HOW TO MAKE CHICKEN SALAD OUT OF CHICKEN SHIT

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

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The Ohio State University
2005

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is about the evolution of my work during graduate school, which is pretty easy to sum up. I started out by making sculptures of sharks and pirates and stuff. The work was not about the subjects themselves, it was about the use of them as the subject matter for art. I became interested in materials. I made sculptures out of Duck Tape because I liked what the little pieces of tape did for the work. I later felt like I needed to find a way of legitimizing the unsophisticated elements of my work, and I found it in using historical art references. I went to Rome and saw lots of amazing statues, which inspired me to quote directly from what I saw. I ended my time in graduate school by making representational, life-size figurative sculptures out of polystyrene insulation foam board and masking tape (they are more exciting than they sound). I end the thesis by explaining that I have always considered everything to have the potential to be useful in art making.
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CHAPTER 1

WRITTEN THESIS

The work I have done in the past two years has been representational objects. My practice has been to explore different kinds of representational form through different materials, construction methods and subject matter. Through the course of my studies, my work has evolved from entertainment-based prop-like objects, to statuesque sculptures with strong ties to art history. I have found that the difference between a representational object being a prop or an autonomous, real thing is a result of how I handle materials. If the materials are transformed to mimic a completely different surface, then it is a replica. If the representation is done through form alone and the material is not transformed in an attempt to deceive, then the object is not a copy but a thing unto itself. My work has also evolved through the challenge of how to legitimize as fine art, low level/unsophisticated elements such as utilitarian materials and adolescent interests. Through the course of my studies, the idea that this was a challenge has been replaced by the realization that disparities between the elements can be the work's strength.

In my first year of graduate school, the subject matter of any work was primarily adolescent male interests. These interests consisted of action/violent images from television and movies, and it was a direction that carried over from my undergraduate
work. I learned my methods of construction from the job I had making movie sets and scenery before I came to graduate school. These combined naturally into prop-like objects that referenced general entertainment images.

In a work titled *Shark Boat* my intention was to imply a nonspecific adventure narrative. The piece consisted of a lifelike full-scale fiberglass Great White shark filling up and spilling out of a small wooden rowboat. The boat was filled with fake candy apple red blood about an inch deep. My goal was to reference many types of movies, the most obvious being *Jaws*. More importantly, I was referencing the entire genre of man-against-nature films that includes some of the worst action movies -movies whose only real fans (though not intended audience) are adolescent males. I was originally interested in using this subject matter as a way to explore and convey parts of my own identity, but I later redirected my interest toward the challenge of validating unsophisticated ideas as legitimate subjects for art. My interest in television and movies was, more accurately, an interest in how these things had affected me since early childhood. In a purely personal way, I went about exploring the images that had been burned into my mind from my childhood fixation on television.

I made *Shark Boat* with the intended removal of all evidence of hand. I made it exactly like a prop, because in all actuality it was a prop. The shark is made of foam coated with fiberglass resin, and painted with an airbrush to match the color of shark's skin. The boat is made from wood and constructed almost like an actual boat. It was "antiqued," which means that I added fake wear and dirt to make it look old and used. If a prop production company were to make a shark in a boat, this is how they would do it.
After I completed *Shark Boat*, I missed the evidence of process, I missed seeing my hand in the work. *Shark Boat* looked like it had come from the factory, and that made me feel as if I had no real reason to have constructed it by hand. My labor had not given any value to it because that labor did not show. The materials used to make the shark and the boat were chosen to be a means to an end; they had almost no value because there was no honesty to them, and they disappeared into the form. I realized after I removed the evidence of process exactly how much value the process gives to the material.

I do not consider *Shark Boat* or the pieces made around the same time to be failures in anyway. *Shark Boat* is a simple piece that has little depth because no elements are in any kind of contrast with each other. Every part of it is in complete cooperation. The materials and construction make it a prop, the subject matter is from movies, and props are made for movies. The material and the subject are the same and this makes the content static. It is a good-looking piece, but it is short-lived. At the time, I associated the complete balance and cooperation of the different elements with solidity and strength; but looking back I now know that this balance was its greatest weakness.

