THE DOMESTICATION OF ORIGIN

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School
of the University of Notre Dame
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

by

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Notre Dame, Indiana

April 2011
This is for Debra, with many thanks

for her patience, sacrifice, and understanding
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge all the Faculty and Staff in the Department of Art, Art History, and Design. They have given me the support needed on this journey. I would also like to thank my advisor, Professor William J. Kremer, without whom this work would not have been possible.

Finally, I would like to thank the University of Notre Dame and its Graduate School, for their tuition waiver and generous stipend, which allowed me to pursue my work.
That spirit bloweth and is still. It will not rise for our whistling or keep a time-table. No wine that we know can give anything more than a fugitive caricature of its ecstasies. When it has blown free, we remember it always and know, without proof, that while the rapture was there, we were not drunk but wise. That for a moment, some intervening darkness had thinned and we were seeing further that we can see now... into the heart of life.¹

Chapter 1:

INTRODUCTION

Human design has made nature more natural than natural: it is now hyper-natural. It is a simulation of a nature that never existed. It’s better than the real thing; hyper-natural nature is always just a little bit prettier, slicker and safer than the old kind. Let’s be honest: it’s actually culture. The more we learn to control trees, animals, atoms and the climate, the more they lose their natural character and enter into the realms of culture.

I believe the way we draw the boundary between nature and culture will change. The domain of origin, of ‘birth’, previously belonged to nature, while culture encompassed the domain of the ‘made’. Thanks to developments in science and technology, this distinction is blurring. Origin is playing a smaller and smaller role in human experience, because everything is a copy of a copy. Insofar as we still wish to make a distinction between nature and culture, we will draw the line between ‘controllable’ and ‘autonomous’. Culture is that which we control. Nature is all those things that have an autonomous quality and fall outside the scope of human power. In this new classification, greenhouse tomatoes belong to the cultural category, whereas computer viruses and the traffic-jams on our roads can be considered as natural phenomena. Why should we call them nature? Isn’t that confusing? We allot them to nature because they function as nature, even though they’re not green.²

What is the relationship between nature and culture? Can there be symbiosis between them? Will they ever exist independently? Is one more authentic than the other? These are the questions that form the margins for my sculptural ceramic work, and they are imbedded in the forms, surfaces, and process. How my work achieves this through use of line and shape, color and texture, method and consideration, will be the focus of this paper.

I began exploring these questions as an undergraduate through investigations in color and surface as nature takes back a used object (Figure 1). Discarded cans, bottles, and stove parts found in the woods take on a new life as they are consumed by weather and time. In this new life, original function and monetary value have no importance. The new value lies in their evocation of the past and the confirmation of the circle of life.

Through my work in graduate school I have come to realize that my role as an artist is to create work that sets up a conversation within a historical context; but my work is not about history. I began mistakenly by exploring issues surrounding alienation from nature experienced by capitalist subjects at the hand of machine labor and commodity. Alienation occurs when “the illusions produced by capitalist making come
to determine the possible range of human thinking.\(^3\) Conversations become more and more about products and programs and less about intrinsic things like experiences and feelings. Though alienation is still a subject of contemporary concern, I only created a few pieces in this vein because it seemed I was reiterating ideas and not forming my own thesis. Moreover, I feel most of us have moved past and now enjoy our separation from nature because frankly... we have forgotten how interact with a nature that is mostly cold, buggy, and unforgiving.

What most of us want (and have acquired) as modern social beings is the technology for an intentionally lived life, close to one another, but without dependence on each other or nature. We have decided to depend on culture, particularly consumer culture. Guy Debord effectively recognized this condition developing in his 1967 collection of theses, *Society of the Spectacle*. He begins the book with thesis #1; “In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation.” In the age of digital technology and the internet, nothing could be closer to the current situation. He goes on to define the spectacle as “…not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.”\(^4\) Those images are mediated by consumer culture that is in turn created by capitalism. Again, this is an issue worthy of investigation but we have been living this design long


enough to say that it has effectively been accepted and thus bears little weight as a contemporary investigation.

