MEDITATION ON ARTISTIC INTENT

A Thesis

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by

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…technology feeds on itself. Technology makes more technology possible, as we can see if we look for a moment at the process of innovation. Technological innovation consists of three stages, linked together in a self-reinforcing cycle. First, there is the creative, feasible idea. Second, its practical application. Third, its diffusion through society. The process is completed, the loop closed, when the diffusion of technology embodying the new idea, in turn, helps generate new creative ideas. (Toffler, 1970, p. 26-27)

Art occupies a unique niche in our society and has, historically, in every human culture across distances and throughout time. Unlike science, art does not have to adhere to a logical progression of thought dealing with only quantifiable information, but often seeks to explore the very contradiction of logic: the insequential, the seemingly impossible. Linear thought and the creation of scientific method as absolute were Western developments that catapulted humans into a cemented view of reality. “…technology includes techniques, as well as the machines that may or may not be necessary to apply them” (Toffler, 1970, p. 25). Early in our species' history, art could be considered the technology that allowed for the conceptualization of an idea into an object or image representative of a desired result or outcome. This ability of the mind, to create objects that symbolically represent an idea, expresses a multidimensional view of reality, which is participatory on multiple levels. The object functions as a point on which to concentrate one’s energies
and thoughts, transitioning the mind from normal states of reality to an altered or heightened state of awareness in which connections could be made to achieve a given result. Song and dance, along with images - both two and three-dimensional - represent some of the earliest innovations of a uniquely human technology, aimed at conjuring this connection to a spiritual realm.

This notion, that certain individuals may have access to an unseen side of reality, has been manifest in every human culture in the roles of various mystics, shamans, holy men, and seers. This way of perceiving the physical world, as only half the picture of reality, is a recurring theme that traces back to our earliest memories as a species. This ability, to access information from outside one’s self, speaks of the interconnected nature of all things and, in our distant past, may have been a common view of reality. In turn, this may have instilled a greater sense of belonging to a larger unified spirit. It has been proven and generally accepted, that strong psychological beliefs can affect ones physical states, giving credibility to the notion that the distinctions and various limitations we have created between our physical and ephemeral nature may be illusory.

As our tools of technology evolved over time into tangible mechanisms with concrete goals, so too was our focus shifted from a symbolic interaction with our surroundings and spirit to a more rational mindset rooted firmly in the physicality of our time. The popularity of technology and the prestige it asserts over those without it, has anesthetized us into an accelerative cycle of

It is my belief that we are a species with amnesia. We cannot fully remember our past, and we are even divided as to how long human culture has existed. We like to think that we are at our most advanced stage, with science and technology at our disposal, potentially able to answer all of our questions about life. However, as we approach the physical limits of technology’s capabilities, we may come full circle back to the industry of the human mind, the power of will, and the intent of consciousness.

The history of clay reaches back into the earliest memories of our species, as a primary material of creation. I intend my artwork to present a critical view on humanity’s use of its gift of creation in our own self-manifested race for progress. They are objects of contemplation, metaphors for the development of our species and the passage of invention through time. Our technological ingenuities have proven our abundance of applied scientific knowledge, while simultaneously exposing our lack of the wisdom of restraint. The tendency of clay to reveal the unplanned, while exposing even the most minute of impressions, reflects the earth’s power to respond with unforeseen consequences to even our most seemingly minor actions and manipulations. We are posed with the question of what we will make our reality into, we find ourselves in a vulnerable point of responsibility, requiring a sense of both hindsight and foresight. Through my aspired process of invention, every
turning point in the creation of a piece reveals a multitude of tangible realities and alludes to the gravity of owning one's own destiny. It is a play between concept and tangibility, the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional, realization and its consequential possibilities or limitations. Each work is an attempt at accessing a mindset beyond uncertainty and doubt, free of all presumptions and expectations, while becoming a conduit for the spirit of creativity and an advocate for a more balanced relationship between the natural world and humankind.

My art is a reflection of my personal experiences, intermingled with my own historical perspective, resulting in works that comment on humanity’s current state of affairs and path for the future. American Identity is infused in these pieces, suggesting a critical view on our social purpose and responsibility. Evident in the artwork is my own subconscious contemporary pop-culture influences from personal experience and exposure as a product of America.

