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An Uncertain Stability

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An uncertain stability

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

| CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION AND ARTIST STATEMENT | 1 |
| CHAPTER 2. ARTISTIC PROCESS | 3 |
| CHAPTER 3. THESIS EXHIBITION | 6 |
| CHAPTER 4. AESTHETIC INFLUENCES | 10 |
| Choosing Color | 10 |
| The “Marina Aesthetic” | 10 |
| CHAPTER 5. ICONOGRAPHY | 12 |
| CHAPTER 6. ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT | 14 |
| “Primitive” Art and The Origins of Constructed Sculpture | 14 |
| Elementary Art | 17 |
| Kurt Schwitters’ Legacy: The Wrong Material | 18 |
| Al Taylor and Cy Twombly | 20 |
| CHAPTER 7. ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT | 24 |
| Early Influences: Surrealism | 25 |
| First Achievements | 27 |
| Later Influences: Keinholz and Goodine | 28 |
| Work Leading up to the Thesis Exhibit | 29 |
| CHAPTER 8. COMPARISON TO PREVIOUS WORK | 31 |
| CHAPTER 9. CONCLUSION | 33 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 34 |
| APPENDIX OF THESIS SCULPTURES (not pictured in written thesis) | 35 |
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION AND ARTIST STATEMENT

Each of the 16 mixed media sculptures that make up the final thesis exhibition installation combines the natural forms of tree branches with mechanically formed pieces of scrap wood painted with acrylic paint. Some include wire and feathers, as well as synthetic materials, such as Styrofoam and artificial flowers. The sculptures range from roughly 9 inches to 3 feet in height.

Gathering the materials for these sculptures began after having spent several months feeling anxious about the near future. These feelings arose from several concerns: the difficulty of finding a job after graduation, the threat of global warming, and the fact that I was about to turn 40 and had not yet found my “true calling” in life.

I also felt some ambivalence toward my career as an artist and instructor of art. This was in part due to a lack of self-confidence and the uncertainty of whether I considered myself a “serious” artist. I was concerned about my creative output and the nagging sense that I was incapable of making art that had any real meaning. This anxiety and ambivalence left me feeling rather aimless and without creative motivation.

I had also been questioning the need for art in a world on the brink of environmental collapse and would ask myself: “Shouldn’t I be contributing to the more immediate and worthwhile cause of cleaning up our environment by, say, becoming an organic farmer, or a factory worker helping to build wind turbines?” Though I still consider such endeavors important, I am now beginning to understand how equally important the role of culture (including art) is in our society. Art could even be used to educate or motivate the public in regard to our current environmental situation. Although environmentalism was not my primary motive with the thesis sculptures, in making them I acted as environmentally consciously as possible, using only organic and recycled materials and a minimum of acrylic paint.

What each of the sculptures represents is the result of a “collaboration” between me, and the found materials, which became a kind of therapeutic opportunity to work through feelings of anxiety. This method required that I relinquish considerable control over the materials (an anxiety reducer in itself) and become attuned to how they best fit together, or how they were most useful within the overall construction. What I ultimately discovered was a certainty of creative impulses and processes that resides within, even while the outcome of each sculpture was uncertain.

The purpose of this thesis is to explain how these collaborations developed and how they ultimately led to a more focused determination of my life and work. I will examine and discuss artistic processes, aesthetic and artistic influences, previous work, artistic development, and provide some historical context created by other artists’ works as a way of providing a foundation for explaining how
the thesis works came to be. In conclusion, I will discuss what I have learned and the direction of future creative work.
The first step I took in preparation for the thesis sculptures was to start collecting tree branches and twigs around my neighborhood and in nearby parks. Even though they no longer served their original purpose, they had retained their durability as components of much larger structures. Because of this, I recognized their innate potential as creative materials to be integrated into entirely new structures. In addition, I started gathering pieces of discarded scrap wood, Styrofoam, artificial flowers found in fields behind cemeteries, and feathers.

Feeling a lack of purpose and, at times, my own insignificance, I felt a connection to these unwanted, essentially useless materials. Because of this, I felt that together, the materials and I had the capability of creating something of some worth. What I would learn was how to work in a more collaborative way with the materials—not forcing them together in any way—to become meaningful works of art. This also relieved much of the pressure of creating work and therefore felt therapeutic and satisfying.

Once I decided I had gathered enough materials, several days were spent sitting and staring at a small twig, an even smaller piece of Styrofoam, and a short, rectangular block of scrap wood, trying to figure out how they could possibly fit together. I decided to try to “encourage” them by painting the twig. Still I had nothing. I eventually realized that I had been trying too hard to force the materials together into combinations I felt were more artistically expressive or meaningful, overlooking the ways in which they might naturally or willingly fall into place. For example, I noticed that the stick appeared most “comfortable” lying lengthwise on top of the block of wood. I liked this solution because it was simple and because I would not have considered it on my own.

I then needed to figure out what to do with the Styrofoam. I wanted to include Styrofoam because it has become so ubiquitous in our everyday environment, as “natural” to see on the ground as tree branches. I decided to cut out a section of the twig near the center. I took two small bits of wood and butted them up against the sawed ends of the twig, forming a walled gap or pathway between them. These decisions, again, seemed the most logical in terms of the materials but not necessarily what I would have chosen to do next. At that point the piece of Styrofoam, which was already in an elongated triangle shape, found its place as a roof or shelter atop the pathway, forming what suddenly looked like a small, crude dwelling with a passageway through its center (fig. 1). The result was a surprising visual metaphor for finding the simplest way through an obstacle. It also had a three-dimensional structural certainty that I had not known I was capable of creating.
I tried to continue allowing the materials to “have it their way” with only secondary additions made by me. These minor artistic flourishes, consisting mainly of adding acrylic paint, were an attempt at creating some sense of visual unity, contrast, and completion to the work. Kept at a minimum, there was no risk of conveying artistic certainty that neither I, nor the materials possessed; it was also a new way of working that made me feel like a kid again, as though I were creating in a kind of elementary way.

