Things Forgotten

An honors thesis

By

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May 2004

Graduation Date Spring 2004
Abstract

This body of work examines interactions people have with inanimate objects. The work is an attempt to conjure up memories that are somehow connected to specific objects and help the viewer realize the rich history that can be bestowed upon an object without a conscious realization. This was accomplished by creating ten pieces of work that deal with inanimate objects as the main subject matter. The composition and layout of each piece, sets up a dialog between seemingly random objects, and makes the viewer draw upon previous experience with such items to create a personal narrative for each piece. In an effort to help those who view this body of work relate to my intentions, I have included a detailed explanation of how I approached each piece, and the personal symbolism associated with the objects chosen.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank John Gee for advising me throughout this project and for helping me develop a personal style.

I would also like to thank Kenton Hall and William Zack for challenging me to appreciate and create beautiful and functional object forms.
Artist Statement

My work deals with the interactions we have with inanimate objects. The objects in my drawings, which seem to have no relationship to one another, when taken in context relate in some way to an underlying theme. I arrange the elements in the composition in hopes that the objects begin to interrelate with one another, creating a dialog for the viewer to translate. The translation, however, becomes highly dependent upon how much of one's personal experiences are brought to each piece. Using objects and drawing techniques that have a very nostalgic feel about them, I hope to capture the timeless elegance that each object possesses. These objects, that we take for granted in our daily lives, are each imbued with a life and history of their own. By illuminating the intimate relationships that we create with these objects, I hope to stir memories associated with them that may have long been forgotten.

Making furniture is a way for me to examine the same relationship from an entirely different perspective. The furniture is carefully crafted to last more than a lifetime, and will each eventually have memories and feelings attached to them that span multiple generations. Although I consider these objects art, it is my hope that they will be used on daily basis so that the relationship between user and object can be truly appreciated.
Background

My art has changed significantly since I entered into the art program at Ball State in the Fall of 2001. Growing up I always had a strong interest in drawing. Whether it was coloring with crayons in my coloring books when I was very young, drawing pictures of birds with my grandpa, or giving up Saturday morning cartoons to take art lessons from the neighbor, I was somehow always doing something related to drawing. Until I got to high school I had very little instruction, so much of my learning came from trial and error in my sketchbooks. Art in my high school was a very troubling experience for me. The curriculum was based on learning to be technically proficient at reproducing drawings from photographs and very little time was spent on actually drawing from observation. As the four years progressed, I began to enjoy the assignments less because they were no longer as challenging. Then when my senior year rolled around I felt as though I didn’t want to pursue my art in college. Not wanting to totally disregard my love of drawing I turned to architecture as an alternative, thinking that at least I could make a living pursuing a career in that field. I was admitted into the CAP program at Ball State in the spring of 2000 only to find that architecture took very little actual drawing skill. Frustrated with my lack of interest in the work I was doing I began to sketch in an old sketchbook and
decided that I needed to pursue something other than architecture, but it would take a few years and several major changes to arrive at drawing.

In the fall of 2002 I took an entry level drawing course with John Gee. My honors advisor informed me that he was the toughest professor in the program and that if I wanted to learn as much as possible I should take his course. So, on a Tuesday in late August I petitioned into a drawing class at Ball State and enjoyed it more than I ever imagined possible. I began to blow off all of my other classes in order to work on my drawings and quickly realized that I should switch majors yet again.

This body of work is an amalgamation of everything that I have learned while at Ball State and some of the primary interests that I had growing up. It started with my interest in three dimensional design and fascination with drawing object forms. Rarely was I able to do this in class for an assignment, so it was something that I entertained in my free time in the pages of my sketchbook. It was a challenge to myself to see how much I could simplify an object before it lost its identity.

