BRIAN BASNETT'S SCULPTURE THESIS

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
The Degree Master of Fine Arts in the
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By
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ABSTRACT

This body of work revolves around energy as an issue. The issue has been defined in the sculpture by addressing: the armature, the surface, the immediacy of making the objects, and the materials used.

By presenting the work in small groups a stage is set for an ambiguous narrative, where the bond between the objects is through the issue of energy in some form.

Other rules I have employed for my working process are: sitting and thinking, playing with the material, energy in the object, revealing a pattern, unfolding a material, formulated altering, and that weight should dictate the gesture of the object. These rules define the objects by giving them comparable identities.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my advisor, Todd Slaughter, and my committee member Robert Arnold for helping me with this paper.

I thank The Ohio State University Art Department for providing a studio for me to make my work with the facilities of a wood shop, metal shop, etc. and the opportunity to teach, which has been an invaluable lesson, for this I am most grateful.

I would also like to thank influential friends such as James Davis, Sharon McJannet, and Phillip Brou for making my experience here unforgettable.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This paper will discuss two basic things: the materials I use when making sculpture, and my working process. The primary materials I use are: wood, foam, plastic, fabric, and paper. These materials are important to me because they are malleable and inexpensive. With these materials I can create an animate object that contains a residual activity in the way it is made.

My process can start at either two points. The first would be an interest in the material, creating what sometimes can and sometimes cannot be iconographic. The second would be an idea, usually representational, that conveys a message. Through both of these starting points there is an underlying issue of energy.

I am developing a system or set of rules that applies to the issue of energy.

What defines the rules in some way are, showing a physical activity in the piece. This has always been an underlying concern. Whether I am
thinking about an atmosphere, a particular object or figure, a single word, or arranging the material I want the viewer to see the sense of a verb.

What I do with the materials is play with them in a manner similar to making things up such as stories and games. I will take a material and start to cut it and bend it, maybe draw on it. I will get paint or glue and try to see if it will bond to the material. Sometimes I will use string to hold a part in place and later realize that it is integral to the work. I move things around until something looks complete; I make changes to the materials until an object, with content, materializes.

The succession of the work comes from a train of thought; one idea will lead into another. I will work with a particular idea such as pressure; the idea generates several pieces that “talk” to one another (figures 1.1-1.6). By grouping these pieces a scene is animated. A few of the avenues in which I approached the subject are: activating the armature with weight, creating patterns, pressure, and heat.

The sculptures made when working with a specific issue many times result in a representational object (Over-inflated Figure, The Rocking Horse, Folding Chair, Three-Key Piano, Steam Locomotive-Half Scale)(figures 1.7-1.11). I think the representational object allows me to focus on the issue. Once an icon has been decided upon it is one less thing to think about while I am working; I can focus on how I want the object to stand, the gesture, the color, etc. A representational form helps dictate many of these variables.
Certain qualities between emotion and physical energy are important on various levels, through myself and in the object. The root of a physical energy in an object is in the structure or armature. This is what gives an object the strength to hold anything. I decided to focus on an activity in the armature itself by using strips of bent wood. This issue was started in works such as *Deflated Figure* and *The Rocking Horse*. With these pieces I wanted to make an armature, and then apply a fabric covering that would determine the gesture further by applying stress to the wooden strips.

Defining 'active armature' as a physical activity displayed in the structure I started searching for a way to claim the issue with specific techniques. In searching for a technique to create an active armature I found repeatable techniques that could be used for other applications. Pieces that show these techniques would be: *Lady*, *The Folding Chair*, *Active Materials* (table 1.1), and *Steam Locomotive-Half Scale*. 
Figure 1.1: Group Photograph December 2002/ fabric, wood, paint, string, pulley, tape, marker/ December 2002

Figure 1.2: Group Photograph January 2003/ wood, paper/ January 2003
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CHAPTER 2

IN THE FALL

One of the first pieces that I made soon after arriving at OSU is a modification of a blanket. There are three parts to The Blanket (figure 2.1): the text, the material, and how they relate to each other.

The question asked by the words cut out of the blanket "What is Not Thinking?" could be asked in different ways. The first interpretation of the question is straightforward, what does it mean to 'not think', posing the question philosophically. The second interpretation would be to make something without thinking, working with the material (a blanket) in a 'non thinking' manner. Perhaps this could be thought of as working intuitively. The difference between intuition and not thinking is that intuition is trusting one's senses to make decisions; not thinking would be attempting to push intuition out. It is not that 'not thinking' is possible, but the intention is, similar to lying in bed and trying to go to sleep after a busy day.

