Ducks, Cups, Bushes, Planters, and Statues

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

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ABSTRACT

Through thorough descriptions of the objects in my thesis show and thoughts about the sources they are taken from, I begin to clarify the overall intention of this body of work which is a combination of memories, observations, humor, ceramic process and personalized imagery brought together to create a fictional garden, a mantel, and a conglomeration of personal icons. This installation is created through the accumulation of many smaller objects to produce larger collections. These collections are intended to work as initial overviews that pull the viewer into investigating the smaller details.

Through creating a hybrid of an outdoor and indoor environment, I have been able to examine and remake different collectable objects. From objects that are interesting because of their history and their relationship to my personal life, to objects that I respond to visually because of strange proportions, awkward weight or funny colors, I put them together to create a new, larger installation based on my experiences, such as growing up in a household where what is displayed on the mantel is very important.

The pieces I make relate to historical and decorative art, contemporary art, stage props, and toys. What is it that I do to make these objects interesting? What is it that I do to my work that makes it art, or is it crafts? I find these questions of labeling what I make both exciting and annoying. I love well crafted objects and I love art. When something
catches my eye, I want to bring it into my world. I start by taking photographs or making drawings. Then I remake the object or the image in my studio. When I reproduce the object out of clay, I usually change some things, like the scale, color, or texture. I am stealing the image of somebody's bush or lawn ornament, bringing it into my studio, and remaking it into a character that I use in my installations. After an icon is part of my vocabulary, I use it over and over in various contexts.

I am interested in making objects because I enjoy the act of accumulation. I have chosen to work with this imagery because it is nostalgic, humorous, and playful. It is meaningful to me because I get to examine what people choose to own and how it defines them. It is my hope to create environments that are funny and descriptive of myself and my process.
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# 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>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapters:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ducks, Cups, Bushes, Planters, and Statues</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Materials and Process</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Conclusion</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: The Figures</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Personal History</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Installation view of Garde and Mantle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Detail of Bush sculpture in Garden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Detail of Paddle Bush sculpture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Insulation view of Mantle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Detail of Mantle Installation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Detail of Mantle, diagonal view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Detail of Mantle, corner view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Bat with Drawing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Bat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Black Monster, Bob Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Neighborhood bush</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Neighborhood bush</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This body of work is a hybrid of childhood memories, current observations, humor, ceramic process, and personalized imagery that I have combined to create an installation of outdoors and indoors. It is a few ideas that I have brought together, confused and regurgitated. These ideas are about my personal history and living environments. They are a combination of three major sources, childhood memories of growing up in a suburban neighborhood, urban gardens in Philadelphia and my current environment. These are the three places I have lived for the longest periods of time. Living in my parents house, growing up in the suburbs of Philadelphia I learned the importance of home decoration and how it works as a character description of the owners. Living in Philadelphia, I got the opportunity to see gardens full of lawn ornaments. A typical garden consists of rows of painted rocks, followed by small wire fences, to plants and flowers, to a full size fake deer, a black plastic Santa Clause, plastic flowers, a few Disney characters and a wind sock all crammed into a tiny eight foot by eight foot little lawn. While living in these different areas I have always been recording information through drawing, photographing and making objects out of clay. In putting together this show I have drawn from imagery to juxtapose different periods of my life. Through a detailed description of the work I will discuss the processes involved in making the show, the pieces in relation to the space, and the sources that I draw upon.
CHAPTER 2

DUCKS, CUPS, BUSHES, PLANTERS, AND STATUES

Everything sits on an industrial gray concrete floor. The space is roughly finished with white walls in certain areas and pipes and original brick left exposed in others. It is broken up into three different sections, a front room, a middle area, and a back room.