I first began working in clay during my undergraduate years at Bowling Green State University. John Balistreri, the head ceramics professor, was crucial in inspiring me to work with clay and to work large. As a result of
John Balistreri

Figure 1

Neocubic Figure #4
Woodfired Stoneware 77" x 23" x 21"

(from Sandy Carson Gallery showcard 2000)

Figure 2

PLATE 27
Untitled, 1959

(from Slivka & Tsujimoto 1995)
Balistreri’s friendship with Pete Voulkos, Voulkos did multiple workshops at Bowling Green. I had the opportunity to personally witness Voulkos work and later helped fire the pieces he created in the anagama kiln at Bowling Green. These experiences had a powerful impact on my art and philosophy. I began building sculptures in the spirit of Balistreri and Voulkos, creating forms from stacked components.

The act of creating is, in and of itself, essential. There is a mindset I try to attain, in which I feel I can do no wrong. It is not out of arrogance or righteousness, but rather the desire to free my creative expression from the boundaries of doubt, second-guessing and fear. This does not necessarily result in a process or works without mistakes. I do what is required to work off of the mistake and turn it into a moment that challenges me beyond the “mistake” in a quest to bring balance to the piece.

This sculpture made me realize that I should be paying attention to the possibility within an accident that could make a piece work better. I realized that broken forms could be as strong aesthetically as whole ones. Such a possibility could be used before or after the piece was fired; I might come up with a new idea by breaking and reassembling the object. I was surprised that my attitude toward clay had been limited, in a way, and I began to break things on purpose. And that is still with me.

- Jun Kaneko (Peterson, 2001, p. 45)

I see my art-making process as a challenge to myself to do better, to outwit my own doubts and negativity. I approach the process with scientific
and mathematical awareness, giving myself parameters within which to experiment. In other words, I adhere to a basic idea of variables & limitations within the genesis of an idea, allowing flexibility for refinement throughout the process, and actually exaggerating the freedom, exploration and consequences of breaking my own initial guidelines. This is an attribute that distinguishes art-making from the realm of science and math as we more conventionally accept them to be.

I often begin this process through drawing, approaching it as though I am building an actual sculpture. Starting with shapes that stack on each other, a composition is automatically created - often times containing varying degrees of spontaneous tension. Then, I draw smaller shapes connected to the main forms, creating areas of concentrated focus. I enhance these focal points with further detail. It is shading that brings the drawing into the realm between two-dimension and three-dimensional space. By this point, my mindset has shifted from looking at the drawing, into thinking about the concept in reality. I see this process of 2D to 3D as a metaphor for the realization of ideas and their actualization in reality. My artistic process is a learning device allowing my choices to reveal some metaphor that is applicable in another relevant situation. It is a process of realization of the infinite possible paths of an unfolding idea.
Figure 3

_Rocket Boy_, Stoneware, pigment & mixed media, 2005
My input comes from the aesthetics of what I know, and yet we’ll see colors neither [Callas nor I] can understand, really. We’re always looking for those kinds of things. We’ll look at one area of a pot for a long time… and ask ‘How did that get there?’… With all our technical expertise, it transcends technical thinking…. I can tell from reading those line drawings exactly what happened to me that day. They’re a diary, a record of my feelings. But this is different, an all-embracing awareness, which defies any ego trip – that’s the beautiful part of it. The ideal form is no ideal form. The clay and its colors signify an endless potential and flow of information.

-Pete Voulkos (Slivka & Tsujimoto, 1995, p. 121)

In reflecting upon the complexity of the relationship between the material and the ephemeral nature of the human mind, one can begin to see the breakdown of distinctions from that of the body and spirit. This angle of perception has opened doors in my process that allow me to let an idea actually create itself with as little resistance from me and my own so called baggage (products of the generally superficial experience of our world). It is in this manner that I allow my purely subconscious level of reasoning to work its way into physical existence.

The drawing process is crucial. It is my way of entertaining an idea and documenting it without committing it to physical reality. In my drawings, I often achieve things I struggle to achieve in my sculptures, a dynamic that evokes motivation for improvement and the desire of growth through further experimentation. Drawing is a bridge from concept to realized form; evidence of my subconscious inspiration at the moment of its conception and awakening.
It is in such a manner that an infant thought, only recognizable once in
the conscious mind, emerges from somewhere even deeper than the
unconscious, a realm that is the essence of all that is. Information from this
mysterious channel has to pass through a filter, undergo processing and
survive the journey to conscious selection. The artist can act as a conduit,
possessing some access to this, and in fact, often trying to achieve some
refined mastery in the power of harnessing new ideas for creation.