My interest in design was only amplified when I took two art history courses that dealt with the history of graphic design and the history of three-dimensional design. In both courses I found myself surprisingly drawn to the work done in the late forties and early 50's streamlined modernism. These designs have a wonderful timeless quality in their simple elegance. I began to examine the objects as well as the advertising of the period in an effort to be able to reproduce similar characteristics in my work.
My love of comic books as a child led me to develop a strong line quality that carries through in my work even today. The strong graphic sensibilities with which the books that I read were laid out have also influenced my work. Strong blocks of color or interesting shapes behind an image were always something I admired about the work of comic book artists and I began to employ some of these tricks in my own work.

Another influence on my work was a keen interest in animation both cell and three-dimensional. The ability to make a static image seem as though it is moving has always been fascinating to me. The technical capability it requires intrigues the draftsman in me, while the ability to give life and personality to an object fuels my imagination.

The media used is as varied as the imagery. I enjoy experimenting with new and unconventional media in order to achieve the desired effect. I begin with gestural splash of color to activate the background of the image. I then select colors that either pop off the page or work in tandem with the background to create a layered effect to the images. I work images on top of and back through each other to create a sense of spatial movement within the piece. The format of my pieces take on different orientations depending upon the objects I am portraying and the relationship that I want then to evoke.

The object forms that appear in my work directly relate to people, places or events that have taken place in my personal life. This is a way for me to examine the relationship that I have with objects and the memories I attach to them in order to better understand how others relate to them. It is my hope and
intention that the work that I am doing will eventually push beyond the personal and have a broad based cultural relevance. For now though, the work examines my intimate relationships with family and friends and the way in which my feelings about them have been transferred to inanimate objects.

Many artists have influenced my recent body of work. I admire David Williams’s ability to take existing images out of context and create an entirely new purpose for them. I also admire his strong graphic sensibility when dealing with color. The drawings of Claes Oldenburg have challenged to keep my works gestural and charged with the energy in which they are made, while retaining a skilled calligraphic quality. Jim Dine’s work also had a similar impact upon me, after having the privilege of seeing a large collection of his print on display in the University Gallery. Kiel Johnson’s line work and use of random objects have also played a vital role in the development of this work. It is his philosophy on art making, however, that has helped me to be inspired by the interactions I have with everyday objects. The Eames’ furniture, objects of Isamu Noguchi and Alvar Alto, and any designer with a flair for timeless design no matter the era, have all been a huge inspiration for me to re-examine the wonderful qualities and endless potential these objects possess in both image making and furniture design.
Development of Techniques

The techniques that I used to achieve the effect in this series of work were, for the most part, experiments. When I first began making art I stuck solely to traditional mediums that were readily available. These included graphite, wax crayons, colored pencils, and cake watercolors. With this palette I was able to realistically capture subject matter such as birds, people, and landscapes, with very little effort.

As my artistic career progressed my repertoire of techniques began to grow, though slowly. High school opened up new doors for me through the introduction of Prismacolor pencils. These pencils were soft enough that you could layer colors on top of one another to create rich vibrant colors you could achieve by no other means. This technique, though considered by some to be a new media, was hardly experimental in nature.

In college I mastered the use of the paintbrush for use in tight renderings, which augmented my colored pencil abilities. The drawings I was doing, however, became very static. They lacked the energy and enthusiasm that I had for my work and I began to tire or the meticulous rendering process.

It was at this point that I began, through the constant prodding of Professor Gee, to let my paint drip and my marks become frenetic. It was a very slow progression from one to the other, but one I grew accustomed to. The process in turn changed my ideas about how I approach a piece of work. When I was working solely in colored pencil, I found myself very hesitant to do anything
out of the ordinary for fear of ruining the time I had invested in the project. I saw the work as an artistic vision from which I could not stray without losing the essence of the work.

As I began to let paint run and lines be lines I realized that every canvas was mine to control. I began to feel as though whatever I did made sense in or was justified simply because I had put that particular mark on the paper. I began to approach my work in a very cavalier manner and my confidence in my art making abilities began to grow.