The subsequent sculptures began with a single object, as is the process with most of my work, rather than with a specific idea. This initial element becomes the idea on which I begin to build creatively. It is either chosen based on how I am feeling at that particular moment, or, alternatively, based solely on my being attracted to its form, color, and texture. If chosen emotionally, and, for example, I am feeling happy and focused, I might choose an image or object that conveys clarity or bright colors. If frustrated or anxious, an object might be chosen that is worn, mangled, or gnarled. A second element, which is usually contrasting in terms of texture, subject matter, color, etc. is then added, followed by another, and another until the work feels finished.

Eventually the combined elements will suggest a subtle, slightly ambiguous visual narrative. One of the thesis sculptures, for example (fig. 2), began with a rectangular scrap of bare wood that was slightly worn. The scrap wood looked the way I felt at the time: insignificant, having little to say, and worn down by anxiety and worry. A few gnarled tree branches were then added to the inert wood, providing immediate contrast of texture and form. The branches created a rather crude stand which held aloft the scrap wood about 6” from the floor—“lifting my spirits,” or else providing the minimum stability needed to proceed. This latter notion was likely the reason for attaching a piece of ornamental, painted wood to another tree branch and attaching both to the top of the scrap wood creating an abstract flower form. The sculpture then seemed to convey a desire to grow despite its appearance of awkward uncertainty.
The bare wood, however, needed some ornamentation—it was not my intention to convey a Zen Buddhist concept of nothingness. After staring for some minutes at the small expanse of wood grain, it occurred to me to draw a small, cottage style house with a straw roof directly onto the wood. After this minor addition, I felt the piece was unified; furthermore, a simplistic visual narrative had been created involving themes of growth, establishing roots, and settling down. This outcome was not what I had in mind when the scrap wood was chosen. In the end, the combination of materials surprised me.

Neither the formal or compositional structure nor the resulting visual narrative of this sculpture could have been easily conceived prior to its being created. Its logic was created primarily from its initial and subsequent elements.
CHAPTER 3. THESIS EXHIBITION

Early on, the decision was made to exhibit the sculptures directly on the floor of the gallery; I felt that this would accurately reflect my feelings of ambivalence and insignificance. After arranging them in a grid pattern separate from one another, it was decided that the sculptures needed to interact more as a group and that a few benefitted, because of certain details, from being viewed at or nearer to eye-level. It was primarily for this reason my studio worktable was included as part of the installation, serving as a central motif and unifying the sculptures placed on and around it. A single light source was directed at the center of the table, casting dramatic shadows of both the table and the sculptures (fig. 3). I found the task of arranging them in this way to be quite satisfying because it fulfilled a childhood wish to create and stand within museum displays, which the final arrangement certainly recalls.

The central arrangement was also more successful because it was more inviting to viewers who could easily walk around it and view the sculptures from various angles. Some even ventured in close to the edge of the table and stood among the works.

The sturdy worktable, used as a centerpiece, unintentionally came to represent the certainty of creativity, or a stable place from which it is generated. A chair was also used as a way of making the table seem more inviting, a place to sit and create. In contrast to this, both in color and form, were the wildly varied sculptures surrounding the table that seemed to be curiously drawn to either the table or the light. In this sense the sculptures were reminiscent of both of children and animals, both of which tend to gather around objects of interest, food sources, and shelter, or simply in groups. One sculpture even resembles a crane stretching it’s head upward to see the top of the table, another a pair of water snakes swimming toward it. It was only by grouping them together that they took on these resemblances, and therefore seemed to interact with each other. Their similarity in terms of materials and structure also
brings to mind the phrase “birds of a feather flock together.” The three sculptures that stood on top of the table seemed to stand with the most confidence, perhaps because they were elevated above the others on the floor. Curiously, they are also the least like children or animals but more reminiscent of plant forms. One, described earlier, resembles a flower, another has artificial aquatic plants attached to it, and the third has, hanging within it, a tree root.

The exhibit, perhaps due to the low lighting and the inclusion of domestic objects, had, as mentioned, the kind of stillness one might associate with a museum exhibit. This may have represented the kind of internal calm I feel when I am being creative. The sculptures, on the other hand, seemed to interrupt the stillness with a sense of motion and spontaneity as they both encircled and dominated the table. These may have represented my creative ideas or expressions. The overall scene suggested the idea that when one is calm and focused during the creation of art, then expression and ideas really begin to spring forth, or take flight, as suggested in the painting by the Surrealist Remedios Varo (1908-1963) titled *Creation of the Birds* (fig. 4).

![Figure 4. Remedios Varo, Creation of Birds, oil on canvas, size unknown](image)

In Varo’s painting, a bizarre half bird, half human sits at a table in a quiet, dimly lit room making birds. He/she paints the finished birds using pigments supplied by an equally curious contraption that stands on the floor next to the table. This device, drawing its supply from a tube that extends to an open window, reaches up to pour streams of pigment directly onto a palette. The serenity of the scene and the calmness of the figure supports the notion that when one has placed themselves comfortably within their area of creativity, and found their creative focus, that everything seems to flow smoothly between ones physical environment, through their creative vision, and back out as a work of art.

