Art as Illumination

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Karen Frances Trexler

Thesis Advisor

Patricia Nelson
Signed

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

April 2015

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2015
Abstract

Art as Illumination is a series of chandeliers created to exemplify my acquired skills in the process of electroforming and the field of metalsmithing. The content of this series speaks to my opinion of the purpose art serves in the modern world, and how I regard aesthetic and beauty. Art as Illumination is a commentary on change, and the beauty of a fleeting moment.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Professor Patricia Nelson for not only serving as my advisor for my project, but as my artistic mentor for the past three years. I am also thankful to Sue and Stephen Trexler for encouraging me to pursue my own path in life and raising me to appreciate the merits of hard work. Additionally, I would like to thank Alex, Becca, and my metalsmithing family for their endless encouragement and support.
Artist Statement

*Art as Illumination* is about imperfection, the passing of time, and the inevitability of change. This series is inspired by my interest in growth as exhibited by the natural world. I found myself captivated by the beauty that was present in blooms, greenery and other organic elements. I noticed their beauty comes not only from their present state, but also that their beauty is exaggerated by its inevitable demise. The process of change, the eventual decay, and the brevity of the bloom emphasized its present exquisiteness.

This series is my attempt to capture not only the beauty I believe is present in every stage of life, but also the beauty that is present in the process of change. The first chandelier is entirely comprised of floral elements; it is the fullest and brightest of the chandeliers and represents life at the fullest bloom. As the series progresses, less flowers are present, and more thistles and bones become present in the composition. The chandeliers also transition from light to dark in color to visually emphasize the process of decay. While the elements of the chandeliers change, I believe the last is as beautiful as the first.

*Art as Illumination* also serves to speak of the way I regard art. This series was created to reveal a metaphor that I believe is present between art and light. Art has the ability to bring ideas, issues, or personal expressions to light. Light is often associated with good, happiness, and comfort. Those are also attributes I associate with art.
Significance

*Art as Illumination* offers not only personal significance, but significance to the evolution of contemporary art; as it serves as a reflection of my generation and the time in which it was created. Just as artists from past generations and other periods of history created art that acted as visual records of their time, my environment and the time in which I live has influenced my art. *Art as Illumination*, by its nature as a series of art created in a specific frame of time, serves as an expression of my generation.

*Art as Illumination* reflects my personal view of art as an opportunity to communicate in a powerful, visual way. I embrace art as a method of communication; and in my series I attempt to express not only the importance of aesthetic, but of using art as a tool to communicate. The metaphor I allude to in my series emphasizes art as a tool to make statements and to communicate ideas. The importance I place upon art as a method of communication, along with the importance I place upon aesthetic, speaks of the way that art is viewed by my generation.

Additionally, this series sheds light upon the time in which it was made, as my chandeliers are ornamented to allude to the theme of change and transformation. These chandeliers reflect my desire to reject my generation's obsession with the present moment and to seek comfort in the natural world by appreciating and noticing the beauty in change. My generation strikes me as obsessed with the present and fearful of change and the future. The leap in technology that has occurred in cameras and smart phones along with social media has encouraged everybody to capture and document every element of their present lives, obsessing over perfecting their personal portrayal of their present. I hope to rebut this obsession with the present in my series, as it glorifies the change and transformation that is inevitable in all aspects of life. *Art as Illumination* demonstrates the beauty that I believe is present in the natural world and attempts to guide the viewer to appreciate transformation and change.
Influence

My series, *Art as Illumination*, is the culmination of a great number of sources of inspiration for me. My idea for this series grew slowly, and it is difficult to trace its specific beginnings. I have been inspired and influenced by a great number of sources; and while it is difficult to specifically state the origins of this series, there are specific ideas and artistic styles that have influenced me in the way I chose to execute this series.

