Tending the Broken Window

Thesis

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Abstract

Through the works Meeting and Salt Box House, and this subsequent thesis writing, I look at what drives my art making and draw links between those interests, my background as a glazier, my rural upbringing, and material properties tied to specific memories.

Before coming to Ohio State University, I spent seven formative years at an Illinois architectural glass firm, making and restoring stained glass windows for sacred spaces. Though I developed a deep respect for the medium and the processes involved in the production, I began to question the relationships between the uses of symbolism, representation. I became aware of the liminal space between the intent of the maker or restorer, and the authorship inherent in the materials. I began to wonder about the roles that time, proximity, perspective, memory, and chance have in the interpretation and understanding of personal and collective experience.
Acknowledgments

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Dedication

To my grandparents, your touch is still felt. To Jeanne Kasper, you are the love of my life and my greatest support.
Vita

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Fields of Study

Major Field:  Art
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INTRODUCTION

Figure 1: East Facing Diamond Lite Window, Scottish Rite Cathedral, Indianapolis, 2012
While on tour at the Indianapolis Scottish Rite Cathedral in 2012, I encountered a set of windows that redirected my thinking about the nature of materiality and my relationship with materials and objects as a maker. These diamond lite windows, in comparison to other windows and features in the building, where rather modest aside from the seemingly random bits of colored glass included in the regimented composition. Examples of diamond lite windows can be seen all over the world, found in architecture throughout antiquity and contemporary times. They are an efficient use of glass and a continually excepted architectural aesthetic for many building projects including homes, public buildings, and sacred spaces. The set at the Scottish Rite date from the 1920’s, produced by the VonGreichten Art Glass Company in Columbus, Ohio. At this particular setting, they are juxtaposed with stained glass windows that function as many stained-glass windows function; not only as light sources, but as opportunities of illuminated illustration. Stained-glass has been used for centuries to depict scenes pertinent to the function of the building. For example, Christian churches often have windows that depict scenes from the Bible. In this setting, at the Scottish Rite, the stained-glass windows included a variety of representations from the accomplishments of human kind in the arts and industry, to depiction of hope as a robed female figure. The diamond lite windows seemed to sit in this environment as a banal necessity, offering light in an otherwise dark hallway. While seeing many of the other materials of this building serving multiple functions, as operational support and as beautification or depiction, it seemed that the choice of the diamond lites was perhaps dictated more by budget than the passion that was expressed in the rest of the building.
Yet, the docent deemed it necessary to stop and describe how these windows had more to them than the simply letting light and air into the building. He described how these windows, though humble in design, hold information that is integral to the building and its history. They act as a record of the presence of time and activity, of chance, of upkeep and care. He explained that every time one of the windows needed repair, say a branch from one of the nearby trees was to fall against the exterior of the building and crack one of the pieces of glass, the glass wasn’t merely switched out for a new piece (which would be easily done and mask all traces of the event), it was replaced with a remnant of the original diamond and a piece of colored glass to make it known that there had been a repair.

At this point in time I had been working as a stained-glass artisan for five years. I had learned the various techniques that go into the construction of new windows and the restoration of old ones. Much of this knowledge was procured through what may be most closely described as an apprenticeship. I would mainly watch the skilled methods of those I worked with, and the studio owner, and then I would try those methods. In this way, I was also trained to paint on glass, generally for the purposes of creating historically accurate reproduction paintings. Most of the commissions taken on at the studio were part of building restoration projects. We prided ourselves on being able to take a set of windows from a building and return them to their former glory, as close to their original state as possible. This was our philosophy, to renew. We wanted to remove the traces of time and decay from the objects we worked with. The clients we worked for wanted this revival in the materials of their environment to translate into a revival in the minds and
hearts of their patrons. This often meant that we were not just renewing the materials, but that we were extensively replacing materials as well. They wanted, we wanted, history as it was. We wanted an idealized version of the institution’s material history, not history as it happened.