At the end of my first year I began to use tape as a surface so that the object could retain the value of its making. The tape surface is an exact visible record of the process by which it was made. Each tiny piece of tape is like a visible brush stroke. At the time, I was still using a similar subject matter as I had before, but I was using Duck Tape as my material. This added not only the element of process to the work, but created a contrast between the object and its material. In the beginning of my second year I made *Self-
*Portrait Bust* - the first piece in which I employed traditions of the past. At the time, I was studying historical Italian art from ancient Rome through the Renaissance in preparation for a trip to Italy later that year. I was interested in what would happen to my work with the inclusion of historical art traditions. *Self-Portrait Bust* draws on the rich history of the portrait bust as a record and on the tradition of artists rendering themselves. The features of the face are depicted in a lifelike manner. The pedestal it sits on is a device that originally functioned as a way to lift a small work up to a conveniently viewable level. The pedestal retains its original function, but in the context of the contemporary art world adopts another one. Because of its association with museums and other art institutions, the pedestal has the power to label anything that rests atop it as fine art. It was my intent to use these devices -pedestal, bust, self portrait- to give legitimacy to the material of tape and the subject matter of entertainment images. The result was that the different elements began to create contrasts because of their dissimilarities. These contrasts gave *Self-Portrait Bust* the kind of depth that the previous pieces lacked. The content became dominated by the contrast of the material, subject, and historical art reference.

I chose to use Duck Tape as a material for several reasons. Aesthetically, it works well as a surface because it has a colorful, glossy, vinyl finish that looks like plastic from a distance. The construction process seemed honest in a way because the tape is not just a superficial covering, it creates the form. Each piece of tape laid down is an exact record of the physical process by which it was made. Duck tape is such a commonplace material with utilitarian associations that the challenge of elevating it to a fine art material became an important part of the content.
Although Duck Tape is a common material with little or no inherent quality, it has a strong identity of its own. The uses of Duck Tape range from taping pieces of paper together to fixing complex machines like cars and airplanes. Made from cotton canvas duck, it was originally employed to waterproof ammunition boxes in WWII, and it was coined as "duck tape". After the war, it was used to for ductwork during the housing boom where it was reborn as "duct tape". It became extremely popular as a household must have fix-it-all. Duck Tape today is a symbol of the quick fix, almost comic in its extreme versatility. By the time I was born it was so commonplace that it was difficult (if not impossible) to imagine life without it. The color palette of Duck Tape is extensive. Originally it was only available in silver; today it can be found in a multitude of colors. Duck Brand duct tape is available in 19 colors, and other brands offer even more. The reason for this wide color range is that duck tape has become popular in the home-crafts world. I was unaware of the scope of its popularity when I first began using it as a material.

*Self-Portrait Bust* is a realistic model of my head, decapitated and rotting. Half of the face has been torn away revealing the skull underneath with yellow maggots crawling out of the eye socket. The core or armature of *Self-Portrait Bust* is made of a variety of materials including blue foam board, wire, and tissue paper. I tore the tissue paper into pieces and wadded them up to build up the form. The tape holds the wads together and connects them to the carved foam armature. Varying amounts of tension of the tape over the wads of tissue create different shapes. My color choices were limited by what colors
the companies produce, and even though Duck Tape is available in a large variety of colors, some colors do not exist. Caucasian skin tone like mine does not exist. Instead of using a skin tone, I had to use a different color to represent the flesh. I chose olive green because since childhood I have always associated green with rotting flesh. In reality rotting flesh is in actuality almost always black or dark brown, but my associations with it being green come from a childhood misinterpretation of the word gangrene as 'gang-green'. It seemed appropriate to the subject matter to use this misconception to make that decision.

