerware is the result of the well known iconography of the Communist Party— the hammer and sickle, fish, grains being harvested— being turned into decals which were then fired on to the royal dinnerware, eradicating the Josiah Wedgwood pattern.

The dinnerware mimics life, in that way. The czar and his family were shot and buried in a shallow grave and concealed for years. The dinnerware now has its own story— it has duality of life. It was this, now it is that.

When I was making my dinnerware set, I made one place setting based on a story that my mother had told me when I was twenty two, and it has haunted me ever since. That story brought to light a number of issues for me at the time, including the understanding that my mother was a much stronger woman than I have been, or will have to be. It also made me think, “I have sat down to dinner with this woman for twenty years, and I never
knew this thing that she has told me.” And I wonder what else I do not know about her.

One always assumes that one knows everything about their family’s life, and particularly about one’s mother. I always assumed we knew each other because she carried me under her heart for nine months, but there is something about every person that keeps them secret and unknowable.

It must have been in the early sixties. One of my mother’s friends came to her for help. She had been dating a man who had gotten her pregnant, and didn’t want to marry her. So she needed help. My mother was a nurse at a hospital, and her friend asked her “Do you think there is a doctor there who can help me? Is there anyone you know?”

And there was.

At first he said no. I don’t know what it was that made him change his mind. At the time, what the doctor would do is inject saline into the uterus to cause a miscarriage. “Make sure she has expelled the fetus,” he told my mother. “Otherwise when you take her to the emergency room, they will give her an injection to stop the miscarriage.”

So the woman went back to her apartment with my mother and another friend. “Don’t lock the bathroom door,” my mother told her. “So that we can take you to the hospital, so you don’t hemorrhage.” The woman miscarried. They had to save the expelled tissue to take to the hospital. I don’t remember why. They put it in a little plastic container. When they got to the hospital, the woman miscarried a second fetus. The pregnancy had been twins.

The insurance company refused to cover her medical expenses for the miscarriage because she was an unmarried woman.

This collected backlog of secret and stories led me to the studio. They led me to create the environment and objects that illustrated the tales of the secret lives around me through the dinnerware set “Tales of Burning Love.” The wallpaper, window and service pieces reflect events that are shared in American culture. I made this piece thinking that to take a
seat at the table in this dining room is to partake in an environment that is closer to the truth of how the world operates. Taking my cue from what I found most intriguing about art history I explored the subversive nature of functional forms; this idea is manifested in deviation from normative form, narrative drawings that are paradoxical to utilitarian objects such as wallpaper and plates, and commemorating events that are painful either personally or culturally. The thorough exploration of domestic space allows me to communicate with any viewer on a comfortable level and also shows the individual works in natural surroundings, ready for the actions they are intended for.

In the end, I did it to discover what is specific to my hand, my mind and my heart. When I applied to graduate school, I wrote that I thought that I was making decisions based on limitations rather than knowledge. That applied in more ways than one. I have achieved a large vocabulary of technical information, but I also have a much broader content basis to work from. The burden of laziness in making and researching has been removed from my life. The work was made through extreme effort and work ethic. When I evaluate the pieces individually I think, “I have got to make these better.” I have made a plate over four times and not had it come out to my satisfaction. However, together, in an environment, all the pieces work. The smaller pieces make up the whole.

I have begun researching my next body of work, which will be a series of apothecary jars bearing imagery that is based on urban legends that emerged during the 70’s and 80’s. This continues my exploration of contemporary imagery on historical form. I am
interested in this idea of the story to perpetuate fear mongering contrasted against a form that is associated with the containment of medicines.

My best friend Ted Sawyer asked me, upon my second rejection from Alfred University in New York, the school I truly wanted to attend. (When I told my advisor this, she snapped “You wouldn’t have been happy at Alfred. You’re better off here.”) “What do you want to go to grad school for anyway? Your work is great. And it sells. What do you think you’re going to get out of it?” I was astonished by this question because I have wanted a Masters degree since I was a little girl and always knew I would get one.

“Because Ted,” I said. “It’s going to change my life.”

And it did.
Figure 4
Saucer

Figure 5
Saucers From “The Fabulous House of Hot Peep”

Figure 6
“Study For Lust”
Figure 7
"Float Bowl"
APPENDIX A

All prints in “The Fabulous House of Hot Peep” were printed by silkscreen with water based ink.

All clay was cone six porcelain fired oxidation in an electric kiln.

The recipes I used were as following:

**Cone Six Porcelain**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredient</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grolleg</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6 Tile Clay</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neph Sy</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pyrophyllite</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bentonite or Macaloid</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Add one cup vinegar when mixing

**Clear**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredient</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flint</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neph Sy</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custer Spar</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerstley Borate</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Matt White**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredient</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whiting</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerstley Borate</td>
<td>72.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zinc</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flint</td>
<td>272.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wollatinite</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neph Sy</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithospar</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3124</td>
<td>72.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magnesium Carbonate</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>