This body of work stemmed from that mentality. I began by using techniques that I was comfortable with such as graphite line drawings rendered in watercolor. After seeing Claes Oldenburg’s drawings though, I was filled with the desire to make my lines more kinetic in nature. In an effort to do so I dug out my lithography crayons and began to make a series of experimental, gestural marks. The effect was nothing short of exhilarating. I had not only captured the essence of the object, but I had also captured the spirit of the process.

Still using this technique I began to experiment with the ways that other mediums would affect the litho crayon. I first tried dripping watercolor into it, which had a very subtle and unsatisfying effect. I then tried using fluid acrylic paint on top of it; however, this did little more than muddy the color of the paint. It was then that I tried clear acrylic medium over the top of my lines and found the effect I was looking for. When applied over the litho crayon, acrylic medium slightly smears the line and picks up the residue in the medium. This creates a very subtle gradation of gray as you move the brush away from the original line.
Working into wet paint was an experiment for me as well. First I tried taking the non-bristle end of a brush and drawing back into the paint. This scratched out a delicate, almost calligraphic linear image. Pleased I then tried using colored pencil which gave the same effect only filling the line with color. At one point though, this technique didn’t work the way that I had planned for it to. In an attempt to remove the paint that I was drawing back into I began to wipe at with a damp paper towel. This, most unexpectedly, created a subtle gradation of color that I have yet been able to reproduce by other means.

The next experiment for me was to load a brush with paint and fling it at the canvas creating a series of small specks of paint. This technique is hardly a new one; however, in my work it was a new development. I found that by doing this at a few different points in the progression of each painting I was able to capture the objects in between layers. This made the space of the painting more interesting and more active. Building upon this, I then took a brush, and before the paint dried, began to spiral the paint out from the original dot. These spirals added texture and an almost playful element to the work “Wound Up and Let Loose.”

The biggest experiment in this body of work however, was in the painting “When No One is Listening.” In this painting I was searching for a way in which to apply a thin layer of spattered paint to the canvas, but found the brush technique unsatisfying. It was then that I noticed the squirtgun that I had bought to draw as an object form, laying on the table next to me. Inspired by the possibility I watered down some acrylic paint and loaded the gun up. When fired
upon the canvas it gave a random dot pattern that, when left vertical for a moment, began to drip. Pleased with the effect I added the squirrtgun to my tool box.

My techniques are slowly becoming experimental, which is a progression that I would like to continue beyond this series of work. This body of work has challenged me to explore the methods and mediums which I use to make art, and taken my work in a positive direction. In the future, given the means, I would like to experiment with the creative presentation of my work and making drawings on three dimensional canvases.
Evaluation of Artwork

*Falling With Your Best Foot Forward*, 2004

Watercolor, fluid acrylic, charcoal, litho crayon, graphite

22" X 30"

This piece is about the relationship between two members of subsequent generations, more specifically fathers and sons. This work stems from my ever-changing relationship with my own father. Everyone tells me that I and my father share many physical similarities, the most prominent being our hands, which are virtually identical. Thus the femur on the right hand side of the piece plays with the idea of inheriting the physical attributes of one's father or mother. It also touches, in a more abstract manner, on the biblical reference of creating one entity from the bone of another. The dominoes make reference to rune stones, cast by fortunetellers to predict the future. On each of the dominoes is a runic letter to further illustrate this connection and to make another. The dominoes that are left standing spell out "son" while the ones that have fallen read "father." This delves into the psychological strain that is put upon an individual when people compare their failures to those of their parents and predict that they will turn out the same way. The moth, however, is the most important symbol in the piece. H.B. Kettlewell cited the particular species of moth *Biston betularia*, commonly known as the peppered moth in an experiment in an attempt to prove Darwin's theory of evolution. The experiment stated that in heavily polluted areas the recessively colored moths became dominant and vice versa. This symbol taken in context is especially important in conjunction with the three
pupas on the left side of the picture. The pupas represent the state of the moth before the color, dominant or recessive, is determined. This abstracts again, the feelings I have about the implied parallelisms between my life and my fathers. It takes into account the inherent similarities between the two of us while acknowledging our yet undetermined differences.