What is most rewarding about the individual sculptures is that they represent the largest unified body of work I have ever produced. That each seems to exude a sense of humble determination to want to be something of some significance also reflects my own agenda. Similarly, while most are sufficiently stable in terms of structure, the materials and the way in which they are combined makes them seem uncertain in terms of purpose—for example, the way a spindly limb tentatively extends upward from an otherwise stable core. Nevertheless, to have achieved even an uncertain stability is also rewarding.
Other observations that are pleasing to me, are the uses of negative space, contrast of color, texture, and form, and the strong use of line. The negative space of each sculpture is engaging and quite different from the next. This also conveys my ability to disengage from my habitual two-dimensional mindset, and to fully explore the physical and visual potentials of three-dimensional sculpture: how it changes as you circle it, how it extends into the viewer’s space, how scale is utilized, etc. The variety and contrast of surface and texture play a big role, as does the contrast between painted (or varnished) and “naked” wood, and between organic and geometric forms. The use of organic line is strong, namely the way it vitally connects the more geometric forms or stems out from them like stalks or feelers (fig. 5). The application of color, because it is often imperfect or whimsical, conveys a human touch, but because it is also subtle and reserved, one that does not attempt to fully dominate the elements within the work.

Figure 5. Thesis sculptures showing contrasting surfaces and strong use of line.

It is, of course, impossible to say whether the sculptures convey any of the feelings I had experienced prior to or while working on them. I see little anxiety in them, perhaps because the therapeutic method worked. If uncertainty is in some way conveyed, it is likely communicated by the choice of used or useless materials and the placement of the sculptures on the floor, and their fragile physical nature. If I had used traditional materials such as clay, high quality or custom cut wood or paint, they might not have readily suggested this notion.

One of the more intriguing sculptures—perhaps because it is the most figurative, and more interesting in terms of negative space—is built up from a small cone shape, painted white, the base of which rests on the floor (fig. 6). Atop the point of the cone asymmetrically balances a piece of painted scrap wood, also white, and which also balances a long branch, which is painted a dark purple. Attached to the top of the branch, like a flag or a torch, is a bright yellow and orange artificial leaf. If this was all the piece consisted of, it would not be figural at all, but with the addition of a triangular piece of
Styrofoam attached to the top of the scrap wood above the point of the cone, the branch becomes an arm; the cone, a long, floor length skirted body; and the Styrofoam a crude, helmeted head.

Figure 6. The most figurative of the thesis sculptures

Choosing to paint the majority of the figure white was perhaps a way to convey clarity of some kind. The white is also a visually satisfying contrast to the rich purple and bright yellow. This is true also of the forms that make up the sculpture: the visually appealing contrast between geometric and organic forms, and the contrast between the weightiness of the base and the delicate branch and leaf. The negative space created by the structural components of the piece is engaging in that these both alter the space around it and, because of the cone, keep it consistent.

The sculpture was placed within the installation just at the periphery of the large shadow cast by the table, its branch “arm” seeming to reach upward toward the tabletop. The difference between this particular sculpture and the others is that it exudes significantly more confidence, especially because of its upright military stance and because it seems to be, as mentioned, either a flag bearer or one who lights the way for the others. It is interesting, therefore, to me that it was the last sculpture to be made for the exhibition. Perhaps it represents my internal artist: brave, focused, confident, bright, and ready to fight the creative fight. Yet the sculpture is also one of the smallest in terms of mass, which is also one of its appealing visual qualities. Perhaps its size is a reflection of my pacifist nature; the “fight” will be small in scale, consisting of quiet, humble, and resourceful maneuvers.
CHAPTER 4. AESTHETIC INFLUENCES

Choosing Color

Working in an elementary way helped to determine that I should use only primary and secondary colors when applying paint to the sculptures. I was also inspired by the bright clothing worn by participants in the 2004 PBS television series Colonial House, which, incidentally, also pertained to the idea of collaboration (among the colonists) and finding determination to succeed.

The point of the series was to send a group of people “back in time” to a recreated 1628 colonial village in Maine, complete with period attire, tools, houses, laws, etc. The colors the colonists wore included pale and golden yellow, light and dark pine green, sky and navy blue, light purple, and deep red. I was inspired by these colors, which conveyed a sense of bold optimism; they were so vibrant and rich compared to the colonists’ environment and immediate surroundings. Also inspiring was that the colors suggested early colonists’ resourcefulness—colonial-era dyes were derived from organic and not chemical sources, making their clothing environmentally conscious as well.

The “Marina Aesthetic”

The modern day settings of marinas and what I think of as the “marina aesthetic” also influenced the appearance and conceptual nature of both the thesis sculptures and some earlier work. I am generally inspired by the combination of colors, forms, and textures found in marinas, a combination evident in the thesis sculptures (fig. 7). More specifically, I love the flotsam and jetsam floating around the bare, weathered wood of the dock, or the dingy white of the boats’ hulls in contrast to the rich colors topside.

Figure 7. The “marina aesthetic” and its influence found in the thesis sculptures.

I am also interested in how the marina aesthetic is directly influenced by the combination of water (a natural element) and man-made forms such as the boats or the dock, or that it results from a
kind of “co-functioning” of the two. At a marina, the function of water, which is to provide buoyancy, is combined with the function of the dock, boats, life preservers, etc., which is to float upon the water.

With the thesis sculptures, I have replaced the natural element of water with the natural forms of tree branches, which function as a way to elevate or connect mechanically formed materials such as pieces of scrap wood, Styrofoam, and other plastic materials (fig. 8). This co-functioning results in a simultaneously unified, yet slightly unnatural or awkward looking construction (or environment in the case of a marina), suggesting that combining man’s artificial constructs with natures is often, aesthetically speaking, less than ideal, but an aesthetic nonetheless.