The allowance and grace that I witnessed in the diamond lite windows at the Scottish Rite flipped this mentality. It made me think of Wabi Sabi, the Japanese philosophy on impermanence. It made me think of scars. It made me think, not of using glass and metal to depict or illustrate a distant story, but of using materials in ways that demonstrate reality and the experience of time, entropy and chance, memory and being. Yes, this was a window one could view through, but it also served as a window to look at. To look at the very matter that composed it, the acts that assembled it, and in this way, these were windows to see one’s self in relation to them, to the building, the windows to each other, to time, and to a touch of the sublime. Unlike many stained-glass scenes, it wasn’t the window of the framed pictorialized space, a window of represented acts in another time or reality whose repercussions are inherited or assumed, these windows offered a view onto the qualities and circumstances of physical existence and the repercussions of care. I thought these things as I continued on with the tour.

My exchange with the set of windows that day in Indianapolis was a catalyzing event. I’d like to take this experience and use it as a way of looking at the approaches, thinking, and decision making that I have made in several recent projects. There are a number of aspects I have examined including qualities of transparency, line, trace, figure ground relationships, and more conceptual qualities of memory, chance, beauty, and
truth. For the following collection of writings, I will focus on several themes and apply a particular approach to each theme. The first is rumination on gestalt, through a list of subjective and objective observations concerning my work *Salt Box House*. Second is an exploration into the qualities of reflection both as a physical and phenomenological quality, but also as a hermeneutical method by which one may interact with an object. Third, I pay homage to the role proximity has in perception and knowing what we see as well as the role proximity takes in the making a work. Last, I examine how I have increasingly allowed, and paid attention to, chance and the agency inherent in the materials I work with.
CHAPTER 1: LIST WHAT YOU THINK IT IS

Figure 2: Composite of Image of Salt Box House, 2017
This is a house, that is sectioned, with a scaffold, supported by its divisions.

This is a display, an array.

This is a display of movement and time, of gravity.

This is your timeline.

This is the timeline of metal. The timeline of glass, silicon, salt, air, water, evaporation, dispersion. The timeline of moving towards, past, and away from a thing. The slow dissipation of a taste on the lips.

This is knowing and celebrating change. Knowing a thing as it is, seeing yourself in the work, seeing love in the work. Knowing a thing as it was. Celebrating chance and change.

This is a monument, a cenotaph for its self. A cenotaph for the hog house, the corn crib, the “vernacular”.

This is a bloom of white clouds, or, snow covered trees. It’s knowing that they are both and neither. Know that they are both and nether.

This is approaching the horizon. Always approaching the horizon, as if walking the fields after harvest and seeing it the distance with the hedgerow. The close horizon of being in the valley, where they piled the old lumber and the worn out car. Or, any number of horizons in white and water. Frozen. Snow covered. The ocean dried up, leaving its deposit in spectacle and sparkle.

This is a bloom of white clouds of snow-covered trees. Knowing a thing, and still seeing in it Grandma and Grandpa. Seeing the self.
This is a home, sectioned, scaffolded, supported by its divisions.
This is a display, this is an array.
This is a display of movement and time.
This is your timeline.
This is the timeline of metal, salt, of water.
This is the timeline of glass, silicon, iron, water, air, evaporation, and dispersal.
This is the timeline of moving towards, past, and away from something.
This is acknowledging and celebrating change.
This is knowing a thing as it is.
This is a metaphor, a symbolic gesture.
This is seeing yourself in the world.
This is knowing a thing as it was; this is celebrating change.
This is a monument.
This is a cenotaph. This is a cenotaph for itself, but also the house, the corner, the vernacular.
This is a bloom of white clouds, or, really it's the snow-covered trees.
This is knowing they are both and neither.
This is they are here and not here.
This is approach the horizon, each horizon. Always approaching the horizon as if walking the fields after harvest and seeing it in the distance, up the hedgerow.
This is the close horizon of being in the valley, where they piled the old lumber and the rusted, worn-out car.
This is where they set up the deer lick.
This is any number of horizons in white and water.
This is frozen, snow-covered or dried up salt encrusted.
This is the dried up ocean that left deposits in spectacular sparkle.
The ocean that leaked out of the skin and shimmered in the sun, and soaked into the cloth shirt that was taken off and hung on the fence.
This is a bloom of white clouds, or, snow-covered trees.
This is knowing the thing, and still seeing in it, grandma and grandpa, and seeing myself.
CHAPTER 2: LOOKING AT, SEEING THROUGH, SEEING IN