This series is clearly informed by my interest in nature and the natural process of growth and aging. I found inspiration in looking to the natural world and observing change. I observed that the beauty that is present in blooms, floral and other organic elements comes not only from their present state, but also from the knowledge that their presence is so fleeting. I found their present beauty exaggerated by its inevitable demise, and the process of change and eventual decay just as beautiful as the full bloom. I was interested in capturing not only the beauty of each stage, but also the beauty of the process of change. I wanted to display the beauty that I find present in the nature of change and evolution. I was especially interested in the idea of representing this change and these fleeting stages in a material as concrete as metal. I sought to extol and solidify each stage, glorifying the beauty of not just each stage, but of change as a process as well.

My artistic process was also influenced by ideas and themes from literature. My interest in change and appreciation for growth came from the reading I did for an Honors Humanities class I took with Jason Powell at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. The reading I did for this class was introspective and informed the way I thought and created as an artist. I was especially influenced by themes and ideas from *Demian* by Hermann Hesse and *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl. The ideas I developed from these readings led me to recognize the beauty in change and the passing of time. I found myself recognizing the passing of time and experiences as opportunity for change and the betterment of the self. The cicada became the visual representation for the way that these books influenced me as an artist as I was inspired by its incessant evolution to a better state. The cicada came to represent my desire to control the way that time and experiences shape me as I
began to recognize the passing of time as beautiful, and I believe there is an obvious connection between the content of my show and this idea.

While it was not my intention to emulate or impersonate a specific movement of art, my way of working within this series certainly identifies with the aesthetic tendencies of The Rococo and The Baroque. In this series I am celebrating ornamentation as these objects are not only functional, but also extravagantly embellished. They are ornate and embellished to convey beauty in addition to serving the purpose of a light fixture. Referring to historical art movements, this indulgence in aesthetic and appreciation of beauty is akin to ideas of The Rococo and The Baroque art movements, and it is obvious how my aesthetic has been influenced by these artistic movements.

*Art as Illumination* is the culmination of a great number of influences. Artistic movements have aesthetically informed this series, and the content of *Art as Illumination* has been influenced by ideas from literature and my appreciation for the natural world.
Process/Technique

My process and the techniques I employed to make my series of chandeliers have evolved as a result of experimentation and creating sample pieces in order to become familiar with the process of electroforming. A great deal of experimentation and technical research went into resolving a way to achieve my desired aesthetic while working within the technical limitations of the electroforming process.

My chandeliers are all electroformed. Briefly, the process of electroforming involves the use of electrical current produced and adjusted by a rectifier along with chemical processes to grow copper. Inside an electrolytic acid bath, the piece to be electroformed is attached to the cathode (or the negative current) and will attract positively charged copper particles released from the anodes (which are the copper nuggets that receive a positive current). In short, this positively charged copper will grow on the negatively charged piece. In order for something to be electroformed, it must be prepared for the process. This requires the piece to have lead wires attached to it and for the piece to be painted with electro-conductive paint, or paint that will conduct the negative current, in order for the copper to grow on the non-metallic piece. Knowing the technical requirements of the electroforming process, I sought to resolve executing my desired aesthetic with such technical restrictions.

I have always appreciated the aesthetic of combining multiple objects or elements in a composition and the culmination of multiple units. There is a particular beauty to the way items and aesthetic elements combine and interact, and I appreciate the way an element's beauty can be enhanced or altered by being placed next to another element. This appreciation led me to work in the highly ornamented style I achieved by arranging fabric floral and found objects and wax elements.

My chandeliers began with copper tubing. I chose to work with copper tubing as a base, hoping the copper base would help to conduct the charge and assist in the electroforming process. Also, for the chandeliers that are electrically wired, the tubing would allow for wires to be run through the arms to the lights. I annealed, or softened, the copper tubing in order to make it more flexible before bending it over.
jigs and forms to create my desired structure. The tubes were then soldered together where they met. This bare copper tubing structure was then ready to be embellished. I did so by using wax to attach elements to the copper structure. These elements were fabric floral elements and wax elements that were injected from molds of found objects or elements that I hand carved. I used the wax to join the elements to the structure and other pieces, knowing that additional areas of connection between the elements would assist in the piece being able to be electroformed. Once I arranged the elements and achieved a desired aesthetic, I attached lead wires to the piece to prepare it for the electroforming process.