Figure 8. The “Marina Aesthetic” in detail of one of the thesis sculptures
CHAPTER 5. ICONOGRAPHY

Tree branches, though traditionally symbolic of nature, growth, and perhaps transience, were not intended to be symbolic within the work. Literally speaking, branches are structural components, which hold up a canopy of leaves providing energy for the tree to grow. This is similar to the wooden structural beams of a house, which holds up the roof. I prefer thinking of tree branches in this way, as it is less philosophical and more concrete. The idea of providing support is also relevant to the thesis sculptures as they each have at least one component used primarily as a support for other elements. Because the formation of a tree branch is the result of it growing toward the sun, this gives some of the sculptures the appearance of reaching or straining, which could convey personal striving or wanting of some kind.

Nevertheless, there are other unavoidable iconographic elements found within the work, for example, the small house forms that sit atop two of the works. Houses are associated with security, comfort, and family. They could likewise be symbolic of “aeries,” or birds’ nests, though the word can refer to a human habitation as well, especially one that is small and high up (fig. 9). Subconsciously, these likely pertain to my desire to be more “settled” in life. That the aeries are crude, not fully realized, and precariously perched suggests that the prospect of owning an actual home of my own is still out of reach or uncertain.

Figure 9. Thesis sculpture with “aerie” house form (shown in detail)

Feathers are used similarly on two of the pieces. Instead of referencing freedom, or taking flight (or fleeing), these feathers are tied down, and placed in such a way that the tip is just touching the floor. In this way they become like sensitive devices used for “feeling” the area around the sculpture, perhaps a metaphor for my own sensitivity or anxiety. Interestingly, this might indicate the transformation of a natural object into a man-made devise. But, because the feather is, essentially, unharmed (only painted
slightly) this suggests the exchange was not one of domination over nature, but of man’s ability to be resourceful in his use of it.

The scrap wood might be symbolic of nature, though slightly altered by man, yet here it is used simply as a contrasting element to the branches and, in many cases, provides a more stable structure for them. In addition, as seen in the example below, the solidity and evenness of the finished wood might be symbolic of stability or of being grounded. It also implies permanence, as opposed to the branches, which might not exist nearly as long. Yet many of the branches are painted and, therefore, also imply preservation of some kind.

The artificial flowers, which are imitations of nature, are perhaps symbolic of my abhorrence for art that seeks to do the same. Flowers can also be symbolic of ceremony and tradition, something perhaps lacking in my life. That flowers are also symbolic of reproduction is interesting, perhaps tying into the theme of home, and settling down.

The tallest sculpture is comprised of a long thin branch, which holds aloft one of the tiny house forms, and, in front of that, a sturdy, thick branch that could be used as a walking stick or staff. Staff’s are traditionally symbolic of a pilgrimage or journey and, in some cultures, used to ward off bad spirits. Perhaps the staff is representative of the journey still to come, and that, with a little endurance and good luck, I will be able to reach some of my future goals.
CHAPTER 6. ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The thesis sculptures are examples of “constructed sculpture,” a term also used to describe the sculpture of Al Taylor and Cy Twombly which were my primary influences for this body of work. They are also evocative of primitivism, which includes folk-art, and the little known Dada based movement called “elementary” art. There are certainly aspects of the thesis sculptures that are informed by other art movements such as Surrealism (discussed in the following chapter), Constructivism, which was influenced by early constructed sculpture, and Minimalism. The following is intended to provide an art historical framework for the creation of the thesis sculptures.

“Primitive” Art and The Origins of Constructed Sculpture

As the term “constructed sculpture” implies, the thesis sculptures create form and void through constructed or arranged materials, unlike traditional sculpture, which uses methods of carving form from solid materials such as wood or stone. The history of constructed sculpture in Western art began in the early 20th century with the experimental assemblage work of George Braque and Pablo Picasso. Primarily wall-mounted sculptural assemblages (fig. 10), these works utilized non-conventional materials such as scrap or crudely cut wood, string, cardboard, even upholstery fringe. In creating sculpture that combined paint and the addition of actual objects and materials, the two artists “closed the breach that separated painting and sculpture, uniting the pictorial realm with the space of the external world.” This would also inform how much modern sculpture was later viewed, “not as a discrete work of art to be isolated on a pedestal, but rather as an object coexisting with the viewer in one unified space.”

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2 Arnason, Prather. History of Modern Art p.198
3 Arnason, Prather. History of Modern Art p.198
Though Picasso and Braque were certainly artistic pioneers, their decision to experiment with raw materials and to work in a loose, bold, clunky, expressive manner was influenced by a much larger trend toward the “primitive” arts that exploded during the first half of the 20th century. At that time, a number of artists had begun appropriating the raw, expressive styles, materials, techniques, and subject matter found in African tribal art and other “exotic” cultures (Native American, Eskimo, Oceanic), as well as prehistoric, folk, and children’s art “in the hope of investing their work with a kind of primal truth and expressive energy.”

More than a mere appreciation or imitation of innocent, naïve, or primal aesthetics, primitivism ultimately served as a catalyst to destroy nearly all the centuries-old creative rules and boundaries that had dictated nearly all aspects of traditional, academic, and established art. Metaphorically speaking, this meant not only wiping the artistic slate clean, but also permission to incorporate the slate as an artistic element in and of itself. If so inclined, the artist could also turn the slate over and draw on the back, attach objects to it, break it apart and reassemble it with glue and string into constructed sculpture.

Put another way, primitivism encouraged modern artists to consider all materials the way a child, a prehistoric man, or African crafts-person or folk artist might consider them; as valuable and completely useful creative materials. This tendency is evident today in the mixed media sculpture of contemporary African American folk artist Bessie Harvey, another influence of mine, who uses tree roots as the impetus for much of her art (fig 11).