Figure 4: Installation View of Meeting, 2017
Creating works that use physical reflection, as part of the composition both conceptually and materially has been an ongoing fascination of mine. On one hand, you are following, and can point to, many historical contexts from Venetian glass making and renaissance painting and understanding of space, to minimalism and the role of the viewer, to current theory on the screen and platforms like Facebook’s reliance on the compulsion of reflecting oneself through social media. We can think of various psychoanalytical investigations into the relation we have with mirrors and the role the reflective surface may have in our early development, and how this may differ from generations of humanity that may not have had reliable reflective surfaces. I also think of Buddhist teaching and philosophical inquiry into the nature of the self, and the nature of the reflected self. This leads me to notions of material relation and the ways in which we self-reflect with material, and not just materials that show our direct reflection. I think that some of these relationships and what we see in the mirror can be rather deceiving, yet at other times can be positively revealing.

One of my most vivid memories pertaining to reflection is of the medicine cabinet in the bathroom of my childhood home. I was probably three or four years old. It was the style of cabinet that had a mirrored front that was split into three sections. These three sections opened independently. The left section hinged open to the left. The middle hinged open to the left and the right section hinged open to the right. I don’t remember exactly why I did, whether it was to get something out from both sides, or whether I was simply playing, but I opened the left and right sides simultaneously which left their mirrors facing each other. What I do remember was being captivated by the results. From
the confines of the small bathroom, there was revealed an infinite tunnel. When I leaned in between the opposing mirrors, and peered into either mirror, a hallway or colonnade seemingly appeared and receded into infinity. Finding the right angle, the right vantage point, to view the endless regress was a bit tricky. I’d climb up on the counter to better position myself, and I’d have to contort my body in specific ways to try and get my own reflection out of the way of seeing into the tunnel. I would just stare into the abyss. I would look at how the repeating reflections of myself, (my face and the back of my head), would increasingly become smaller as the chain of reflections slipped into the fog of mirrored infinity, the mise en abyme. I would revisit that space between the mirrors, and I still do.

Standing in front of Meeting, I experienced a compiling, or culmination of a multiplicity of the aforementioned perceptions with other awareness. At about ten feet from the artwork, I had an encounter that started by not looking at the work at all. I looked at the floor in front of it. The gallery lighting reflected off the mirrored tiles that compose the piece’s front facing surfaces, and gleamed like water on the gallery floor. There is a marked disturbance in the reflection that brings the eye up to inquire why the light is modulated in such a way. While observing the material qualities of the three panels, instances of drawing and marking reveal a making process. The hand in my making emerges. My eyes then quickly focus past these details onto the quality of reflection and what is being reflected. What I find reflected is a distorted version of myself that is relatively dark and back lit by the surrounding environment. I know it’s my reflection, because it moves when I move. Yet, the properties of the mirror, and the ways
in which it behaves in the light, prevent the reflection from being my first or lasting cognitive entry into the work. Nevertheless, I am aware that I am looking at myself looking at the work. Herein lies another kind of mise en abyme. With an understanding of our multivalent and personal reactions with objects, or the materials of space (ie: building materials), one can recognize the ways in which one relates to and interact with the material world as a mirror with which there is an attempt to orient and find meaning. An encounter with a material, be it an artwork or the staircase into a house, requires an interpretation that includes and a kind of mirroring or self-reflection. With an artwork, we bring our own history, material knowledge, and story to viewing. It is arguably necessary in the contemporary context, that we situate ourselves in and with the work. The work serves as a mirror for us to see our own reaction. Even in the commonplace, the staircase, I reflect on it so far as to know its purpose, and perhaps know its state of disrepair or upkeep giving me a sense of its ability to hold me up and not cause me personal harm. I may also judge the owner of the staircase in a similar way I judge the state of his/her property. These judgments are informed by my own biases, being expressed by my reflections on the staircase.