In order to electroform, the item that is to be electroformed needs to be wired so that a negative charge can be run through the object. There needs to be a sufficient number of lead wires to allow the current to run through the entire piece; lead wires must be placed according to the structure in order to make sure current will flow through the whole piece. In this case, I attached lead wires to each arm and to the center of the piece, knowing that the current would be able to flow from the arms to the center and from the center out to the arms. If pieces were struggling to grow in specific areas, I would remove the piece from the electroforming bath and add additional lead wires to those areas.

Once my piece was wired and fully arranged, I spray-painted the chandeliers. This helped to tack the elements to each other and to the chandelier, again increasing connection points and the ability for electrical current to travel though the piece. This also seals the fabric floral or found organic elements in order to keep them from deteriorating and contaminating the bath during the electroforming process. Then, I painted my pieces with electro-conductive paint. I used Safer Solutions brand electro-conductive paint which I applied using a Critter brand syphon spray gun hooked up to compressed air. Spraying the paint ensured that it was applied to not only the high areas, but also the harder to reach low areas.

Once the electro-conductive paint had dried, I placed the chandelier in the electroforming bath, attached by its lead wires to the cathode. I dialed the rectifier to a setting that was appropriate for the size of the chandelier and allowed it to grow until the elements had grown a substantial enough layer of copper to make
them strong. Once my chandeliers had grown, I removed the lead wires by cutting the attachments off with a cutting disk on a flexible-shaft tool. I then attached the candleholders or arm covers by riveting and soldering them to the end of the arms. The chandeliers were then given a patina in various levels of darkness using liver of sulfur. The three that are electrically wired were then wired using UL approved wiring elements. Finally, a chain was attached to the top to accommodate hanging.
Description of Work

Two of the chandelier that represents the diversity of my series would be the third and the fourth chandeliers. The third chandelier in my series represents the midway of my series. This chandelier was electrically wired, and the arms conclude with bulb covers over candelabra based light bulbs. The arms of this chandelier come from a central cavity where the wires are connected before being run out through the arms to the bulbs. This chandelier was created by bending copper tubing to create the arms that were then imbedded into a wax cavity to create room for the electrical wiring to be concealed in the body of the chandelier. Since this chandelier is the middle chandelier of my series, it is embellished with more bones than the preceding chandeliers. Resulting from the theme of my chandeliers progressing from highly floral to less floral, this chandelier has bones in its composition; however, it is still mostly floral and includes lots of flowers, greenery, and cicadas in addition to the bones that are tucked in the composition. The structure is mostly covered, and this chandelier is very voluminous. This chandelier has a patina that is darker than the preceding chandeliers, and less dark than the following. It is darker in the low areas with a brighter finish on the high areas. This patina is more cool than the others, with more warm patinas than featured in the early chandeliers. It has hints of blue among the blackened and lighter copper elements of the chandelier, making it different from the other chandeliers of the series.

In contrast to the third chandelier in my series, the fourth is not electrically wired. Instead, the arms of the chandelier conclude with candleholders to support and catch the wax drips of a taper candle. Since there is no need for a cavity to contain the wiring in the center of the chandelier, there is no center structure and the fourth chandelier appears to be less voluminous than the third. Additionally, resulting from the theme of my chandeliers progressing from highly floral to less floral and full, the structure of this chandelier is more visible as the surface embellishment is more sparse than the preceding chandeliers. Following the pattern of highly floral to less floral, this chandelier still has some floral elements, but has bones and thistles tucked amongst the flowers. This chandelier also has a darker
patina than the preceding chandeliers, but is lighter than the fifth and final chandelier. This chandelier represents life in a state of decay further along than the preceding chandeliers that have fewer bones and thistles incorporated into their composition. My fourth chandelier was created just as the third, and others, except that four arms constructed of bent copper tubing were soldered onto the central bar of the chandelier instead of being imbedded in a wax form to create a cavity for electrical wiring. Once the structure was soldered and constructed, it was embellished and electroformed just as the third and other chandeliers.
Images of Described Work

Third Chandelier

Fourth Chandelier
Works Cited