*Self-Portrait Bust* was the last Duck Tape piece I made, for after making it I ran into some problems with the tape as a material. Right after I had made *Self-Portrait Bust* a fellow graduate student taped (with Duck Tape) a Duck Brand Duct Tape Company free promotional brochure to my studio door that showed examples of craft projects made with their tape. One of the examples of what they called "fun sculptures" was a green head detached from the body but not really severed of Frankenstein. It was so remarkably similar to my severed head that it was kind of shocking at first. Ultimately it was discouraging. The material that I had first considered to be unique, or at least highly unusual, had a large precedent in the homemade crafts world. The company itself embraced this and marketed its product for that use. The strong craft-world associations worked their way into the content. I became more and more uncomfortable with this because it added a cheap, gimmicky side to the material. I wanted the utilitarian associations of the material to be part of the piece, but the home-craft associations overwhelmed the other elements. I became determined to search out other materials.
*Wounded Bunny* is the transition piece between the Duck Tape pieces and the exposed foam and masking tape pieces that are the centerpieces of my MFA exhibition. I was looking at small decorative Rococo ivory and stone carvings and found their limited monochrome color palette to be quite elegant. Masking tape resembles ivory in both its off-white color and semi gloss surface. Masking tape is translucent and thin. A single layer melts right into the surrounding materials where as multiple layers become opaque. Over the foam, it creates a surface that resembles and references classic materials like marble. Masking tape is similar to Duck Tape in its basic function, but it has no inherent associations, and it brings nothing that could overwhelm the content. It has little baggage or reference to other things. Masking tape is a quiet material with a disappearing identity. One's attention does not go to what the material is; it goes to what the material does. *Wounded Bunny* was originally intended to be like the Duck Tape pieces with the entire surface made out of tape. The final product is the result of a decision to stop the process at a certain point that was not the point of completion as originally intended. I decided to stop working on the bunny because I felt that the form and the materials were worked to their most efficient level.

After I completed *Self Portrait Bust* I took a trip to Italy, my first trip to Europe. In preparation for this, and during the time I had been making the Duck Tape bust, I had been superficially studying Classical and Renaissance sculpture. It was in Rome that I became aware that this two-thousand-plus-year collection of art is to many people the very definition of art. The massive collection of antique statuary seemed to be a standard for sculpture. What struck me as most important was how the display of material skill
was employed to reinforce and bolster the Christian, pagan, or military subject matter. This display of talent and facility with the material, along with the standard devices of composition and presentation, seemed to have the potential to give value to any other element in the work. It was my intention after visiting Rome to use the look and devices of Italian sculpture in my own work in order to give it the legitimacy and complexity that it previously lacked.

The subject matter of the pieces I made following Italy is essentially combinations of several different, analogous themes from paintings and statuary I saw or studied. The wound in *Wounded Bunny* comes from sculptural depictions of wounds including the gash from the spear in Christ's side and the mortal wound of *The Dying Gaul*. The bunny itself reflects naturalistic sculpture of animals and people in motion. The baby in *Baby Pizza* is drawn largely from the conventions of the putti, cupid, and cherub. These different depictions of babies in art all share the characteristic of being animated beyond the physical capabilities of a child of that age. This 'hyperanimation' is conveyed in the baby/pizza by the pose of an athletic leap and reach. Slightly more specific to a single work is the large floating severed hand in *Reclining Woman*. I copied it directly from the hand of Adam on the ceiling of the Sistene Chapel in St. Peter's, but the specific gesture of the hand can be found in many different works where a similar naturalistic/languid posture is used. The pose of the woman and her relationship to the child is reminiscent of works like Bernini's *St. Teresa of Avila in Ecstasy* and Titian's *Assumption of the Virgin*. In both of these Christian-themed works, women are seen in the same composition with angelic male youths (puttis). *Roman Portrait Bust* is a combination of the features of
several different empirical age Roman officials. The face is that of Caligula, but the hair, neck and upper chest were taken from others. It is iconic of Roman portraiture but unrecognizable as any one individual. Familiar recurrent elements from art history do not reference one thing in particular and in so doing divorce themselves from their original content. These elements were originally part of pieces that had rich, complex narratives to them. These narratives themselves are not present in my work, but a potential for a narrative is.