Thus, while standing in front of Meeting, is one not thrust into the mise en abyme? Isn’t the viewer standing between the literal mirror of material phenomenon and the mirror of personal and cultural reflection encouraged by the work of art? What happens, then, when you catch your own gaze?

When I am the child, sitting on the bathroom sink, I catch the gaze of my reflection. I focus on one of my reflections down the line in that series of reflections
looking back at me, lock eyes with it, and hold that gaze. If I hold the gaze long enough, something appears to slowly shift, and my reflection begins to feel peculiar or uncanny. Like the reflection is of me, but somehow not me.

Perhaps I was slipping into the abyss of physical and psychic mirroring. It is strange, but also sublime. There is a noticeable shift in my ability to orient.

A similar occurrence happens to me when I spend time in front of Meeting. I see myself standing in front of myself, looking at me looking. In chorus with the lighting and the ways in which the mirror distorts reflection, there is also a silhouetting of the body standing, and it becomes easy to imagine the figure as facing away as well as in. It can, with a slight adjustment of one’s focus, seem like your reflection has turned away to look not back at you, but out into the reflected world with you. Much like a Rückenfigur, the figure viewed from behind, the reflected body connects to the other surface qualities of the artwork to become the foreground in a pictorial space and illustrates a moment of contemplation on what lays beyond in the background.
Figure 5: Detail Image of Salt Box House, 2017
Traveling West on Countyline Road just east of Mt. Carroll, Illinois, my family and I came across the beast. At a distance, it looked like a lion. The row of trees in the front yard at my grandparent’s farm combined to form body, mane and facial profile of the Saharan archetype. It was a mythic beast, large and green, looming over the fields, transplanted from its home on the savannah. In the winter, the trees were bare, and it was more difficult to make out the feline shape. When the large oaks became covered with snow, though, I could once again see the apparition. In winter the vision was more fleeting. Regardless of the season, as we approached and got within about 100 yards of the driveway to the farmhouse, which the oaks lined, the lion began to twist and shift, blending back into trees. After coming down the driveway, under and past the trees, instead of standing at the leg and foot of some 50-foot cat, when we parked and got out of the car I was standing next to trunk of a tree.

Within view from the farm where my mother and aunt grew up was another optical anomaly that laid on a distant horizon. From a ways off, it looked like something breaking out of the ground. It looked like some tectonic shift that had thrust shards of dark earth, dark crystals, out of the ground. Based on nearby trees you could estimate its size to be that of a house or large outbuilding. This would make sense as it was in relation to other building that dotted the horizon. Yet, there was something about it that made it look like it may also be the underside of a capsized ship. A ship that had been sailing the tilled ocean of Northwestern Illinois, and in some disaster, ended upside down in the shallow waters. You could get to it by walking straight at it, but this often meant walking through a muddy field. The best way to it was to follow a road that looped from the East
to the North, so that you undertook a gradual spiral towards it. As you walked this road, slowly circling in the direction of the wreckage, the qualities of the scene changed. It was quickly realized that what I was looking at wasn’t something that grew out of the ground, but a pile. As the materials of the entity became clearer, so did its anchoring weight. In fact, rather than growth, there was a weight that seemed to be continually forcing the materials deeper and deeper into the ground. Crystals turned to half-buried, rusting machine parts and fractured wooden building materials. What was left of a roof lay caved, almost like a blanket across an assortment of things that had once been so useful, but now lay seemingly stationary. Or, perhaps, this assortment was not stationary, but existed in a less perceptible engagement with time and movement. It rested with the potential of gravity and decay to be received back into the earth from which it jutted.