_Drifting away 2004_

Watercolor, spray paint, fluid acrylic, chalk pastel, colored pencil

16” x 30”

This piece is about the passing on of a loved one and all of the emotions involved. The newspaper is the most dominant element in the piece and has multiple meanings on a symbolic level. On a personal level it makes reference to the many Sunday mornings I spent as a child reading the funny papers aloud with my grandpa. He would help me draw the characters when I was younger and the time spent doing this fueled my interest in drawing. On a more universal level, it alludes to an entire discarded paper that inevitably contains multiple obituaries that the reader did not take the time to acknowledge. The open lock embedded in the paper references the freedom from the pains that many individuals endure before they pass away. The bird in the picture, was drawn from memory and in the short time before the paint dried. Though the viewer would never know it, it alludes to the time in my life that I spent bird watching with my grandfather. It also, in its simple elegance, shows the years of practice, as a child, that I put into portraying birds in my work. I chose to give the bird a red
breast, because robins, as my grandfather always said, are the bringers of good news. This may seem out of place when taken in context; however, I think that death for my grandfather came as a welcome relief. The last elements of the drawing are the old instructions for making a paper sailboat. I chose this particular symbol because it can be paralleled to the tradition of many ancient cultures to send their dead out to sea. It ties the image together as a whole because it gives new purpose to the discarded newspaper.

Wound Up and Let Loose 2004

Watercolor, colored pencil, fluid acrylic, china marker, graphite

22” x 30”

This piece of work was the first in the entire series of works and as such it was the one that went through the most changes as it progressed. It was a drawing inspired by the work of Claes Oldenburg whose brilliant line quality I can only hope to one day possess. The drawing started with the plug intended to be a simple homage to my father and the work that he does on naval equipment. After evaluating the piece I felt that the solitude of the plug adequately addressed one aspect of my father’s life, however, it did little justice describe the real man. I then began to add more and more objects and textures to fit my father’s eclectic lifestyle and decorating habits. The small toaster in the lower left of the drawing is a quad slot toaster. I chose this object to represent the idea that society and my father in particular hold to be true that if a little is good, a whole lot more has
got to be even better. My father and I have always had a very awkward relationship because growing up I was closer to my mom and he never seemed interested in the things that I became interested in. We spent time together but it was always doing something that either he or I didn't really want to do. As I grew up it became awkward in a different way because he would tell me things that I didn't care to know when he was on a drinking binge. I used the robot as a symbol to represent the awkwardness between the two individuals because the movements of old robots were portrayed as awkward and almost forced.

Too Many Jacks, and Jill, 2004
Watercolor, fluid acrylic, graphite, enamel
22" x 30"

Jacks are a game that I feel was traditionally a girl's game. When taken in this context they can represent the innocence of childhood. Jacks, however, have a very interesting form that makes them seem dangerous, especially when stepped upon. The ball in this picture is bouncing out towards the viewer, which leads one to believe that the player of the game has lost control over the ball and will therefore lose the game. The ball is symbolic of the loss of the innocence that the game of jacks implies. In the high heel lies the implication of commercialized femininity and sex. Commercial society has warped the ideas of men in such a
Some women become objects. This piece is based upon the many stories that my girlfriend imparts to me about interactions on a daily basis she has with men who treat her as an object of desire rather than a peer or equal. The bird is representative of her desire to be free of the situations in which she finds herself because she is an attractive woman.