Upon entering the gallery, the viewer is met with a ten foot by seventeen foot rectangular-shaped garden made out of fourteen bushes, one yellow squirrel and a few random blobs of grass. The bushes look like oversized game pieces. The rectangular shape of the garden could resemble a giant board game and the bushes look movable, because of the way they sit unattached on the concrete. Most of the bushes taper at the top causing them to look like they could be picked up and moved. The garden is bordered with plots of clay grass and scallop-shaped blocks. The grass plots are squared-off tiles built out of brown clay to look like dirt. The dirt underneath the grass resemble square pieces of Masonite. On top of the dirt tiles are slabs of trimmed blades of grass, that are made out of strips of clay which are sliced and painted in varied greens to give depth. The combination of the painted and the sliced slabs were laid out in organic rows which creates a rhythm that looks fake. In the areas where the grass is more built up, it starts to look like a green shag carpet.
The bushes vary in size from forty inches by twenty one inches, to sixteen inches by ten inches. The majority of the bushes have a bubbly green glaze that creates a fuzzy, rough surface that alludes to the touch and depth you would encounter on a real bush. I choose to make one yellow bush to stick out and work as a contrast to the green bushes, to draw attention to the artificiality of the garden. I wanted it to add humor to the garden and help create a B-movie, cheesy, prop-effect. It also balances out the yellow of the squirrel sitting a few bushes away. It references for me other things, like an imaginary bush made out of potato chips and Bob Thompson paintings. I am attracted to Bob Thompson’s foliage because of the way he stylized it. He turned trees into lollipops through psychedelic colors and generic lollipop shapes. I borrow his colors often. There are a combination of stylized bushes and ones that transcend every day bushes. By being made out of a combination of different sources, they turn into strange, fictional, objects.

I have been working with different levels of realism, from fairly realistic to stylized to not very close to the original source at all. Although there is at least a little bit of the original source in most of the bushes, I want to convince the viewer that the stronger or less recognizable objects were bushes because of their location in the garden. All of the individual bushes have their own personality and quirky traits. Even though I want the garden to work as an overview, I also want each individual piece to be interesting on its own.

At a diagonal from the garden is a twenty-two foot long, fifty nine inch tall, white, wooden mantel that wraps around a niche. At the ends of the mantel are two wooden posts decorated with quarter rounds. Underneath the shelf of the mantel is a common
piece of crown molding bought from Home Depot. The style of the mantel is fairly
generic, although it oddly wraps around the room in a U-shape. I made the design
through looking at home decorating magazines and general memories that I have from
being in different people's houses. The mantel is not detailed enough to relate to any
specific time period. It was just enough information to be a mantel but nothing more.

Sitting on top of the mantel is a continuous, horizontal, stretched, pile of white ceramic
objects. There are several kinds of white: shiny, matt, opaque, transparent, and sugary-
satin. The objects vary from monsters and broom sticks to cactuses and chain saws. There
are hundreds of these objects which vary in scale from about six inches to about one-half
inch. One of the reasons that the mantel was chosen as a support is so that these objects
were presented at eye-level. Before I realized that I wanted to make a mantel piece, I
knew that I wanted to make a long shelf with piles on it. I liked the idea of a really long
stage that blurs any kind of narrative because of its length and the quantity of imagery.

With the inundation of imagery and because of the size of the shelf the viewer has to
keep moving to see it all. The more I thought about the idea, I realized that I wanted the
shelf to be a mantel to create a domestic reference. I chose the objects on top of the
mantel to be monochromatic so that you see the overall picture before focusing on
individual objects. I also wanted it to reference a horizon line in a landscape.

My intention with the objects on top of the mantel is to create different scenarios
by putting together objects and imagery that are not usually in each other's company. I
brushed white slip on top of red clay so the brush strokes would show. I used four
different white surfaces to create a more interesting built up composition. I didn't want
any of the pieces to become uniform on the mantel. By varying the surface I added more visual information, such as a brushy texture and dipping lines. The different finishes created different thickness of surfaces. All of the objects on the mantel are handmade. Evidence of touch and the construction process are left on all of the individual objects, from the amount of polishing to the angles that were cut with a fettling knife.

When I originally thought of this project I thought that all of the piles were going to be strictly based on decorative objects such as knick-knacks. As soon as I started to make them I realized that my sources were everything that surrounded me, such as benches, mail boxes, art, and books. I remade objects that I saw every day and changed their scale to fit my piles. I took images from home decoration magazines, comic books, favorite artists, Christmas ornaments, toys, nature books, neighbors' front yards, campus and my imagination. Every thing is built to a collectable scale like a toy or a figurine. I varied the amount of detail, the construction processes, and the surfaces to lead the viewer into investigating the different piles. Inside the piles, just like in the bushes and the drawings, I wanted subtle details to be discovered. Such as the high heel, the pump and the snake trying to look like a boot on the mantel. It was not important to me that everybody discovers all the little details, but they are there to be discovered.

