

THESIS

MAKING WITH ATTENTION

Submitted by

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Colorado State University

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY DOUGLAS M. SINK ENTITLED MAKING WITH ATTENTION BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

MAKING WITH ATTENTION

My sculpture examines relationships between human and environment, object and intention. By creating a sense of the art object as a modern artifact, I challenge modes of making and living in contemporary western society through the guise of utilitarian objects. By using materials that have been classified as waste to create sculptural works I bring value to something that had little. I use low-tech and old-world methods to create, allowing myself to experience the true labor inherent in the making of things, while at the same time creating a contemplative sculpture which embodies skillful craft and sensitivity to material.

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By making with humble materials and skillful methods I am able to create sculpture that is serious in its endeavor. Invoking the forms of past technology, this body of work challenges the viewer to examine the way we achieve our means of influence in the world around us. I ask questions about waste and the use of raw materials in a society which very slowly turns toward more sustainable modes of living. Ultimately, through obvious but skillful construction, these pieces highlight the value of unique hand-made objects in a time when mass-production is the norm.

The works in this thesis are intended to suggest their own time and place. While the viewer may recognize an appropriated form or a suggested function, the materials and manner of construction are not frequently used in this time and in this way. I have chosen this as a means of expression because it creates a sculptural object which catches the imagination and attention of the viewer and seeks to be investigated in an intimate manner. Through this experience, I hope the spectator is afforded the opportunity to imagine more sensitivity in their everyday world.

MATERIALS & METHODS

Using materials such as wood, steel, leather, and natural fibers I create the sense that the modest objects that I make do not come from this current age. Very rarely is there evidence of plastics, power tools, or any other means that were not present prior to the industrial revolution. By excluding these references to the way that things are made in contemporary industry, I further separate the viewer from the notion that this is a common item. Iron, a material that requires great energy to apprehend from the planet, is used judiciously. Being an abundant and renewable material, wood is used more liberally.

Frequently the wood that I use is scavenged from waste materials, including shipping palettes, old crates, and discarded housing materials, which are carefully liberated from their initial use and conditioned for my own. The re-use of a discarded material not only counters the wastefulness of our current living system, but allows me to develop a history with a particular piece, and ultimately helps me to be more responsive to the material I manipulate in making. I see in this process a very direct relationship to that of the pre-industrial craftsman. A pre-industrial worker of wood (carpenter, cabinet-maker, etc.) was responsible in many cases for the act of wrestling this wild material from the earth, refining and shaping it for hours, before it could be used to create objects that spoke of the civilization in which he lived. The craftsman created objects of use to his society. I create works that re-imagine those artifacts, wrought from the detritus of the society that is the progeny of the original.

Adding further to the sense of an object out of time and place are the various processes that I use to combine different elements in my constructions. Basic lashing methods allow me to join disparate materials with a sense of care and purpose. With traditional woodworking techniques and archaic blacksmithing technology I leave evidence of my making of the object on the surface.¹ The hand-made nail represents a commitment of time, skill, and resource that is uncommon in contemporary life. The unique object, being so very rare, urges the viewer into a dialogue with the sculpture in which he or she can revel in the apparent care and attention of the making.

Supporting my methods of making is the decision to use found objects and materials for a majority of my forms. I find that a previously used element carries more character and psychological weight than that of a new and pristine object. Using the found steel element with a chain in *Derrick* [Figures 1&2] helped to suggest a possible function for the piece because of the inclusion the chain, a form commonly associated with machinery. The years of mud, rust, and other detritus caked onto the surface gives the piece a sense of history. This decision to use found objects and make sculpture through the method of assemblage can be traced to the works of Pablo Picasso and Julio Gonzales in the 1920s and 1930s. Gonzales and Picasso incorporated found objects in their sculptures, hoping to infuse

¹ Walter Benjamin proposed that the aura, as indicators of the process through which an object is made, is lost to us in an industrialized system. In pre- industry, the aura of an object was a major contributor to its authenticity. By including these references I suggest a hyper-reality that we can neither remember nor look to in our foreseeable future, but encompasses the dream of existing harmoniously with our environment. In this way I call up a false sense of nostalgia within the viewer, asking them to 'remember' a better time even though this time has not existed.

contemporary form with spirit [Figure 3]. David Smith's *Tanktotem* series incorporates semi-recognizable objects in the construction of new sculptural forms [Figure 4]. I use many semi-recognizable forms, whether it be the overall form of a plough in *Plough* [Figure 5], or smaller portions of a greater form as in *Origins* [Figure 6]. This allows me to suggest function and a sense of history, but removes the works from our own time and place.