A blanket is comfortable; it keeps a person warm. It brings to mind sleep, sex, and questionable laziness.
Connected to the blanket the statement answers itself. What is not thinking? Activities associated with a blanket.

Another piece dealing with the nature of fabric is Over-inflated Figure. Over-inflated Figure is a literal self-portrait because the figure is a tracing of my body onto the fabric. Over-inflated Figure barely has any volume at all for the lack of an internal structure, being a strip of wood. The more weight applied to the surface of the figure (using paint and other fabric pieces) the heavier it got.

This piece brought to light the nature of the ego. Altering the surface of the figure influenced the structure, pushing the piece to the floor, similar to people and surroundings influencing an individual, making them feel slightly overwhelmed. I wanted the figure to stretch out a little, so I tied it up with a piece of sting to the walls of the room. This is how it stayed.
Figure 2.1: The Blanket/ acrylic blanket/ September 2002
CHAPTER 3

FROM A TRIPOD

With The Blanket I was trying not to think about what to do with the object, but still wanting to alter it. With other pieces such as Bloom (figure 3.1), T-shirt and Jeans (figure 3.2) and The Three-Key Piano I was thinking about the number three. The number three derived from looking at a tripod, I was interested in it as a minimal structural system because of its simplistic strength. I wanted the pieces that I made to operate inside of the number three, a strong minimal structure, to see if I could find a similar strength in what I would make. The tripod is most obvious in Bloom. However, in the later two pieces the number is a source for making the object.

Three articles of clothing that fit together to make a single object is T-shirt and Jeans, which uses the everyday fabric we wear. It is altered into a non-functioning yet immediately identifiable thing (two pairs of jeans and a t-shirt).

The Three-Key Piano stemmed from the structure of a tripod. My thinking was that a grand piano is a classical instrument that has three
points holding it up. The classical aspect was important because I felt that one could make sculpture concerning classical sculpture dealing with an icon versus the material. The nature of the piano is sophisticated, but provides an opportunity to arouse any emotion with the music one makes while playing a piano. If a person was to play the instrument they could press one of three keys so the possibilities become limited, almost dictating to the viewer what to play and how to play it. The keys are large, made for the entire hand versus a finger. *Three-Key Piano* becomes a visual song about classical sculpture in a sort of 'get the job done' fashion.

An important part of this piece was covering it in fiberglass. Trying to cover or upholster a given armature with material while allowing the fabric to display a natural energy (*Over-inflated Figure, The Rocking Horse*) led me to something that I had been avoiding; forcing the material to have a permanent place. This is what the fiberglass cloth and polyester resin did, it claimed the activity of the materials and the way the materials were used.
CHAPTER 4

DEVELOPING A SYSTEM

Both Lady (figure 4.1) and The Folding Chair helped define a system I am looking for. With The Rocking Horse I was looking to make a specific pattern to complete an idea about a rocking horse with a heavy head. The idea is the thoughts of the horse (representing a companion) are too much for it to bear, so much so that the horse cannot rock. I found this interesting because a rocking horse cannot go to far anyway. I wanted to see stress in the horse (as a contained being and as a sculpture).

I began bending strips of wood to give the skeleton a physical energy. The remainder of the horse relied on a pattern to be cut out and applied to the armature. Previously I had traced myself for Deflated Figure, tracing a horse was the next logical step. The contour of the horse and myself answered how a direct energy can be had in a pattern, which is through a direct transfer of a living thing by a living thing where all parts are touching.

In an attempt to hone the idea of an active armature I got rid of most of the materials I was using except wood (figure 1.2).
I started working somewhat mathematically (with a ruler and semi-specific measurements). Shortly thereafter I figured out that a board of lumber could be cut lengthwise from both the height and width dimensions. This can most easily be seen in *Armature for a Tornado* (figure 4.2), and *Baseball Girl* (figure 4.3).