*Built to Last* 2004

Watercolor, graphite, colored pencil, fluid acrylic,

24" x 48"

My ideas about building things have drastically changed since I have become interested in furniture design as a profession. They teach in furniture design that when making something out of wood the planned life of an object should be 250 years. It is a hard concept to grasp, especially in today's consumer world that an object can have a quality that lasts for 250 years let alone the physical capabilities to do so. For this reason I chose a toy from my past and that of many others to represent such an idea. Tinkertoys were a toy that was carefully crafted, and intended to be passed on from generation to generation. This presents the viewer with the idea of quality in craftsmanship as it relates to design. Tinkertoys, however, by nature were a toy that developed as a way for children to build something, explore the possibilities of the structure, add to it or take it down and start over once they get bored. When pondered in this context the title takes on a different meaning that addresses the disposable nature the objects we purchase not only because of their quality, but also
because of our constant need to have something new. The structure in the
picture is faded out and almost ephemeral to illustrate something that once was
magnificent, but has since faded away. The bird in the picture is dead and is
being carried by three ants to symbolize the decline of craftsmanship in modern
design.

Lost and Found 2004
Watercolor, fluid acrylic, oil pastel, colored pencil
22" x 30"

Marbles have always been objects of particular interest for me. The
craftsmanship of older handmade marbles along with the magnificent colors used
makes each individual marble a work of art. The miniscule size of them makes
them seem precious in a way that many other toys are not. Both of my
grandfathers collected marbles when they were younger and taught me to play
when I was small. This piece makes a nod at the things that we learn from older
generations. Marbles in this context are used as a metaphor for knowledge and
stories passed from grandfather to grandson. The paratroopers in the
background of this image are a reference to my grandfather being a paratrooper
in WWII, which consequently I didn’t find out until he had passed away.
Unfortunately I would have enjoyed hearing the any stories that he may have had
to tell but they are now lost forever, like the bag of marbles that we played with
when I was little. The empty birdcage deals with the fact that my other
grandfather was never able to go to war and according to my grandmother felt empty for the rest of his life due to this fact.

Sitting Around the Breakfast Table Waiting for the Toast to Pop 2004
Fluid acrylic, litho crayon, graphite
18" x 36"

The toaster in this piece is the prominent element. The toaster is an object that has changed little in design since the 50's. Its use, however, has drastically changed. It used to be used to prepare the toast that would accompany a larger breakfast. Today it is used to prepare all sorts of readymade breakfast foods that can be prepared in the fleeting moments of our fast paced lifestyle. This object has virtually eliminated breakfast as a meal especially in the context of a sit down meal. The yo-yo along the right side of the picture represents a cyclical event such as family problems. The scissors are poised to cut the string and end the cycle but have yet to follow through with the action. These objects taken together in context allude to the family problems I experienced as a child growing up. Meals if eaten together were always done in one of three ways: uncomfortable silence, heated argument, or as quickly as possible so that we didn’t have to be in the uncomfortable situation. I attribute much of our family problems to the fact that we didn’t enjoy spending much time together doing what I thought were things that “normal” families did. The
scissors and yo-yo relationship is representative of my parents unending struggle to stay together when they couldn't stand each other and their apparent inability to make a decision about getting a divorce.

*When No One is Listening* 2004

Fluid acrylic, graphite, colored pencil, litho crayon

22" x 30"

Growing up my mother always had hanging flowerpots in which she grew impatiens or geraniums. I remember many summer days on which I was drafted to help her tend to her flowers instead of being able to do as I pleased. Most days the sound of cicadas could be heard while we worked, which is where I derived the image of the cicada. It is not a far reach to compare that sound to the sound of a phone taken off the hook, which was another noise I heard quite often when my mother didn’t feel like talking to anyone. The phone, however, has more bearing on our relationship today, because I get the busy signal when it is me that she doesn’t want to talk to. The saw makes reference to my woodworking and the issues that my mother has with my choice of profession because her issues with my father, whom I inherited my woodworking ability from. The paper is split to denote the rift in our relationship as well as the almost dual personality that my mother seems to have at times.
Leftovers 2004

Litho crayon, Latex wall paint

30"x 44"