My concern is the culturally external, yet still fathomable version of authentic nature is in the process of adaptation from autonomy to dependence as commodity, effectively creating ‘cultural nature’. Without a doubt, this will widen the gap in our cultural understanding and interaction with the natural origins of life. As a rising anxiety for the well-being of the environment spreads, those with a voice are making it heard, however; in consumer culture I believe the only audible voice is advertising.

Commercials by Pepsi promise investment in eco-friendly endeavors. Toyota boasts ‘synergy’ between humanity, nature, and technology. The new iPad asserts it is capable of showing you a night sky just as accurate as the real thing. Sierra Mist shows us trees talking about how natural their soda is. Nature Valley Granola is as ‘authentic’ and ‘pure’ as nature itself. These and many other corporations would like consumers to think only of products when thinking about nature, not of nature itself. Once it is completely displaced in products and culture, nature is bound to suffer a fatal blow that will finally dematerialize it into the same intangible representation Debord spoke of in regard to the experience of life in modern consumer societies.

Enter the new view of nature or ‘Next Nature’\(^5\) and a new set of questions we must ask ourselves. Do we really want to believe in nature as a consumable product?

Do we want to entrust nature to corporations that have little but the ‘bottom line’ in mind? Should the ‘get it done yesterday and as cheaply as possible’ attitude be transferred to something we depend on so deeply? Will we be convinced by a counterfeit version of nature enough to offset the diminishing quality of life, including degradation of knowledge and critical thought Debord says are lost in the disappearance of authenticity? Maybe; this is the conversation I wish to activate through my work. This is my point of departure.

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Chapter 2:
INFLUENCE

Though I do not intend my work to be a personal narrative, a large portion of inspiration for this exploration comes from the personal experience of growing up in the suburbs of Minneapolis, Minnesota and my subsequent abandonment of that system of spectacular living for a period of time. I was brought up in a Minneapolis of urban progressiveness juxtaposed with an outdoorsman conviction of the importance of hunting, fishing, and camping. As early as my teens I felt a need to escape the hustle of the city on a regular basis. Fishing the trout streams of the southern arrowhead, camping trips in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA), and hunting the central farmland provided an escape that refreshed and allowed me to tolerate the suburban life.

By my mid-twenties I found it necessary to move to a more rural setting, and I relocated to the forest just outside the small northern town of Ely, on the edge of the BWCA. There I found that I had nothing to escape, and so I had no reason to continue those programmed outdoorsman activities so necessary to me when living in the city. I stopped fishing and hunting, and because camping was essentially the way I was living, I stopped that recreation as well. I simply lived and breathed, which was really nice... for
a while. It became alarmingly clear I was becoming more and more reclusive, to the point that I barely talked to my family and friends anymore. This was startling to me in light of the fact that family and friends have always been the most important thing in my life. I know now that living in a rural setting outside of Ely allowed me access to a deeper connection with nature, but I allowed it to be at the expense of my social relationships. It seems as if my natural and social relationships are like drinking glasses and I only have enough juice to fill one. Since, I have found a balance and try to keep each about half-full. I think it is a very familiar thing for someone to want to share such an epiphany with the world, but instead of orally, I have chosen to share it visually.

As I look to other artists trying to say similar things visually, I cannot help but linger at the work of ceramic artist, Ron Nagle. His series of ‘snuff bottles’ produced roughly during the middle of the last decade, consist of highly textured, matt surfaces in the lower portions of the bottle that are being engulfed or covered over by the hyper-smooth, bright and seductive hard candy like surfaces that seem to drip from above (figure 2). In an exhibition review of Nagle’s work at The Buddy Holly Center, Peter Briggs states that both Nagle’s color pallet and “…lacquer-slick and stucco-bumpy surfaces all nurture a stream of sensibilities ranging from erotic self-indulgence to the commercially hip.” A curator at The National Gallery of Australia describes the formal qualities of his work as, “drawing visual imagery from the world of hot rods and car

customizing, the styling and packaging of commercial products, and the flat graphics of pulp advertising and comic books.”