![Figure 11. Bessie Harvey, 7 Legs, mixed media, date and dimensions unknown](image)

My view of primitivism distinguishes between tribal art, the art of children, and folk art. Tribal art is not what I would consider “primitive”, since tribal art is often created for complex ceremonial or religious purposes. Its design is often complex and well thought out. The skills needed to make many

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4 Arnason, Prather. *History of Modern Art* p.134
examples of tribal art, as well as their aesthetic appearances, may have been handed down from someone else, which would suggest stylistic influences and training. Most are also laboriously carved.

The art of so-called primitive peoples is not itself ‘primitive,’ i.e. neither technically crude nor aesthetically unsubtle.\(^5\)

Tribal art, although it is placed under the umbrella of primitive art, is primarily everything the thesis sculptures are not. Though I find tribal art to be fascinating, it does not influence my work the way children’s art and some examples of folk art might in that these usually seem more spontaneous and intuitive, but no less expressive or, in some cases, spiritual.

As mentioned, preparing for and creating the thesis sculptures was a therapeutic experience in which I attempted to engage in more elementary or “innocent” forms of expression. I find the ideas of Guillaume Apollinaire, a poet, art critic, and major proponent of primitivism in the early 20th century interesting. Apollinaire was more interested in the “roots of creativity” that informed much primitive art, also recognizing the “cathartic and therapeutic function of art in antique times and primitive societies” which “hailed a return to a state of innocence.”\(^6\)

Influenced by the freedom of technique and subject matter of primitive art and its exploration of the improbable or the illogical, Apollinaire and Dadaist artists such as Paul Joostens (fig. 12), claimed that “no traditional technique was necessary for the creation of works of art” and that “dedicated artists could rely solely on intuition and imagination”\(^7\) as opposed to “old, imitative techniques.”

Figure 12. Paul Joostens, Construction for Dada, 1920, assemblage, 38.5 x 26 x 18 cm

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\(^7\) Katia Samaltanos *Apollinaire* p.108
Elementary Art

Following this idea, the Dadaists, a group whose development was in part a response to the devastating aftermath of WWI, composed, with founding member Hans Arp, a manifesto in 1921 calling for a much needed “elementary art”. The Dadaists hoped that the new art form would “save mankind from the furious folly of these times, reject everything that was copy or description, and allow the elementary and spontaneous to react in full freedom.”

“We proclaim with elementary art [to] bring forth art as something pure, freed from utility and beauty as something elementary in the individual.”

Elementary art was the visualization of pure creativity, nothing more as conveyed in this wood assemblage by Hans Arp (fig. 13). For this reason it was also entirely abstract, avoiding the symbols and representations that could arouse emotions that lead to, among other things, war and destruction. “Against reaction in art!” their manifesto exclaimed. I too tried to avoid emotion and too much overt symbolism in the thesis sculptures. When I began working through occasionally overwhelming feelings of anxiety I gathered the least emotional materials I could find—tree branches, wood scraps, etc.—and made abstract constructions from them. I hoped that by freeing myself conceptually—no longer trying to control the outcome and letting anxious feelings dissolve in the flowing stream of the creative process—that I would be able to tap into that life affirming creative impulse. Perhaps this was also how the elementary artists intended to “save mankind.”

Figure 13. Hans Arp, Relief Dada, mixed media, circa 1917, 37 x 46.5 cm

Similar to the initial object or image that begins much of my work, elementary art relied on the “pure constituent” or “starting element,” be it image, object, word, or otherwise to create a work of art. No idea or sketch was needed, nothing but motivation, materials, and action.

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9 Marc Dachy The Dada Movement, p.166-167
10 Marc Dachy The Dada Movement, p.166-167
[Elementary art] is elementary because it does not philosophize, because it is built up of its own elements alone. These elements could then be “transformed, permuted, or rectified,” enabling the artist to “produce unprecedented structurations.” The following description of elementary art also mentions an “inner logic” that is created by combining elements (or materials) as Al Taylor later recognized in his mixed-media sculptures. It also reflects my desire to allow the creative materials to become parts of altogether new constructions:

The elementary units, deploying a field of dynamic interrelations, develop an inner logic...once they are “manipulated” by the artist, who allows them to act and grow.

Though elementary artists eschewed seriousness and philosophizing in art, they knew that to create art without meaning or subject matter, as well as with unconventional materials, behaviors, or actions, was not to create art void of expression. They believed that the kind of art, which does not forcibly carry meaning, or representation, or that strives to be seen as a thing of beauty or evidence of skill, more often reveals “something elemental” within the artist. Likewise, elementary art required “more knowledge” since material, line, and color were used for their own sake, having no scene, model, pre-determined meaning, or rules to guide them.

Some of the ideas behind elementary art can be seen later in the constructed sculpture of Joan Miró whose influence is discussed in the following chapter. Miró claimed his art to be “totally removed from ideas” and that it only exists in a “human and living way, with nothing literary or intellectual about it.”

Since I had been struggling with the thought that I might be incapable of creating art with any real meaning, the discovery of the ideas behind elementary art were inspiring in that they seemed to allow for, and even encourage art that had no meaning. Furthermore, it suggested that, to make art the way I had created the thesis sculptures was ultimately more expressive of who I was as both an artist and an individual.

Kurt Schwitters’ Legacy: The Wrong Materials

Even today, the materials used in the thesis sculptures, as well as those used by Taylor and Twombly, might not be deemed “quality” or worthy of art making— a perception that Dadaist and elementary art proponent Kurt Schwitters wished to eradicate. This is evident in the following statement by Schwitters, surprisingly, as early as 1922:

The material is unimportant in art. It is enough to give it shape for it to become a work of art.