I believe strongly in the power of the spirit, in that which is not physical
in its entirety, but beyond our scientific understanding of identity. In my art I try
to keep in mind that I am a human being, full of flaw and humility, a
representative of earth at a time when humanity has brought about
devastation that affects every corner of the planet. It is important to know just
where we come from and where we are going. I see myself as a conduit, and
my art capable of holding information, inspiration and revelation within its
forms and surfaces. It is my goal to be the kind of artist that can evoke
awareness in the viewer, bringing about realizations, connections and
humbleness.
Vorzon 2000 Ton Upsetter, Salt-fired Stoneware, 2005

Figure 4
Currently, I am working with forms that convey a mechanical presence reminiscent of an age of technological achievement. These pieces are made of clay assembled from a vocabulary of different approaches I have accumulated and refined throughout my experiences working in ceramics. I throw basic volumetric shapes on the wheel—spherical, conical, cylindrical—of various forms and sizes. I use slabs to build boxes—cubes and rectangles. Linear tube components create and enhance negative space. Beginning by building a sturdily built weight-bearing base, I attach thrown components, stacking them in a gradient of visual tension. Forms are attached that cantilever into space in a seemingly unstable manner, which is explored further with the push and pull of more shapes. The completion of the basic form takes up to five different sessions, allowing the clay to stiffen between each session to accept more weight without collapse or compromising the structural integrity. Once built, I shift into a surface treatment stage in which I begin to focus attention on specific points of detail, as with my initial drawing technique. The surface is carved and holes cut to further relate a sense of mechanical logic and an implied function of form.

These finished constructions often take on an illogical appearance as the discord is realized between apparent implied function of symbol and obvious subsequent non-function of the material. This frozen stillness conveys a sense of confusion between the articulated forms and the inherent organic quality of its ingredients, which gives the viewer the monumental
sense that it somehow once was or will be again. These works often have surfaces that allude to age or the wear and tear of use. Depending on the desired effect and circumstances, different firing methods and surface glazes are applied.

The mechanical imagery relates to the current era of humanity in an industrial age while also containing vestiges of antiquated industrial equipment. These sculptures are post-apocalyptic remnants or mythical fossils of a technological era and culture that harbors the potential to be wiped out by natural disaster, or by its own undoing. In this manner, they are symbols of the effect of technology gone awry in the past present and future. Much like a petrified tree, or an ancient trilobite fossil, they are pre-fossils, warnings of an impending doom. In a sense, these are artistic commentaries on the mechanical era of human creation.

Theologically and arguably historically, creation was a gift from God, the ultimate creator. We have hands and minds, along with the desire and ingenuity to make things. Many objects first invented were utilitarian tools, vessels and objects with a reverence for life and a spiritual connection. It could be said that many of these were the first “artworks”, having a spiritual purpose, a ritualistic intention. Objects that allude to the artists’ view of the existence of a mystical unseen side to reality are an example. This mindset is unpopular because it has no basis in a quantifiable reality. In Western thought, this reasoning was dismissed early on for a more scientific logic and
progression, and has only continued to resonate through American history and culture. Our current state of invention or creation, is based primarily on a consumer driven purpose with a focus on disposable, quick-fix products with no spiritual existence, no inherent impression of human involvement in the objects themselves. The sacred has all but been removed from contemporary American existence. Flat-screen TVs, SUVs, and DVDs are some of the signs of a cultural mentality that seeks to deny its own humanity and morality for pleasure and convenience. The consumer culture of today is a culmination of the technological advances serving humanity’s desire to have every convenience satisfied and whim filled – some kind of yearning for “perfection” through tangible means. Technology, the very fuel that feeds humanity’s so-called advances, is my working symbol of the origin for the condition of our time. My work shows a hypothesized artifact from an imagined post-technological point of view. We can continue to create bigger, better, more efficient machines, and still we will lack fundamental fulfillment, as the technological era shifts our attention away from the power of the spirit within.

In creating these pieces, I am trying to push the boundary of what ceramic art is and has been historically while posing my own take on what it can be. Aware of the schism between ceramics as craft and fine art, I try to work with an intensity that treats the clay of the earth as a precious material worthy of being fine art, worthy of statue-esque proportions in idea and form. One of my ultimate goals for my art is to achieve revolutionary building
techniques that have not been previously executed in such a manner. I build allusions of machines with a material that could never function as metal, electricity and gears could; and machines, as we know them, have thus far failed to harness the sort of natural essence and spirit that only clay can.