Moving into the next room, hanging on the wall are six drawings on paper and seven clay wiffle-ball bats with drawings on them. The images in the drawings reference the imagery used on top of the mantel and in the garden. The drawings are made up of fences, chairs, houses, towers, tools, architecture and decoy ducks. These images are composed in a way that create an ambiguous spaces. There are certain parts, like the
houses or the buildings, that give the illusion of three dimensional space, but oddly scaled objects, flat areas and strange compositions throw off that illusion.

The drawings on paper are intermingled with the bats. I arranged them by making formal decisions creating a rhythm between the three dimensional bats and the two-dimensional drawings on paper. The drawings on the bats vary from more painterly, large, shapes of color mixed with fat, graphic, lines to build up space and imagery, such as swing sets, snake piles and push brooms. The bats are hung vertically with c-shaped white hooks. The handle of the bats are at the top where the hooks support the rim of the bat handle. I was initially attracted to the wiffle-ball bat in a hardware store. I bought it because I liked the form. It has a funny shape that I thought would be nice to cast out of clay and to draw on. I didn’t choose the bat because of its history or its relation to my history. I think of the bats shape in the same way that I think about all of the objects in the show. On one particular bat, I made the drawing with ceramic pencil that made it look like a large doodle. This bat resembles the piles on the mantel more than any of the other drawings. The drawing on this bat also looks like wallpaper, because of the overall, even weight of the lines. It is like it was on a sheet that was applied to the front of the bat. It also looks like a sleeve of faded tattoos covering someone’s arm, because of the way it covers the cylindrical form. The imagery in the drawings act as icons that represent different memories. They somehow relate to me or my past and by reproducing them I have turned them into visual icons. These icons are put together to create a larger installation based on my experiences.
CHAPTER 3
MATERIALS AND PROCESS

Nine of the fourteen bushes in the garden have the same green glaze on them. It is a chrome green glaze with soda ash, frit 3124 and litzium in it. The soda ash makes it textured and bubbly. Seven of these nine bushes were made with a Black Bird clay body and two were made with a terra-cotta body. The difference is that on the Black Bird clay the glaze varies from green to black. Where the glaze is applied thinner, mostly in-between the leaves, the iron in the clay burns through the glaze turning darker green or black. On the terra-cotta clay the glaze is a more consistent lighter, chrome green. The variation of the color on the Black Bird bushes create shadows that make the bushes look more realistic and complex. I glazed three of the bushes with shiny commercial glazes to create a flashy, smooth, plastic look.

All of the bushes I built by initially coiling up a support and then manipulated the surface, either by applying leaves or other methods. A small bush that is sixteen inches by ten inches looks like a sea sponge. It is cone shaped without any clay leaves added to it. It is covered with thousands of pin pricks making a texture to create a leaf like rhythm. It makes the clay look absorbent. Rubbed into the pin pricks is a matt army green glaze. On top of that are shiny green poke-a-dots that are about an inch apart from each other.
There is a small bump sticking out of the side profile, which I refer to as the aub. It is a real stretch to label this form a bush, it looks more like a sea creature.

A second small leafless bush is sixteen and one half inches by twelve inches. This form is built up by piling one or one and a half inch cylinders that taper into a missile head shape. The seams of each cylinder are left exposed creating a stratified Christmas tree effect. Four of the cylinders were painted with a bright green slip that were randomly separated. I added quarter inch diameter holes to add more texture and a visual rhythm. I also added the holes to lighten up the massive form. This was the only subtractive process that I used on the bushes. Finally I covered the bush with a glossy green glaze. Subtly, you can see the slip underneath the glaze which helps to separate the individual cylinder that make up the bush.