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11 Marc Dachy The Dada Movement, p. 166-167
12 Marc Dachy The Dada Movement, p. 166-167
13 Rudi Fuchs et. al. Kurt Schwitters, I is Style. (Rotterdam: N A I Publishers, 2000) p.100
And later in 1946:

*Only the wrong material used in the wrong way, will give you the right picture, when you look at it from the right angle. Or the wrong angle.*

The latter is intended to be playfully perplexing, the overall point being that whatever you do artistically, try to do it the “wrong” way. What I have ascertained is that he meant to never create the way you or anyone else would “normally.” If I might also add: this practice can lead to insightful, and, as proven with the thesis sculptures, “unprecedented structurations.”

Schwitters’ artistic philosophy, made evident in much of his collage-assemblage works, has stood the test of time and influenced the constructed sculpture of countless artists, including Joan Miró (fig. 14), Robert Rauschenberg, Eva Hesse, Anselm Kiefer, and of course Taylor and Twombly. Miró, for example, once expressed the idea of “melting down the metal of empty paint tubes and using the resulting shapes as a starting point.”

Figure 14. Joan Miró, *Woman and Bird*, painted bronze, 1967, 200 x 115 x 72 cm

Nor is the “wrong way” of making art limited to what happens in the studio. It can also include how and where the artist finds materials. Schwitters, Miró, and Rauschenberg are all known to have spent considerable time outside the studio scavenging for found materials anywhere from subway station floors to city dumpsters. Miró did his scavenging during leisurely strolls, much like me. A friend of Miró’s recalls scouring the beaches of Catalonia with him:

*Part of the fascination of sculpture for Miró was also his desire to get out of the studio, to take a breath of fresh air and to broaden his outlook... on these daily gatherings I carried the game-bag, always without questioning, for Miró was a hunter of images and objects and sudden discoveries.*

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14 Rudi Fuchs et. al. *Kurt Schwitters, I is Style*. p.100
16 Laura Coyle et. al. *Joan Miró* p.33
There is indication too that Miró was attracted to the “wrong materials,” comparing them to “stains” and “imperfections.”

When sculpting, I start from the objects I collect, just as I make use of stains on paper and imperfections in canvases.\(^\text{17}\)

These artists also shared the ability to see possibilities residing in everyday, non-artistic materials. Miró was compelled by the “treasure lodged in plain things,” and “would immerse himself in the atmosphere created by disparate, plain, ill-matched, purposeless, and entirely valueless objects.”\(^\text{18}\) Robert Rauschenberg discovered a stuffed ram in a junk shop window and knew he had to have it, the result being “Monogram”, one of the most important works of twentieth century art.

Working with found objects allows me to work more spontaneously and intuitively, or, as Schwitters noted, allows for “immediate expression by shortening the path from intuition to visual manifestation of the artwork.”\(^\text{19}\) The results are also often surprising, especially when I have no predetermined meaning or emotion to convey. There is also the challenge of working with materials deemed “wrong” and which have pre-existing forms and appearances. The result is usually rewarding and provides, if only to me, insight into my creative impulses and personal aesthetics.

**Al Taylor and Cy Twombly**

Two contemporary artists whose work greatly influenced the aesthetic quality of the thesis sculptures and who have certainly adhered to Schwitter’s philosophy are the late Al Taylor (1948-1999) and Cy Twombly (b. 1928). Both of these artists have constructed three-dimensional, mixed media sculptures made primarily of found or reclaimed materials, paint, and other media. I found particularly impressive the economy and resourcefulness of their methods and materials and the unabashed lack of superfluity in their work. These were rather unheroic and uncertain works of art, and so I related to them immediately.

For Taylor, like many American artists working in the 1970s, this overall lack of materials and substance was in part due to a critical response to the late 1960s early 1970s American art movement known as Minimalism. In addition to using limited materials, Minimalist artists adhered to the 1960s Formalist concept that art was nothing more than the yellow and blue paint that the artist brushed on a canvas. Minimalist art, however, was typically void of imperfections and expressiveness that could suggest human emotion and imperfection. Taylor, while still embracing a Minimalist aesthetic, wanted to reintroduce the human element. Two ways he did this were to allow for imperfections in his surfaces and

\(^\text{17}\) Laura Coyle et. al. *Joan Miró* p.23  
\(^\text{18}\) Laura Coyle et. al. *Joan Miró* p.15  
\(^\text{19}\) Rudi Fuchs et. al. *Kurt Schwitters* p.100
to crudely assemble his materials. He also incorporated humor by creating and titling his works based on word puns (fig. 15).

Figure 15. Al Taylor, "Layson a Stick" 1989, mixed-media, 20” x 26” x 47”

Taylor created sculptural works that utilized the barest essentials for his method of artistic expression. His art often resembles the possible underlying framework or armature of a work of art that does not yet fully exist (fig. 16). Taylor used a variety of painted and unpainted recycled wood, such as broom handles, wooden rings, and so forth. He also used wire, Plexiglas, and, in “Layson a Stick,” incorporated two plastic leis.

Figure 16. Al Taylor, Untitled, 1986, mixed-media, 73”x 24”x 12” and Eel, 1986, mixed-media, 26”x 5”x 10”

Taylor’s aesthetic was influenced by his time as an assistant to artist Robert Rauschenberg, who also used found materials, and also from a visit made to Africa in 1980. It was there that he said he
“learned the idea of self-reliance; using available materials, like cutting the roof off an old bus and turning it into a motorboat.”

Taylor’s description of his creative process recalls the earlier description of Elementary art and is similar to the “collaborative” efforts used in creating the thesis sculptures:

What I am asking the pieces to do is to make themselves somehow. Instead of forcing myself onto some anonymous objects, I try to find a method that will allow them to form their own logic beyond me.  