Now at the age of 72, Ron Nagle is retired from teaching, but continues to make ceramic objects. They have changed a bit since the ‘snuff bottles’ into something more like sculptural dioramas. In a 2010 exhibition of his work at the James Kelly Contemporary titled “Spit Shine”, Nagle presented stylistically similar work of again highly textured, brightly colored, matt, organic surfaces but this time as backgrounds or scenery with exquisitely smooth and glassy objects or blobs that seem to ooze forth from within the fabric of the clay. The major difference between the two bodies of work is his shift from object forms to pseudo-landscapes with maquette-like qualities (figure 3). His work has heavily influenced my decision making process both formally and conceptually through the juxtaposition of rough organic textures with seductively slick, candy like surface.

Like Nagle, the material that I have chosen to work with is clay. The process that I have chosen is rooted in the ceramic process. For me, this discipline is directly related to the conceptual side of my work through its truth to tradition. It has an authenticity rooted in tradition, the workshop, and the student/ master relationship making it difficult to deviate from based on the length of its history. Consciousness of this ancient

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tradition connects me directly with makers of ceramic forms dating to the beginning of the last ice age, some 37,000 years ago. Some students of clay are still producing versions of the oldest known example of ceramic (fired and vitrified clay) sculpture; The Venus of Dolni Vestonice found in South Moravia of the Czech Republic, dating to 25,000 B.C.E. (figure 4). Others choose to emulate more of a vessel tradition that begins with a ceramic bowl found in a cave near Suzuka, Japan that currently dates to 10,000 B.C.E.  

Both of these methods of forming clay give me a sense of belonging that I cannot find in the other disciplines of object making.

The pieces I make remain formally as objects in a way that relates to the figurative and utilitarian traditions of pottery. My work for this thesis are sculptural and they lack utility, but I have developed them with the mind and training of a potter, of a vessel maker, and so the most recent of my sculptures closely relate visually to ceramic soup tureens of the 18th and 19th centuries (figure 5). Their oblong and undulating forms reveal the sensual qualities that I want my work to emulate as compelling objects.

The typical application of motifs relating to the natural world on a completely cultural object aligns with my visual format and conceptual system in which culture supports the natural world.

In looking to cultural systems that support (or preserve) the natural world, I am drawn to the work of Mark Dion. Though he does not work with clay (or any other

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particular material), the format much of his work takes as scientific collections of nature supports my thesis very well. With titles like “Biocide Cabinet”, “Urban Wildlife Observation Unit”, “Mobile Bio Type-Jungle”, “Hallway of Extinction”, Dion often uses the natural history museum phenomenon for inspiration in order to draw attention to his vision of our compartmentalized view of nature. In a statement written for his 1990 work “Taxonomy of Non-endangered Species” he reminds us that,

> Taxonomy, the classification of the natural world, is a theory of order imposed by man, not an objective reflection of what is present in nature. The categories are actively imposed and contain the assumption, values and assertions of human society.\(^{11}\)

One piece of Dion’s that I am drawn to the most is “Neukom Vivarium” (figure 6). Completed in 2006, this work features an 80 foot greenhouse structure at the Olympic Sculpture Park in Seattle, Washington that houses a naturally downed Hemlock tree, including all the secondary organisms that accompany it. Equipped with complex technologies for keeping the ecological system of decay started in the field, the greenhouse serves as a cultural surrogate for the original resting place of the tree.

When asked what it means to do such a thing in an interview by *art21*, produced by PBS, Dion states,

> I think that one of the important things about this work is that it’s really not an intensely positive, back-to-nature kind of experience. In some ways, this project is an abomination. We’re taking a tree that is an ecosystem—a dead tree, but a living system—and we are re-contextualizing it and taking it to another site. We’re

putting it in a sort of Sleeping Beauty coffin, a greenhouse we’re building around it. And we’re pumping it up with a life support system—an incredibly complex system of air, humidity, water, and soil enhancement—to keep it going. All those things are substituting what nature does—emphasizing how, once that’s gone, it’s incredibly difficult, expensive, and technological to approximate that system—to take this tree and to build the next generation of forests on it. So this piece is in some way perverse. It shows that, despite all of our technology and money, when we destroy a natural system it’s virtually impossible to get it back. In a sense we’re building a failure.\footnote{\textit{Art21. Mark Dion. Interview & Videos.} \textit{pbs.org}. Art21, Inc. 2001–2010. Web. 4 April 2011.}