As the road led around to what at one time was a driveway, a grassy strip cut through an embankment and ditch, the view shifted yet again. Looking up the driveway was the still standing façade of what this structure used to be. Like so many other gabled buildings that dotted the countryside, perched on hills or tucked in the valley, it seemed that this structure held all the implements of agricultural growth and prosperity. Sure, it was a leaning a bit to the left, and the top seemed to tilt forward as if it was about to tip its hat to you. It seemed as though you could walk right up, unlock the man door and open the main sliding barn door reveling some kind of farm equipment, and get to work. Unless, that is, it fell around you like Buster Keaton’s façade in Steamboat Bill, Jr.
Though it is often distracting, I have the tendency to try and see the work I do as if I’m the viewer, not the maker.

At a distance, *Salt Box House*, a sculpture I composed for the Master of Fine Arts Thesis exhibition, seems to be static. Comprised of shelving, glass, and a white substance that is shaped into the rudimentary form of a gabled structure. Many of the materials are indiscernible at a distance, but perhaps can be assumed. Those assumptions are made. The white is plastic, Styrofoam, or marble. The glass is a window, a container, an aquarium tank, or a vitrine. The shelving rack and the shelves are wood, or metal, or plastic. On approach, the materials and methods through which this work is assembled become clearer. There are metal shelving racks, and indeed, wooden shelves. The shelves are merely supports, and don’t have a full bottom. And the glass is a vessel, a showcase as in a jewelry store. The glass containers hold a white substance and liquid, perhaps water? As for the white stuff, maybe it’s plastic, but still hard to tell. Getting closer, there seem to be deposits of crystalline pebbles, and the growth of white clouds in and on the glass. The distorting effect, like looking through lenses, of various levels of water held in the glass tanks is made evident when moving nearer to the work. Light glares off of the glass and water. Some of these reflections show the spectrum of color in the gallery lighting. The white is Styrofoam, or plastic, or marble in the form of tiles with what seems to be saw marks incised on them.

Standing right in front of the work, it is seen that the tops of the tanks are open. There is space in the frame and shelves to see the glass, water, and white tiles. In each container, a total of 24 containers, there are three chambers. In the front and back
chamber, there is water and the evidence of what has evaporated off in the form of a watermark ringing the interior of the chamber about a half-inch above the surface of the water. In the middle chamber exists water, and the white substance, that seems to be dissolving into the water, and a bloom of white cloud, growing up the walls of the chamber. White fuzz is accumulating on the tile, softening the features of the saw marks. The static sense of this work gives way to an understanding that there is being evidenced a slow, moving process. On the floor of the chamber exist tiny gems, like little crystals sparkling in the light. Walking around to the side, the distortion from the various water levels, and the reflective qualities of the glass and water start to shift, decompose, rearrange and break up the way the structure is seen and perceived. The house is lost and is seen much more as tiles, perilously stacked by their side in each middle chamber, and some tiles have fallen. Continuing around to what, almost by default by my approach is the back, the sculpture’s illustrative property reconstitutes and the gable appears again. The materials are shown again, as the gaze is reoriented to the surfaces comprising the work rather than the dazzling effects of walking past its side.

This effort to be the viewer, an attempt at the objective, is not divorced from my experience of making the work and my knowledge of its composition. Am I able to see the work, and not know one of its most unidentifiable components, the salt? Do I want to try and not know? Am I able to forget the way I cut the salt on a band saw, which dispersed a fine dust that stuck to my skin and was in my nose and mouth?
As I walk away from the sculpture, the gabled form, the house, shed, barn, surrounded by a sort of scaffolding reinforces itself. As the detail of the comprising materials become less defined visually, I do remember how it tasted.

Sean R. Merchant

Salt Box House
steal, wood, window glass, salt, water
2017

I’ve been thinking of salt as a kind of embodied and transferable memory. Excavations of ancient seas, long dried up and now far beneath earth’s surface, warrant salt that we sprinkle on food and that absorbs into our body. Salt we sprinkle on roads. Salt that then dissolves and leaches back into the soil when it’s rained on. I keep these thoughts near notions of home. Notions that home, and our proximity to an orienting center, changes as one disperses – or is dispersed – into life. Or, more specifically, notions and memories of my hometown; a rural place that seems to also be dissolving back into the earth. At times these memories are washed away like the residue left on the skin, or in the mouth, after being in the ocean. It has a taste like perspiration, and it reminds me of the sea within the self.