I did not see a single statue from ancient Rome that had not been damaged in some way. Many of them were damaged to the point of being classified as ruins. The statues received the same kind of damage that any carved stone object accrues after thousands of years, but since the statues are human figures, their cracks, chips, and missing pieces become gashes, wounds, and amputations. I felt that the passage of time had re-sculpted them into new works that spoke of disfigurement and annihilation of incredibly beautiful things. It took seeing this collection of statuary in person for me to associate their natural damage with bodily harm. Almost immediately, I connected this with the violent elements of my own work. Both my work and the damaged statuary showed not the violent acts that had caused the damage, but only the damage left as evidence of unknown, but suggested, violence. A few statues in particular directly influenced my own work. One of them was a small, not too remarkable, white marble sculpture of a lounging toddler. The damage to it was severe, but the features had not been eroded and were still sharp. The prominent damage was a large fissure completely through the child's head, vertically, and the detachment of a foot and a hand. I could not
help but imagine what kinds of wounds they would be if the statue were flesh instead of stone. The damage to the head would no doubt be something like an axe wound. A near copy of this head wound is present in my Roman Portrait Bust and I quote the severed hand of the baby in Reclining Woman. Revealing the anatomy of the body at the site of the wounds is my attempt to emphasize the connection of damaged statuary and physical trauma.

Wounded Bunny, Baby Pizza, Reclining Woman, Roman Portrait Bust are separated from my previous work by not only differences in subject matter but also differences in materials and construction methods as well. A record of almost the entire process of construction is clearly visible in the material. This group of works is made almost completely of extruded polystyrene insulation foam board and masking tape. The foam is a cheap, common material made for insulating the walls of buildings. It is almost always found in either light bubble gum pink or in baby blue. These colors are the result of the foam companies color-coding their product in order to denote levels of fire resistance and other specifications as cheaply as possible with very small amounts of pigment. Though this material is used primarily for construction, it has found a secondary use in object making, because it is lightweight, fast, versatile, cheap, and can be cut, carved, sanded, sawed and melted. As a result, it is used to make objects for art and various industries. This material is ideal for making temporary forms or armature. It is often used for making the understructure for fiberglass objects and for making the original form for castings. It is rarely if ever embraced as a finished material.
My personal experience with foam as a material began my senior year of undergraduate school. I got a job at a company that makes props, sets, and scenery for movies, stage, ceremonies etc. I was hired for my foam working skills (which I lied about) to make a large fake rock hill out of blue foam board. This was just before the U.S. invaded Iraq and the company was contracted to make scenery for a very important military technology presentation. Many top government officials were going to be there, including Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, so this rock hill had to look good. I was apprehensive because I really didn't know what I was doing, but I soon learned to make a large shape by laminating the foam boards together. I found that a saw and a sharp knife were the best tools for cutting and shaping, and I sharpened an old kitchen knife until it could shave the hair off of the back of my hand. When I cut the foam with the knife, it made a smooth facet in the foam that resembled, in shape, the plains of jagged rock or ice. Though the form was representational of an existing thing, the unique properties of the material gave it its own identity and made it a thing unto itself. I covered the foam with latex roofing material and painted it a dark rock color in order to make it resemble stone -this was the m.o. of the company- but I was shocked by how drastically the object changed with the addition of a faux-rock surface. The appearance of the object changed of course, but more profoundly the it's identity was completely altered. Covering the foam changed the rock hill from an actual thing into a prop, a semblance of an actual thing. I can trace my interest in the difference between a thing and an imitation to this moment.
In order for a representational object to have its own integrity, I found that the material must retain its original identity, and in doing so it shows a visible record of its making. In order to use foam to make both the form and surface of an object, it was necessary to embrace all the physical qualities of material itself along with its specific construction methods. For a representational object to be an actual thing and not a prop, it has to utilize everything about it that is unique to itself.