In a manner much more about installation than mine, Mark Dion explores our cultural associations with nature. With “Neukom Vivarium” in particular, I wonder if the familiar format of a ‘public curiosity’ the tree has taken will overshadow the message of environmental fragility. I want to believe in the power of objects over conceptual art to convey a clearer message.
Chapter 3:  

THE WORK

The sculptures I have chosen to create for this thesis project are based in the tradition of art objects. On at least one level, “Objects are metaphors for people...and it’s [art] about the acceptance of others”. I think this becomes especially true in the consideration of special or elevated objects because generally more time is allowed by viewers for their contemplation. As I find myself pondering the human connection in my work I am reminded of their vitality inside the realm of vessels. Vessels have the ability to contain, both physically, and metaphorically. The metaphor I am aiming at is the cradling of an infant or nesting of life (figure 7-11). My work incorporates both parts of this metaphor; the container and the contained, the nest and the nested. Their dependence on each other is iterated by the shared contours and implies a loss of context in separation.

By placing an organically rendered, sensually shaped, unique ‘idea’ of biological life nested in a bassinet form, I am creating an initial sense of compassion between the work and the viewer. This is then undermined by the raw, roughly textured,

atrophic surfaces of the dependant (figure 12) that seem to liminally rise and fall, reminding the viewer that it is a representation of a portion of un-manipulated nature they are looking at, not a prepared state park version with groomed trails and scenic vistas. These have already fallen victim to the will of consumer culture. I want the viewer to consider the idea of nature that exists outside the cultural constructs they are use to; otherwise I would have cradled the canonical polar bear, dolphin, or photograph of a tropical sunset. It is very important to me that there is an expansion of reverence toward undomesticated nature. In this context, it only works if I create theoretical, unknown versions of feral nature because the plain act of gathering said nature would negate its authenticity and essence.

To help capture that essence of authentic nature, I am also employing specific shapes for the organic forms. I first had to ask myself, ‘what is the essential function of biological life’? Biological life’s primary function is to procreate, and so decidedly my shapes should reflect that. By forming the pieces with loose associations to reproductive organs I create another potential point of entry for the viewer (figure 13). These abstracted corporeal forms bring about sensual qualities that might be lost in their crudeness of surface had the contours not continued in the form of the nest.

By allowing the two forms to have an effect on each other, I am formally transferring the sensuality from the organic to the culturally representative nest. The use of sensuality in consumer culture should not be overlooked and is extremely significant when it comes to my ideas about what these nests represent. Their gentle lines and compound curves coupled with seductively smooth and visually soft surfaces
conjure design elements used in the advertising and entertainment industries. When this is combined with fantastically glossy, shimmering metallic, painted surfaces that resemble the look of rock candy (figure 14), one can hardly look away, unconsciously hypnotized.

The base or nest portion of my work achieves a culturally significant product quality not only from line and surface but also from the manner in which it formally contacts the pedestal. Instead of tucking the form all the way under itself, similar to a cloud or the way a pillow rests on a surface, I have left a ‘bead’ or ‘foot’ for it to rest on (figure 15). Without it, the perceived softness of the form would support ‘dreamy’ qualities instead of enforcing the existential and ‘made’ importance central to their visual context, including their approximation to pottery and soup tureens.

In a slightly less accessible way, the work also presents its conceptual side through references dealing with their process of production. In the practice of ceramics there exists an unwritten ethos of honesty to tradition. As my process is the ceramic process, I am indebted and feel a responsibility to offer something exclusively in the direction of ceramists. These process references double back to the notion of authenticity and function in relation to both organic and cultural components of my sculptures. In many circles, only work created in the rigid format of ceramic craft can be authentically appreciated. This means they are made with an appropriate clay body, use traditional construction methods of hand-building or wheel-throwing in their making, and then become vitrified through an appropriate firing temperature. It seems as the intensity of the process raises, the higher the reverence by the ceramic
community; especially when it comes to firing. Leading the way in this ideology is wood-firing due to the length of its history and level of labor required in comparison to other methods and fuels. It is a multi-stage process requiring numerous hours of work in wood preparation, loading and stoking that yields results that are mostly uncontrollable and variable from one firing to the next. Success is typically measured in how much uniqueness the kiln offers to the work, leaving the efforts of the maker secondary in appreciation. It is this pretence of authenticity and autonomy that I feel works the best with the contextual format of the nested or biological portion of my work.