Figure 7: Image of Wall Text For Salt Box House, 2017
I sometimes think that my work spawns from the proximity between my knowledge of materials, the stories I tell myself, the memories I hold dear, and the work of my hands.

*Salt Box House* started as a vision that popped into my head. Like several of my projects, it centered on the rudimentary shape of a gabled building. This image has taken so many forms over the years and is often manifested through illustrative means. There have been many material interpretations of the house form. I think it comes from my memories of my maternal grandmother’s farm. I believe it is a kind of remembering of the farmhouse, the corncrib, and the various other buildings on the property. I think it comes from the area I grew up in. Not the home or the house I lived in, particularly, but homes that spotted the landscape of Northwestern Illinois. Like many areas in the Midwest, vernacular structures of this type populate the horizon. These are best viewed after harvest, when they are suddenly revealed again from being hidden by the tall waves in a sea of corn. I think this gabled form comes from seeing abandoned houses and barns, in various states of ruin, within view of many of the county roads I traveled on as a child and teenager. I wondered about them, the former inhabitants, and the work that was done there.

This gabled form has become a powerful symbol. It stands for home, or at least it stands for a container, and it is imbued with memory. It is the smell of the corncrib. It is the falling edifice of Steamboat Bill Jr. It is a reaction to the typical. It is repetition. I had this vision. I saw the gabled form in white. I saw it surrounded by scaffolding. Like a great restoration was being done on it. I wanted to build something that fell apart. I
wanted it to also grow. I wanted to illustrate. I also wanted to show the qualities I saw in so many decaying buildings of our agricultural past with their qualities of time, decay, and absorption. I saw so many buildings, with their sense of memory, unknown utility, and assumed stories.

I had a vision. I wanted to make a building form out of salt and have it dissolve in water. The vision came relatively quickly, but it had to be fleshed out through some questions of material and function. It showed that I’d have a system of racks and shelves. Each shelf would hold a container of water, and I’d put blocks of salt in the container with the water. Putting all the containers together would reveal the form of a house. Or, the salt being arranged in this way would look like a house. It would be in the shape of a house. The salt would slowly dissolve over time, and create a salinized solution that should evaporate and leave a salt crust lining the glass containers. It would both illustrate and demonstrate the idea of a symbol of home, agriculture, or domesticity dissolving and reconstituting.

I had this vision, and then I set to work. First I made the decision for metal racks, then glass boxes. I decided on salt and wood shelves. I decided the sculpture would include water, and thus be changing during the exhibition. Some questions remained though, and I set to work on asking these questions and finding results.

How will I construct the glass boxes? After trial and error, I found that constructing the boxes out of one-eighth inch plate glass, and separating the interior of the chamber into three chambers would be the most suitable arrangement. The seams would be held together with silicon.
Could I just purchase Aquariums? No

Will they be watertight? Yes, after constructing multiple prototypes, I found the construction method to be able to withstand the pressures of being filled with water.

How much water should I include? Multiple levels. An optical fragmentation is created when the three separate chambers are filled with various levels of water. The water acts as a lens.

Will they hold full blocks of water softener salt? No.

Should I use full blocks of salt? No, it will be cut to fit into the middle chamber of the glass vessel.

How will I cut them? I first attempted to cut the salt blocks with a handsaw. Then I attempted using a hand-held reciprocating saw. I finally decided on using a band saw with a deep-toothed blade. They will be cut into tiles and then staked on end within the middle chamber of the glass box.