The largest drawing in the series it is a piece about the frustration I feel about making art. For the past semester I have made a valiant effort to balance all aspects of my life including my art, my job, and my family. Unfortunately I am spread very thin and I feel that at times I am unable to do an idea justice because of multiple impending deadlines. I find myself having a plethora of good ideas that never reach fruition either because of time constraints because I am working too much, or because I don't have enough money to afford the cost of materials because I am not working enough. To add to this strain I have split myself between two fields of interest: drawing and furniture design. Normally I would just take more time for school but there is pressure from my family and girlfriend to graduate and get a job, thus again limiting my time for art. I used the refrigerator as a metaphor for the fact that I have to put so many ideas into storage and over time they, much like leftovers, become cold and stale. The gas can plays with idea of the automotive styling of the 1950's refrigerator I chose to depict. Symbolically, however, it represents an accelerant such as the pressure from family and friends to be done and get a job. The tile pattern, because it is void in certain spots, expresses my inability to get certain ideas to come together as quickly as I need them to. The other elements in the picture play with the idea of what happens to ideas when they can't be immediately realized.
This work is also about my artmaking. It deals with the problem one encounters finishing a project up. The top is a self explanatory symbol when taken in this context. When a project begins, I am very excited to get it underway because the idea is still very fresh in my mind. As the project progresses though, minor and sometimes major setbacks begin to take their toll on my enthusiasm. By the time the project is ready to be finished up many of the original ideas have been lost or changed and it becomes a chore to complete. The popsicle, on the other hand, deals with my desire to make projects last as long as possible. It expresses the feeling of loss that I have upon completion of a project that has become very much a part of my everyday routine. It also takes into account the unconscious prolonging of such projects, by comparing it to the slow liquidation of a popsicle in the midday sun. The umbrella and can opener are metaphors for unexpected problems and new ideas that can totally alter the course of the project.
Summary

I was very pleased with the way that the show turned out. Seeing all of the work up on the wall, I was amazed at the amount of work I was able to get done in a semester’s time. I was also pleased to see the progression in my work as the thesis came together. I finally feel as though I have found a drawing style in which I am confident and feel as though I could continue long after this series.

I feel that the full size sheet of watercolor format was a good size to explore this work, however, in the future would like to work larger. I also feel that I could use more inventive forms of presentation, however, due to time and cost restraints I was not able to.

I really enjoyed using fluid acrylics as the vehicle for my ideas. The paint afforded me flexibilities that colored pencil and other dry media would not have let me explore. I think the biggest asset that I have found with using paint is the bright vibrant color you can achieve virtually effortlessly. I am also particularly fond of the acrylics, because the rapid drying time allows me to continuously work on an image while the enthusiasm for an idea is still fresh.

In the future I plan to work on a larger format. I also feel that more time spent contemplating the content of my pieces before execution would help me to find justification for my work beyond my personal life experiences. I feel that by pushing myself beyond self-centered imagery into a more culturally relevant ideas, my work will have much more impact upon the viewer. I also feel that working more animate objects into the pieces will not only help compositionally, but will help give context to the elements as well. I also plan to image back onto
the objects themselves leaving a physical impression upon them as they have left an intangible impression on my mind. I may even take this idea so far as to create furniture, and then work images back on top it when completed.
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Exhibitions
“Joel Bodkin: Furniture and Drawings”
Gordy Fine Art and Framing May 1st-29th
“Things Forgotten”
Ball State University Atrium Gallery April 6th- 13th
“69th Annual Ball State University Student Art Show” March 2004
“68th Annual Ball State University Student Art Show” March 2003
“67th Annual Ball State University Student Art Show” March 2002
Italian experience show August 2003
Ball State Foundations show Fall 2002

Awards
John P. Gee Drawing Award March 2004
Ruth Swain scholarship Fall 2002 & 2003
Frank Miller Lumber Co. Award March 2003
TIS bookstore award March 2002
Gordy’s Art Mart award August 2002
Presidential Scholarship Fall 1999- Spring 2003
Dean’s list Fall 1999- Fall 2004
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