I construct the hypothetically biological forms by starting with a thick slab of clay that I dust with various refractory materials, melting agents, and colorants. It is almost like applying a glaze one ingredient at a time but in amounts measured by an educated guess. This is the first stage in setting up the notion of autonomy while maintaining authenticity. The slab is then textured and coated with a sodium silicate solution to promote fissures and cracking during the next stage of forming. By reaching under the slab and stretching the clay upwards I can preserve the textured top side and at the same time allow form and surface to develop organically. The rest of the work in color and surface I left up to the Notre Dame wood-kiln out at Professor Kremer’s studio. They were loaded in a relatively ash protected location in the kiln in an effort to maintain something of a dry surface while collecting bits of the random nuances offered by the kiln. A successful seven day firing and the first components are done.

Next was the construction of the nest based on the idea of consumer culture. The process format that says the most about this arena is one that falls outside of
historical tradition and authenticity and in a place dictated by planned obsolescence and cheap production costs. Traditional forming techniques of slab and coil-building were utilized but quickly bastardized by bisque temperatures barely above 1600 degrees on a stoneware clay body meant to vitrify at 2340 degrees Fahrenheit. This leaves the body of the form closer to fired clay than what can be defined as ceramic. It also makes sanding much easier and accepting automotive body filler in preparation for painting (figure 16). Seen as ‘cheating’ by most ceramicists, painting the finished surface to an automotive quality on these nests makes the most sense as a contrast to the traditional surface and process applied to the other. I could have made these nests out of fiberglass or modeling foam, but I am decidedly a ceramic artist. I did not even paint the surfaces myself. I hired a painter for that. Clay is my medium.
Chapter 4:  
CONCLUSION

For generations, western civilization has turned its back on the wellbeing of the natural world in the name of technology and progressive systems of subsistence. Now, with the rising anxiety of dwindling resources and the reality of climate change, there is a resurgence of interest and concern for the environment. Almost everyone has an opinion on what needs to be done to ‘save the planet’ but few have the frame of reference needed for what that means. We use words like authentic, pristine, organic, and pure to describe nature when in reality; real nature bears little resemblance to the way we contemporarily define those terms. Advertising suggests that if we buy products that utilize such terminology, some miraculous result will emerge. It seems as though the only nature destined to survive is that which can be directly absorbed into culture.

Physically, my work presents these ideas through the rendering of organic objects juxtaposed by nests of a culturally significant appearance. An objectness and occasional implied function exists as a commentary on the demands for use and consumption by society and our economic system. Parallel to this are the material references embedded in the work. The organic portion of each work is conventionally
vitrified making it very permanent in existence through a wood-firing process that is extremely violent and unrefined. The nest or tureen components are alternatively fragile bisque fired clay that has been painted, representing conditions of impermanence and economically constructed (yet compelling) commodity. Together they are intended to suggest an interaction; not only with each other but also with the viewer.

As I look at the exhibition of my work in the Snite Museum, I must take a step back to absorb what I have accomplished (figure 17). What I am most intrigued by is the level of originality the objects possess. They are honest, unique inventions that are compelling and meaningful to ceramics and the fine arts.

This work contributes to the dialogue established by a long ceramic tradition as well as by the discourse related to sculpture and visual art. It continues the conversation from both contemporary and historical perspectives while addressing serious social and cultural issues related to humanity’s relationship to nature. One of the joys of visual art today is that it separates itself ideologically from science and religion allowing it the ability to accept the ideas and discussion of a diverse set of constituents. I hope to reach many of them through my work.
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Figure 17  "The Domestication of Origin" (exhibition view), Chad Hartwig, 2011.
SOURCE: Chad Hartwig
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*Tis is Spinal Tap*. Dir. Rob Reiner. Perf. Christopher Guest, Michael McKean, Harry Shearer, Rob Reiner, June Chadwick, Tony Hendra and Bruno Kirby. MGM, 1984. DVD.