With this technique I decided to make *The Folding Chair*. A chair is a generic form that could be used to reference furniture. With any piece of furniture there is a right and wrong way to make it, so this in a sense is an established system of making. A chair functions as an object to sit on and if it does not it is not a chair. The image of a chair gave me a simple recognizable form to work from, yet would pose as a complex cutting pattern when trying to figure out how to make a single board unfold.
Figure 4.2: Armature for a Tornado/ wood/ February 2003
Figure 4.3: Baseball Girl/ wood, vinyl/ February 2003
CHAPTER 5

ACTIVITY

Experimenting with plastic, mostly PVC tubing at first, led me to the pieces Shrimp, Vulcan, Low Pressure System, Activity Station, and Steam Locomotive-Half Scale (figures 5.1-5.4).

Shrimp used the PVC pipe as an armature. It was the first piece that displayed the strength of the pipe. The weight of the vinyl covering makes the pipe bend dramatically. Shrimp poignantly stated something that Deflated Figure had stated earlier; the surface covering dictated the gesture of the form. This can also be seen in Three-Key Piano and Steam Locomotive-Half Scale.

A pipe carries a connotation of flowing matter. Understanding that a pipe has energy in concept lets the physical energy in altering a pipe become less important. The conceptual energy in a material leads to the use of "active materials" (materials that have an implied activity in them) (list 1.1). Using "active materials" in theory would display energy without necessarily dealing with balance, tension, or other tedious acts.

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Low Pressure System uses the foam that insulates water pipes to narrate a lethargic weather front. This particular type of weather is slow, soft, and drooping. Similar to any weather, Low Pressure System is mutable through its position on the wall and the length of the tubes. The paper triangles attached to the tubes are symbols used in television weather maps to show a cold front.

In Vulca an the viewer has a sense of motion and activity through the use of a pipe, but there is also activity displayed by manipulating the pipe with heat.

With plastic, heat as a source can be displayed while working with the material. In Vulca n the heating of the material can be seen as a means to manipulate and as a marking tool in the residual activity of burning the surface.

In the pieces Steam Locomotive-Half Scale and Activity Station the use of heat can be observed in the form the plastics take. Steam Locomotive is covered in a polyethylene shrink-wrap. This plastic sheet, heated with a large volume of heat, shrinks showing the viewer an immediate activity with the actual shrinking of the piece.

Strips of wood were used because I wanted the shrink-wrap to contort the object, but also wood specifically because of the reference to steam (as to steam bending) and wooden toy trains.

A train is one of the most powerfully raw icons to be used. As with Over-inflated Figure, The Rocking Horse, and Shrimp the surface of Steam
Locomotive dictates how the object rests. The difference between the fabrics and the plastic is, when the plastic shrinks, it forces the wood into a position and holds it there. The plastic and wood are held actively together, but barely, so an ephemeral quality comes forward marking the era of the train.

Activity Station, which is a representation of the desk I have been working at, shows heat in the joints. Each segment is lit on fire then pressed against the joining segment. The material used for Activity Station is made of Hula-hoops. Forming and burning this active material narrates a tongue in cheek story of the activity of myself at my desk.

Hula-hoops
pipes
paint rollers
rope/string
rubber bands
inner tubes
tires
gears
springs
handles of all types
bedding
sheets
towels

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Table 1.1: Active Materials
Figure 5.1: Shrimp/ vinyl, PVC pipe, string/ November 2003
Figure 5.2: Vulcan/ PVC pipe/ January 2004
Figure 5.3: Low Pressure System/foam tubes, rubber bands, wood, paper, vinyl stickers/
March 2004
Figure 5.4: Activity Station/ hula hoops/ April 2004
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This work revolves around energy as an issue. The issue has been defined in the sculpture by addressing: the armature, the surface, the way the objects are made, and the materials used.

A few of the avenues in which I approached the subject are: activating the armature with weight, creating patterns, pressure, and heat.

The sculptures made when working with a specific issue many times result in a representational object (Deflated Figure, The Rocking Horse, Folding Chair, Three-Key Piano, Steam Locomotive-Half Scale). I think the representational object allows focus on the issue. I can focus on how I want the object to stand, the gesture, the color, etc. A representational form helps dictate many of these variables.

Certain qualities between emotion and physical energy are important on various levels, through myself and in the object. The root of a physical energy in an object is in the structure or armature. This is what gives an object the strength to hold anything. I decided to focus on an activity in the armature itself by using strips of bent wood. The activity in
the surface or covering of the armature has been displayed with fabric, and heated plastic.