A twenty eight inch by fifteen inch bush, that I like to call “the Pope hat,” is a medium sized cylinder that closes of at the top into a point. This form is covered in stylized leaves cut out from wooden templates. There are five different leaf shapes that are randomly repeated. Each shape is a half inch slab that is cut at a forty five degree angle at the bottom to give it a vertical orientation when applied to the support. This bush resembles a crown or a beehive. The individual leaves resemble grave stones or cookie cutter cookies. This bush is interesting because of the randomly repeated stylized organic leaves.

The bush that sits next to “the Pope hat” is a little shorter and more organically shaped. This bush is not symmetrical and its leaves are not all vertically oriented. They are pinched into roughly one inch half circles that are thicker at the base and they taper at
the tips to about one eighth inch edges. At the top of the bush is a bird that is covered with the same glaze as the bush. It is hard to see because of its camouflage.

The two brown and white bushes are very similar because they are both made the same way. I built a gum drop shaped support and then covered them with leaves made out of coils. They are attached to the bush at forty five degree angle so that they are all pointing upward. On the larger one the tips of the coils are slit and then dipped into white slip and applied to the support. They are pinchers. On the smaller one the tips of the coils are flattened into paddles and dipped into white slip. Coming out of the top of the paddle bush is a two inch by one inch snake whose head was dipped into white slip as well. These two brown bushes look like they have a light snow covering.

I approached making the objects for the mantel in two different ways. The first way was similar to making the bushes. I started out by making a hollowed clay support and then I applied objects to the support. This way I was able to orchestrate the piles by consciously making objects that fit in specific areas. My other method was to make many, many, individual objects and to pile them on top of each other when I installed the show. The difference was that when I piled these pieces they were organized by gravity. They did not always show their most interesting attributes. When building the pieces for the mantel I felt like it was a survey of different handbuilding techniques that I knew. I used press molds, drape molds, stamps, the pottery wheel, slabs, coiling, solid modeling techniques, Tile making, carving, anything I could think of to make these objects. I varied the techniques just like the imagery and the glazes, to create an overall built up
surface, to be more visually interesting. I made white miniature bushes and gardens in the piles hoping that they would reference or echo the larger garden across the room. I choose to make the pieces out of red clay and to paint them white instead of making them out of white clay. So that painting them would be more evidence of my handling. I also liked the idea of giving them a really low end faux porcelain finish. It makes sense with the fake bushes in the garden. I varied the application of the three different glazes that I used. The shiny white was a opaque, cone 04 commercial glaze, that I brushed on. The satin white glaze was a cone 04 white glaze that I would under fire at cone 06. I dipped the pieces in this glaze. It was a beautiful sugary-surface that covered over or softened a lot of details on the pieces. The third glaze that I used was a commercial cone 05 clear glaze. This glaze highlights any imperfection in the slip application. It also eats away some of the white slip where it is thinner revealing the brown clay underneath. This glaze made the pieces look sloppy.

I started out working on the bats by making a two part plaster mold. Then I press molded some bats, which I assembled with colored slip in the seems to highlight their construction. I wanted a handmade quality to be apparent. Then I covered the bat with an orange slip everywhere except for over the seems. After making a couple of press molded bats I realized that they were a little to sloppy. I started to slip cast some bats which obviously produced much cleaner results. This required a different quality of drawing then I was using on the press-molded bats. As soon as I started to realize this, it was time for my show but I got a couple made that were starting to work for example, the one with
the turquoise line drawing of the reclining chair and the heart-flag. With the slip cast bats
I need to use cleaner and more specific lines. I also wanted to have more graphic
compositions that fit with the machine made bats. Of course, this seems real obvious to
me now.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

My thesis show is a collection of imagery and objects that I have been accumulating for the past couple of years. Transforming them from the original source into ceramic objects turns them into a fictional collections. This collection is based on my personal interests from my favorite artists to my family, from bushes that live in my neighborhood, to a squirrel that I made after watching the movie “Caddie Shack,” all of these objects are representations of my personal world.