It could be said that these sculptures are busy and chaotic. It is a matter of subjective perspective – a true statement, but an effective result. There are degrees of chaos that, if pushed more or less, may achieve balance and visual synchronicity. I aim for a level of chaos that invites investigation without being offensively overwhelming, but rather holding the viewer’s curiosity. I use this complexity of form to make the viewer confront the piece while simultaneously being confronted by the object before them.

Another critical inquiry could be directed toward the proportional aspect of some of my finished pieces. I often make works composed of two separate components – a base and a top. A piece that is stacked upon a base can reach eight feet in height. The proportions may seem off and give a distant sense of instability. This is a variable that is a result of both my building and firing process. The wet clay cannot support the weight that may be initially visualized, and the available kiln limits the height of the sculptures. As a result, I enjoy the disproportionate nature of the two pieces and see this discrepancy as a result of my process, one that circumstantially comments on the limits within our own invention.
I take advantage of the processes that I use and try to incorporate the unplanned variables and limitations into the piece while utilizing the possibilities with planned variables. Since the ceramic process is full of different stages, there are multiple chances for these unplanned variables to make their way into the work. For example, I retain marks made from the handling of the clay, alongside more considered areas. This relationship between conscious deliberation and process-oriented circumstance gives the surface and the work a genuine feeling of having an age, so to speak. The implied life of the sculpture is directly connected to the time span that the clay is wet enough to receive impressions. In this small amount of time (up to a month) I consequentially put enough random marks to suggest a far longer life span than if the marks were indeed indicative of a genuine place in time. This can be seen physically through glaze marks, cracks, drawn lines and cuts into the clay body.

Also, in the firing of a piece, I use atmospheric kilns, introducing wood, salt or soda ash to create a natural glaze surface that does not erase the original marks on the piece. The complex chemical reactions that take place in the firing can often enhance the natural clay finish or work against it (by covering the marks of the process) to varying degrees of success. One of my aims has been to create strong enough forms that will resonate with the viewer despite the path the firing takes and the resulting surface.
There are an infinite number of factors that have led up to this body of work. I do not wish to pigeon hole my art as having any one source of inspiration, but rather to see it as a totality of all my relations. I balance my approach to the art process with a reverence and a desecration that expresses the potential dual nature of human creation. I see existence as a shared concept among all life, and as an artist, I see having access to this shared experience as a universal right. I seek to explore the possibilities of imagination, inventing a reality from an assemblage that resonates with the ideas and thoughts that have become important themes throughout my time. In addition, this body of work contains the accumulation of my own specific life experiences and influences. The work reflects a personal entirety that speaks to the human population through historic and contemporary conventions, as well as through my own personal perception and belief system.

In my future work, these forms and themes may not always be visually represented as they are in my current work. The content, however, will continue to be centered around a general concern for humanity and our current path. I will continue to work with clay for its unique capacity and intrinsic quality to speak of humanity and our relation to the earth.

As an artist, a citizen of earth, and a product of all that has preceded my time, I feel it my duty to try to be aware of the dynamics that have and are shaping our reality. In meditating upon the systems of classification that we’ve invented to help us learn about our surroundings, I believe we have ultimately
served to further fragment and sever ourselves from the view of an interdependent, unified life organism. In science and religion there is a hierarchical trend toward categorizing reality at multiple levels of theoretical systems: we assume humankind to be at the apex.

Technology seems to represent a human desire to deny our own mortality and limitations as an organism with both a mysterious beginning and a mysterious, ambiguous end. It is also, perhaps, an effort to elevate those who can afford to possess it to god-like status, capable of feats only previously associated with the myriad of the spiritually miraculous from our collective history. The most technologically advanced societies possess the means for the greatest destruction through military industry and chemical engineering. As if owning this technology is likewise to being a god, we are seduced into believing that humanity is capable of judging who is right and wrong by the mere default of our own invention, and thus justified in exacting vengeance upon those deemed to be of ill will. Technology allows for the authoritarianism to choose who is to live and who should die by human judgment alone. However, unlike our idealized deities, we are all susceptible to the devastating consequences associated with the use of such tools. As countries and organizations scramble to hold some kind of power, the proliferation of destructive weapons has become so widespread that there now exists enough nuclear weapons to destroy the earth many times over. This competitive nature of humanity to fragment ‘us from them’ must change, coinciding with
the re-direction of technological advances, if we expect to maintain our species and the earth on which we live into future generations.
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