CONCLUSIONS

Working primarily with hand tools and using techniques that were in widespread use before the industrial revolution allows me an immediacy and closeness to each material I choose. This helps me to come to a deeper understanding of the possibilities of a substance. I am heavily influenced by the works of Martin Puryear. His work focuses on simplicity of form and method, while highlighting simple details that point to the unique nature of art objects [Figure 7]. While Puryear approaches his work primarily from a formalist standpoint, I carefully select the forms that I collect from the world, choosing each for its ability to suggest function, potential motion or fragility. Each piece of wood or steel has its very own characteristics, and I seek to work harmoniously with these characteristics, expending only enough energy to allow the forms to meet, but not so much that it must adhere to every whim of my 'design.'

I suggest a meeting in the middle, forcing myself to deal with the inherent strengths and weaknesses of a raw material. Making sculpture in this manner forces

me to work slower and acknowledge the significance of a made object, to understand the energy that we once expended in order to make utilitarian objects, but are now removed from in our society because our industrial modes of production require consumption rather than conservation.

Frequently my works include a reference to the human 'user.' Either through a suggested handle or apparent reigns, the viewer is invited to imagine a physical interaction with this seemingly utilitarian object. This imagining invites the viewer to consider the role of the human being in the actions which I am suggesting, thinking, "If I pick up these reigns and pull this object, I could dig a furrowed channel into the earth...." These proposed tools often require the human to provide all of the power for the action, forcing the viewer to undergo a sort of voluntary servitude to the tool in order to achieve the expected outcome. 'Plough' asks to be driven but demands that the viewer act as the draft horse [Figure 5]. 'Pound' creates a sense of potential movement and force, but at the cost of back-breaking labor [Figure 8]. In doing this I highlight the amount of actual labor that we no longer undertake, drawing attention to a fundamental shift in the way that we exert our will in this system.

Through carefully considered sculptural objects I suggest a shift in our approach, asking if we can forego some control and comfort in order to live in greater harmony with the other elements of this grand system. Can we as a society cultivate an industrial mindset that is as sensitive to the needs of our ecosystem, or those of a working people, as I have been in the connection of a length of wood to a scrap of steel? By presenting alternative modes of being through objects

reminiscent of the technology we depend upon, I hope to cultivate a dialogue between an observer and the object itself, encouraging an imagination that balances the brutishness of mechanization with the subtlety of nature, the force of our human desires with the receptivity required to thrive within a sustainable system.

FIGURES



Figure 1. *Derrick*, Doug Sink, 2008.



Figure 2. *Derrick* [detail], Doug Sink, 2008.



Figure 3. *Bull's Head*, Pablo Picasso, 1943.



Figure 4. *Tanktotem 1*, David Smith, 1952.



Figure 5. *Plough*, Doug Sink, 2009.



Figure 6. *Origins*, Doug Sink, 2009.



Figure 7. *Untitled*, Martin Puryear, 2000.



Figure 8. *Pound*, Doug Sink, 2010.

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THESIS WORKS

BIRD, 2008, WOOD, STEEL, BRONZE, MIXED MATERIALS



DERRICK, 2008, WOOD, STEEL, MIXED MATERIALS



SPEAR, 2008, WOOD, STEEL, LEAD, MIXED MATERIALS



Hook, 2009, STEEL, LEAD, RUBBER, MIXED MATERIALS



HAPPENSTANCE, 2009, WOOD, STEEL, MIXED MATERIALS



LADLE, 2009, WOOD, STEEL, LEAD



GAUGE, 2009, WOOD, STEEL, MIXED MATERIALS



PLOUGH, 2009, WOOD, STEEL, STONE, LEATHER, MIXED MATERIALS



ORIGINS, 2009, WOOD, STEEL, WOOL, MIXED MATERIALS



CART II, 2010, WOOD, STEEL, MIXED MATERIALS



POUND, 2010, WOOD, STEEL, MIXED MATERIALS