Through making this show I have begun to realize how much my work is about my personal life. I have also realized how important it is to finish projects before I move on. Without any closure, the same ideas always come back, keeping me from moving forward. My near future plans are to continue working on the garden. The version on the show is thinner than I originally imagined. I want it to be full and lush like the gardens in Philadelphia where every single corner of the eight foot by eight foot plot is completely utilized. I am also going to continue working with household furniture because I want to develop more complex and descriptive environments to house my ceramic objects.
APPENDIX A

THE FIGURES
Figure 1. : Installation shot of garden and mantel
Figure 2: Detail of bush in garden
Figure 3: Paddle Bush
Figure 4: Mantel installation
Figure 5: Mantel detail
Figure 6: Mantel detail
Figure 7.: Mantel detail
Figure 8: Bat with drawing
Figure 9.: Bat
Figure 10: *Black Monster*, Bob Thompson, oil on canvas, 1958.
Figure 11: Photograph of neighborhood bush.
Figure 12: Photograph of neighborhood bush.
APPENDIX B
PERSONAL HISTORY

I use domestic decorations and house-hold objects such as cups, bushes, plants, planters, statues and ducks as departure points to make sculptures. Domestic environments are an important influence on my ceramics. I take images from these places and bring them into my studio by drawing them, photographing them or stealing them.

Growing up in a household where the most important issue was to create a warm welcoming environment for us to live in had a big effect on me. My mother was obsessed with having a “homey” appearance at all times. She wanted the house to be welcoming and to tell a visitor that we are a mix of traditional home, antiques, with a dab of “Country Kitchen.” This has ingrained in me an importance on living environments and appearances which has carried over into my artwork.

Early on, I took it upon myself to represent who I was by turning my bedroom into a Jeff-Warnock-wanna-be-cool-skater-kid shrine. I plastered my walls, ceiling included, with skateboard pictures, street signs, what I thought at the time was cool punk band posters, and general strange crap that I found on the street or in parking lots when I was out skateboarding. I started this project when I was about twelve or thirteen and continued it until I went off to college. I never took down any pictures, I just taped pictures up over top of existing ones. There was a brief period where I started to draw on
my closet door, a couple of cartoon heads. I started to notice my friends picked up where I left off. I don’t even know when they would come over to draw. It became contagious.

Thinking back I realize that this was the beginning of my interest in creating a space of my own. I wanted to make something that represented me and I was making a lot of visual decisions to do so. The way that I was working was that I would put something up on the wall without much forethought and live with that decision for a while and then make my next move based on my previous one. I hung up photographs that I took, on top of magazine pictures, mixed with stickers and occasional drawings. I had various collections of toys, sock hangers, Christmas balls, and mannequin heads.

As long as I can remember eccentric people have interested me. I was fanatical about the Adams Family and the Munsters and I can remember keeping them in my mind while I was hanging things in my room. Not that it looked visually spooky like those programs but I thought of my room as my eccentric personality trait.

As soon as I went off to college, my mother went to work on restoring my bedroom. It took her three long days just to peel the pictures off the walls and then lots of coats of primer and paint to restore them. She didn’t even tell me that she was going to take this task on. Probably because she didn’t want to deal with the complaining. I came home one weekend to yellow walls and curtains with heart-shaped rods. This was devastating to me because it represented the end of my childhood.

My interest with domestic-objects also has something to do with me getting hooked on making pottery in high school. I started out looking at the pots that people decorated their houses with. I have learned so much through making pots. Pottery has
taught me about form, drawing, function, touch, and process. It has changed the way I look at everything. It taught me to examine and analyze things more thoroughly.

Ever since I was about two years old I have had a love for tools. I clearly remember telling everybody that I want to be a carpenter when I grew up. I love to build things. I specifically remember the feeling in my stomach that I would get when I saw this certain type of baby nails that came in a small plastic container with a red plastic top that had a hook connected to it. I could stare at those nails all day. Unfortunately building things never came very natural to me even though I would try over and over again. I was way more destructive than anything else. My family always reminds me of the time I sawed off the leg of the kitchen table. I remember repairing the kitchen table not sawing the leg off of it. The first thing that I made in ceramics class in high school was this weird half-slab built, half pinch-pot type of vessel. I remember people talking about the strange way I built it, because of the way I combined the slabs with the pinched area. This made me excited. I had permission to make things even though they were crooked. From then on ceramics was my life. I get to use tools and people didn’t mind if things were wobbly. There wasn’t a right way or a wrong way of doing things. I could just make what ever I wanted. I didn’t have to make it look like something else or listen to somebody’s stupid instructions. Thank God for ceramics or I don’t know if I would have made it through my junior and senior year in high school.