How fast will it dissolve? It depends on the relative humidity and temperature of the room in which the materials are housed. It seems to start quickly. If the salt is placed in a solution of pure water, it rapidly dissolves. If it is placed in a solution of already salinized water, it partially dissolves, but finds a stasis within four to eight hours. A salt creep then starts to grow off of the surface of the salinized solution and crawls up the glass and salt block. It looks like white fuzz on the block and softens the appearance of the cut marks. It looks like a cloud or white trees on the glass.

How heavy will the entire structure be? Roughly 800 pounds.

Should I purchase metal racks? Not from the supply store.
Should I have certain components fabricated? Yes. I’ll have the glass cut to specification to save time. I’ll have the metal racks created to specification.

How will I purchase the materials? This project will be partially funded by a research grant. The rest will be out of pocket.

How should I design the shelves, with what materials? Glass or wood, maybe stone? Wood. They will be fabricated out of pine, which will be stained darkly. They will be open, as to allow visual access to components throughout the sculpture.

Will the structure break and spill everything in a downward crescendo like toppling champagne glasses? It is a potential, but I am engineering it not to.

Why is glass green? It is because of the iron content in the chemical composition of the glass.
CHAPTER 4: CELEBRATING CHANCE

Figure 8: Detail Image, Meeting, 2017
Having worked with stained-glass for some time now, I’ve heard many myths about various aspects of the trade. To pass down knowledge of the craft is part of the tradition. From people sharpening and shaping their brushes by licking them, and thus ingesting harmful toxins from the paints used in glass painting, to methods of designing, I’ve heard quite a few colorful stories. One story that stuck out regarded the origin of silver staining. To begin, silver staining is a method of glass augmentation wherein silver is imbedded into the surface of a piece of glass through heat, generally creating a yellow or amber color where the silver was applied. This is usually done by painting on a solution that includes silver onto the specific areas that you want to turn amber, and then firing it in a kiln to at least 1050 degrees Fahrenheit. This is usually done on clear glass and, as the story goes, is where stained glass gets its name. The silver solution “stains” the clear glass with amber. The method through which this was discovered, according to the oral tradition I was privy to, is basically the story of observing a chance incident and being aware that it was an opportunity and not a fault. The story is set in an early medieval glass shop, where an artisan was working on making clear flat glass. The method through which this clear glass was produced required a moment in which the artisan leaned near the piece of flat glass. As this happened, near the open end of a large kiln for annealing the glass, a silver button from the artisan’s coat fell off and onto the glass. The kiln needed to be shut quickly to preserve the other pieces of glass inside, so the button was left and the kiln was bricked up and left to gradually cool. After the kiln cooled down and opened, it was seen that the silver button melted slightly on the surface of the piece of glass it landed on. When the glass was taken from the kiln, and the
puddled silver button was removed, there remained a small area of yellow glass where the button had been. Voila! Stained-glass.

There are multiple things I question about this account, told to me some 500 years after it supposedly happened. Why was the glassmaker wearing silver buttons, isn’t that a bit ritzy? I am also not sure that the methods of producing flat glass in those days would have someone lean over or near it. None-the-less, I think this anecdote serves as a way to illustrate how chance and materials themselves have an influence in the ways in which material use and aesthetics come to be. The story may also illustrate how artists act as agents of chance, setting up the system in which chance can be a generative tool used in the work done between intent and product. That is, if one can see it as a tool, and can allow it to be a tool.

In my own studio, there have been moments in which the paths of my material curiosity and knowledge, time, and opportunity have crossed to produce a new way of making. In the spirit of silver staining, I developed a way of drawing on and coloring float glass that continues to reveal its applications. I see this process as the convergence of a variety of paths, and they may all include an element of chance and the recognition of benefit in the result.

One of the paths is in the manufacturing technique of float glass. The company, Pilkington, developed a method by which large amounts of extremely flat glass can be created by pouring molten glass onto a float bed of molten tin. This technique is licensed worldwide as the “Pilkington Process”. The glass is more buoyant than tin, and therefore “floats” on top of this tin and self-levels into a perfectly flat sheet. This process was
refined through much trial and error, a dance with the known and the unknown. The process of making float glass produces not only perfectly flat clear glass, but glass that has one side that is coated with an atomically thin layer of tin on the surface in contact with the float bed of tin.