Twombly is considered first and foremost an abstract expressionist painter, his large-scale paintings of scribbles and other random markings recalling the “freedom of expression of a child’s drawings.” But if Twombly’s paintings suggest freedom, his sculptures seem as if they have been frozen in place. Some give the impression of growth, transformation, or flight (fig. 17), while others show the frozen, resulting rubble of a failed attempt at all three (fig. 18). These concepts are derived from Twombly’s interest in the tragic heroes and heroines of Greek mythology. Some of his sculptures have even been referred to monuments honoring specific Greek figures.

Twombly may have also been attempting to allow the materials to “form their own logic beyond [him],” though perhaps his interest in hero mythology encouraged more dramatic structurations:

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21 Bell et. al. *Al Taylor*, p.17
From [Twombly’s] surprising combinations of banal everyday materials a magic world emerges, seducing us into accepting as probable the most improbable.\textsuperscript{23}

The thesis sculptures borrow aesthetically from the sculptures of Taylor and Twombly in several ways. The most apparent is that they are made from similar reclaimed or recycled materials such as wood scraps, branches, wire, and artificial plants. Secondly, that they utilize few materials in their construction, suggesting, as mentioned, more the underlying framework of, as yet unfinished sculptures. They are also sparingly painted or embellished.

CHAPTER 7. ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT

As a child, I would often look for, closely examine, and utilize mundane objects and essentially worthless materials the same way I did with the wood scraps, Styrofoam, sticks, and branches of the thesis sculptures. For example, I recall hours spent scouring our gravel driveway for unique treasures: fancy pebbles, funny shaped rocks, bits of wood, rusted metal, or small unidentifiable pieces of plastic, which I placed inside a plastic zip-loc bag and labeled “Archeological Finds”.

Another favorite activity was to find a fallen tree limb in the backyard and pretend that I was directing a film about its inspiring journey back up into the large tree we had growing there. The film would begin in extreme close-up with the limb’s first weak attempts at lifting and bouncing its way off the ground. Eventually it would gain enough height and get caught in the tree branches above, its journey completed.

The dramatically lit table and chair of the thesis exhibit reminds me of the first time I had acknowledged having any artistic ability. My father, who dabbled in drawing and other creative projects, arranged a bowl of fruit on our kitchen table and forced me to sit down and paint the still life over a period of several days. Perhaps the sculpture that I had placed on the chair of the thesis exhibit, which recalls a small, curious figure, was meant to represent me sitting and painting the colorful fruit lit by a single light source in our otherwise dark kitchen after dinner each night.

Many of the thesis sculptures recall bizarre, fantastical creatures. The crude way they are assembled from a variety of finished and raw materials even gives them a kind of Frankenstein quality. This stems from an early enthusiasm for creating imaginary creatures on paper. When I was a teenager, one of my most cherished possessions was a drawing kit that allowed you to create an infinite number of fantasy characters by mixing and matching different heads with different torsos, arms, and legs. After arranging the plastic plates (which had raised lines), a rubbing of the figure was made onto a sheet of paper, which could then be embellished with color, darker lines, etc. This process was similar in many ways to the process used to create the thesis sculptures. Like the plates, I was able to mix and match the materials, decide on an arrangement that seemed to work, then add a little paint or other medium.

As mentioned, the thesis installation is much like a display found in a museum, utilizing dramatic lighting to enhance a particular scene but lacking the institutional ropes barring viewers from entry. From the time I was a child to the present, I have enjoyed visiting museums, particularly admiring the silent, motionless interior scene displays. When I was young I dreamed of one day being the person who arranges those scenes, if for no other reason than to be able to climb into them.
Early Influences: Surrealism

Surrealism, an art movement beginning in the early 1920s, attempted to make visible the often irrational and complex workings of the inner psyche as experienced in a dream state or the subconscious. The less rational the subject matter, the more it succeeded as a Surrealist work. This notion had a profound influence on me as a young person as I often felt like an outsider. I found an escape into this inner realm, accessing it at any time through drawing. I made dozens of small, extremely detailed ink pen drawings of strange, otherworldly and somewhat fragile looking figural assemblages similar in several ways to the thesis sculptures: striped and polka-dotted cones and tubes connecting flowers, doll body parts, feathers, and shoes all floating before soft cloud forms or growing from the earth in a desolate landscape.

Another way Surrealism influenced me at this early stage was to encourage the use of whimsical, outdated, used, or useless materials in making art. These types of materials can be found, for example, in the sculptural and photographic work of Surrealist artist Man Ray (fig. 19) and the sculpture of Joan Miró. I found, and still find, such materials far more interesting than anything “current,” clean or polished. I found that I enjoyed gathering these materials and then rearranging or representing them in entirely different ways, the same way I once did with the driveway “finds” and more recently with the thesis sculptures.

My first artistic attempts at utilizing “found” materials was when I was a late teenager and decided to convert the corner of my bedroom into a colorful, bizarre mixed media installation complete with a painted and clothed mannequin, artificial flowers, and a hula-hoop hung from the ceiling. Later, in college, I made a similar surrealistic scene inside a small room made out of a wooden frame and black curtains. The viewer would enter the room and circle two dimly lit dressmakers mannequins painted and covered with all manner of surrealist objects such as medicinal bottles, a feather boa, and fake teeth and gums. I remember enjoying the idea of controlling the viewer’s space, of having them enter “my” world. A similar thrill was felt watching people enter and view the thesis exhibition.
The thesis installation, with its curious placement of strange forms combined with the familiar domestic table and chair, is certainly a surreal one—especially when compared to the surrealist painting *Harlequin's Carnival* (fig. 20) by Joan Miró, one of my first major artistic influences. Like the thesis installation, Miró places surreal figures in an otherwise familiar interior scene complete with a table, a ladder, and a window.