Then I went to art school. The first project I had to make at art school was a spaghetti bridge for my 3-D design class. The bridge had to span three feet and hold two cups of water in the center. It had to be made out of number eight spaghetti joined with
one dot of hot glue at the joints. I came home after my first class and started the project right away thinking, "Holy crap! College is really hard." I spent twenty-five hours on that first project. My bridge turned out O.K.. It held the water but was not so pretty.

This first project set the tone for the next four years. I spent my entire life in the studio. At first I was a double major of glass and ceramics. Mid junior year I quit making glass work. I enjoyed the process of glass blowing but I didn't like the actual material. You couldn't touch it like clay. I was initially interested in making pots at Tyler even though it was defiantly not a pottery school. There were a few people making pots, but mostly people were making sculptures. After a while I stopped making as many pots and started to make clay sculptures. I was beginning to figure out what interested me about ceramics and art beyond process. I was learning that I could use my sense of humor and that I could make work that was not me trying to be like other posters.

One day around the beginning of my junior year, I gave myself a assignment to make a piece a day for three weeks. It didn't matter what I made as long as I came to my table and made one piece from beginning to end. I ended up with about twenty-five odd figures. It was one of the best things I ever did. From those twenty-five pieces I figured out what I wanted to make for my B.F.A. show. I was interested in relationships between the personalities of the clay figures that I made. For my show I made husbands and wives. I started out by making Cassiopeia. She was a pink headed bulbous inflated building, with a round cartoon head. I actually made her first then named her, because she reminded me of a star gazer. Then I realized that I wanted to make her husband named Flip. So I made him based on the name Flip and the qualifications required to marry
Cassiopeia. For the most part my B.F.A. show was about making a figure and then, making its partner by trying to give these abstracted objects comparable personality traits. These objects were all mostly made out of both slabs and pinched pots. I was firing them with slips to cone 02. Their scales varied from about three feet to one foot high. The visibility of the construction process was important to the aesthetic appearance. I emphasized the seams of the slab joints to give off the appearance of pre-fabricated and assembled parts. It also helped give the appearance of the piece being inflated. These joints also helped me break the object up by color. They acted as lines that partitioned the color into separate sections. The colors of the slips and glazes that I choose were mostly pastels. I contrasted light pastels with black because, I didn't want my color choices too be to fluffy.

During my first year in graduate school I found myself questioning my allegiance to ceramics. Did I need to use so much process? What is my work outside of the context of the ceramics world, and why am I limiting myself to traditional clay materials? I experimented with other materials independently and combined with clay. I don't have any true answers to why I like ceramics so much. Even though it is messy, it gets on my nerves, it shrinks, Ceramics Monthly makes me feel stupid every month and my colors are muddy I haven't found anything that matches the feeling that I get when I unload a kiln full of my work. I enjoy the more material based conversation that tends to come with ceramics.

The pieces that I made for my thesis show relate to decorative objects, historical art, contemporary art, stage props and toys and are influenced by these stories and my
history. What is it that I do to these objects to make them interesting, or what is it that I do to my work that makes it art, or is it crafts? I find these questions of labeling what I make both interesting and annoying. I love well crafted objects and I love art. When something catches my eye, I want to bring it into my world. I start out by making drawings or taking photographs. Then I remake the object or the image in my studio. When I reproduce the object I usually change things like scale, color, material, or texture. I am stealing the image of somebody’s bush or lawn ornament, bringing it into my studio remaking it into a character that I use in my stories. After a icon is a part of my vocabulary I use it over and over in various contexts.

I am interested in these objects because I enjoy the act of accumulation. I have chosen to work with this imagery because it is nostalgic, humorous and playful. It is meaningful to me because I am interested in what people chose to own and how it defines them. It is my hope in this work to create environments that are humorous and descriptive of myself and my process.
BIBLIOGRAPHY