Ordinarily, this thin layer of tin is virtually invisible. Under the right conditions, however, it can be seen. In the light of a shortwave ultra violet lamp, the tin side of float glass will give a dim glow. If float glass is to be silver stained, the tin side will stain darker amber in comparison to the non-tin side. And in the case of my drawing technique, I lay a copper wire down in a kiln and then a piece of float glass is placed over it with the tin side down. After firing the grouping to at least 1100 degrees Fahrenheit, a line of red is produced on the glass where it touches the copper.

Most glass colors are created through the addition of a metal into the glass recipe, and I had known that copper could produce red glass. There is a glass product often referred to in glassblowing as “copper red”, wherein copper is a vital component. Decades after the discovery at Pilkington, I had a student creating masks out of copper that she was trying to kiln slump float glass over. Some of these tests resulted in a slight reddish tint in areas where the glass and copper mask came into contact. At the time, it was a nuisance, but I made a point to remember what had happened. Two years after that, I had a rather great program review, that left me with a great sense of accomplishment as well as a feeling of “what next”. This window of time seemed like the perfect opportunity to get some serious play done. I say “play” here, in the sense of discovery through the convergence of things like material knowledge, curiosity, intent, imagination, time,
allowance, memory, intuition, reason, and desire. Play here also involves an engagement with wonder, a sense of wonder to produce something wonderful.

The chance inherent in the combination of two or more materials, and the subsequent reasoning and control of the results may also be applied to the ways in which a work of art can be interpreted. Certainly, materials may be organized to fashion a work that is intended to elicit a specific reading. Yet, as a viewer approaches a work, is there not an exponential convergence of material, corporal, experiential, and psychological paths that result in a unique and indeterminate reaction? Sure, consensus can be reached, but is consensus permanent? Or, is it momentary, like the ever rolling now, the meeting point between the fluid future and the seemingly concrete, unchanging past? This may be a point where the now is observed as a chance occurrence between entropy and will. Think of how our memories act in this space of flux, and change as the materials associated with them change? It can certainly be said that a thing happened and that there are ramifications of the happening that can be recorded and witnessed, but is what we perceive and know unquestionable?

Perhaps all of this is celebrated through the method of mending that was applied to the windows aforementioned in the introduction to this thesis writing. Maybe this style of mending is recognition that the moment of chance is a glimpse of the sublime from within our shelter of apparent control and mastery of time and space. As I stood in front of that set of windows, I thought about the branch being flung against the window during a storm, cracking the glass.
It made me think of the collapsed barn.
It made me think of my grandparents.

It made me think of a tea bowl with a gold-filled crack.

I thought of the line made by the mending lead, separating clear glass from blue and I thought of a distant horizon line.

I thought of being inside while looking out.

I thought, then, of the continual upkeep of those spaces we create to form an inside. The upkeep that defines, and redefines, the inside against the efforts of the outside elements to break down that very barrier and establish continuity.

I thought that what we see as chance, that flung branch, is the operation of equilibrium.

I thought of intent, and illustration, metaphor and symbol, and thing itself.

I thought about how we come to know the world individually and collectively.

I thought about the ways we care for it and each other, how we try to save what we love from changing, and find love in the ways things change.

Standing in front of the Meeting, I gaze at the red lines that cross in the mirrored surface, copper embedded in the glass with heat, time and gravity. I think about the mirrored surface, silver not embedded to create color, but lying thinly across the back surface of the glass to create reflection. I catch my own gaze, and decide it’s time to walk away. I walk away, and my reflection walks away. We seemingly move in opposite directions into the background, as if we are parting. Though the backgrounds we are walking into are the same sublime mise en abyme. I imagine that we are not walking away, but that we are starting a journey on that infinite procession. I imagine that we are
actually not parting, but that we are circling back towards each other, only to cross paths again, and again, and again.
References