*Baby Pizza* is a life-size male toddler athletically jumping into the air and reaching for a slice of pepperoni pizza. *Baby Pizza* is rough looking. The finished piece is a totally complete record of its construction process. The surface is not refined and is stained with dirt and grease from my hands. The dirt shows a record of where my hands were and how the piece collected grime during its construction. The roughness of the fingers and toes shows how the tape creates form by wrapping and binding the tissue paper. All of the materials used are at least partially visible. The steel wire attaching the slice of pizza to the baby's hand and the steel rod that runs into the baby's back supports the piece are clearly visible. The brown wax eyes are uncovered. Every part of *Baby Pizza* reflect every action that went into its making. Foam's color limitations gives only two choices. The baby got the pink foam because it gave him a warm kind of skin tone, and the pizza got the blue foam because it was the other color option. The polystyrene companies partly made this color decision for me.

The *Reclining Woman* and *Roman Portrait Bust* were the next two pieces I made. These pieces show a high level of craft. In combination with unusual materials, the craft stands out and can be a complete element on its own. The methods of construction of
these works are similar to the kinds of sculpture that they emulate. The column/pedestal for the Roman bust was made with woodworking/stone working techniques. The foam was cut into circles and laminated together into a cylinder similar to how Roman or Greek columns were made with stacked blocks. The cylinder was then inserted into a complicated router jig and the fluting was made. The base and the cap were turned on a wood lathe and laminated to the column. *Roman Portrait Bust* and *Reclining Woman* were both carved out of larger solid blocks of foam made by laminating sheets together. Their reductive carving process references techniques used for stone carving. The small details of the faces and fingers were made using a plaster modeling compound and tissue paper and covered completely with masking tape. The entire record of the process is not shown in these two. The goal of these two works was not to show an absolutely complete record of their making like in *Baby Pizza*. The record of construction is at its most efficient level. It shows enough of the process so that the making and materials become important elements, but not so much that it overwhelms the content or overshadows the other elements.

In the pieces made after the severed head self-portrait (*Wounded Bunny*, *Baby Pizza*, *Reclining Woman*, and *Roman Portrait Bust*) the television and movie subject matter of my previous work is almost entirely replaced by historical art references. The only connection to the entertainment violence in the previous pieces is the subtle anatomical cut-aways. In the most recent works these elements relate both to the violence present in my earlier works and to the "violence" of destruction I observed in the historical works that I reference. These anatomical cross sections are so subtle that at first they almost
seem to be a part of the historical subject matter. My hope is that they function ultimately to subvert the classical art style in order to pull it from antiquity into the contemporary world.

My work has changed over the course of my graduate studies, but looking at its evolution, I see the constant threads. The works are all representational, though the kind of representation has changed from prop to statue. Evidence of violence has been present in almost all of my pieces. It began with the entertainment-based violence of Shark Boat, which was graphic and prominent, and ended with the subtle anatomical cut-aways of Roman Portrait Bust. My subject matter has changed drastically in a thematic sense, but the methods behind it have remained the same. I take general images from a large source, images that do not reference a specific thing. Because they are non-specific, they reference the source as a whole. I combine various images from the same source together (whether they be from entertainment or art history) and create something that is familiar and recognizable but does not immediately reference any one particular thing. Because the images were originally from sources that contained or related to narratives, the combined images imply a narrative. I have used Duck Tape and insulation foam skillfully, but have allowed the materials to retain their original appearances. These materials are industrial and my use of them as a fine art material is uncommon.

My two years in graduate school have been a lesson in how to utilize anything to make art. Every experience I have ever had has the potential to fuel my work. I turned the years I "wasted" watching television as a child into an extensive education that could inform the subject matter of my work. A job I had constructing movie scenery gave me useful
making skills and helped me to define an object's identity. My trip to Rome launched the work that would define my MFA exhibition. I found ways to instill artistic value on common utilitarian materials. The same tape that holds a cardboard box closed can, still using its original function, become the surface of a sculpture. Carved insulation foam board can do everything that traditional fine materials like marble or bronze can do. Anything can be utilized because everything has potential.
CHAPTER 2

IMAGES

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