![Figure 20. Joan Miró, *Harlequin's Carnival*, 1924-25, oil on canvas, 66 x 93 cm](image)

This is one of the ways Surrealist works had a intentional, disorienting effect on the viewer; combining the familiar with the unfamiliar seemed to distort time and place. My worktable and chair, for example, are familiar as both domestic objects and antiques, while the sculptures seem to exist in a strange and different realm.

The Surrealist Max Ernst was another early influence. I especially admired his ability to create a wide variety of highly unusual creatures. The creature in Ernst’s painting, *The Elephant of Celebes* (fig. 21), for example, has a similar Frankenstein quality found in the thesis sculptures.

![Figures 21. Max Ernst, *The Elephant Celebes* (left), oil on canvas, 1921, 125.4 x 107.9 cm](image)
First Achievements

The first time I was encouraged to continue using found materials was after winning recognition for several mixed media wall-mounted assemblages. Essentially, they were ½ inch by 6 inch planks of found wood to which I attached printed images (old magazine photos, wallpaper, etc.) and a variety of found second-hand store and antique shop items such as a jewelry box, a brass door-knob panel, a framed photo from the 1950s, a round hat box lid, a bow tie, etc. Paperboard cones that I had made and decorated with polka dots or stripes (taken from my earlier ink drawings) were also attached and parts of the wood were painted. These “totems,” (fig. 22) as they came to be called, were hung vertically and stood roughly 7 feet from the floor.

What I enjoyed most about creating the totems, like the earlier installations, was the thrill of combining disparate objects, materials, and forms. Yet this time, I found that by doing so, I was creating a kind of non-linear narrative that pervaded the length of the pieces, a process described previously in chapter 2. I also enjoyed the spontaneity, expressiveness, and imperfect application of materials and paint. This was a way of working that came naturally to me, perhaps because it represented my inner thoughts and desires: a passion for things old, unusual, or used (feeling out of touch with the modern world), having a slightly disordered, highly visual thought process, and thinking of several things at once. Perhaps they also made reference to my tall, thin physique. The thesis sculptures are also physical representations of how I sometimes see myself: as slightly fragile, awkward, and spindly.

Figure 22. Larrison Seidle, Misses (left) and Playboy (right), circa 1993, mixed media assemblages
Later Influences: Kienholz and Goodine

Later influences, which informed the surreal museum quality of the thesis exhibit and further influenced me to use found materials, were Edward Kienholz and Linda Goodine. Kienholz created an often unsettling, complex brand of museum dioramas out of found objects and materials (fig. 23). Here, again were the Surrealist combinations of the familiar and unfamiliar, and the use of unwanted, outdated materials. I also admired that many of Kienholz’s larger installations could also be entered, immersing the viewer into the artist’s vision and the work.

Figure 23. Ed Kienholz, Roxy’s, 1960-61, mixed media installation, dimensions variable

Linda Goodine, once my photography professor at Herron School of Art in Indianapolis, photographed elaborate on-site installations involving people interacting in some way with a variety of natural and man-made objects and materials (fig. 24). Goodine and the influence of her images encouraged me to continue using found, manipulated materials as a form of expression in my work. In the work of both Kienholz and Goodine, non-linear visual narratives are also prevalent, formed by the use of a wide variety of objects and materials.

Figure 24. Linda Goodine, Rojo, 1989, Cibachrome, 42 x 52"
Work Leading Up to the Thesis Exhibit

I continued working somewhat three-dimensionally with found objects and materials in graduate school (fig. 25) as I had done with the totems. Many years had passed since I worked this way, so the process felt new and freeing, and the work definitely conveys this. This time, however, I was done trying to make “art,” and resisted the urge to make work that was compositionally or visually engaging—the result being, ironically, some of the most engaging and compositionally exciting work I had ever done.

Figure 25. Larrison Seidle, Allegory for War, 2010, mixed-media assemblage, approx. 30 x 35 x 5"

My choice of materials had also broadened to include “modern” materials, though still worn, broken, or used, such as car and electronics parts, and plastic objects such as baby pacifiers and bubble wrap. Anything was picked up, especially things I would never before think to use. I developed a newfound admiration for the mixed media art of Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008), who utilized similar materials—the uglier or trashier, the better—in his assemblages (fig. 26).

The most exciting aspect of the new work, recalling Schwitters’ creative philosophy, was that I was forcing myself to do the opposite of what felt like the most intuitive thing to do in terms of choosing materials, applying color, mark making, and arranging the composition. The uglier and less fussy the piece, the more I felt I was growing as an artist. In this way, I also discovered a great deal about color as I experimented with color combinations that I never would have considered before.
The work, however, was restrained in that it still more or less adhered to rectangular formats. Even the totems were slightly more daring in that they were long and narrow and towered above the viewer. The work also did not extend far into the viewer’s space, let alone surround or immerse them the way my early installation had done. Even though I tried forcing myself free from artistic restraints, the work still seemed concerned with being “art” on a wall. The black curtained room installation was, at the time, quite an undertaking for an undergraduate student, and I was not nearly as concerned with it being seen as “art” as I had since become with my work. Some of the recent assemblage pieces, however, attempted to break out of the rectangular format and enter the viewer’s space to a degree (see fig. 27). Not surprisingly, some professors suggested that these were significantly more successful.

The thesis sculptures, therefore, were attempts to completely disengage, artistically speaking, from the wall. The final exhibit installation would also pick up where I left off in my desire to create installations or museum style environments. I also felt the need to return mentally to the kind of focused consideration I’d given those worthless finds in the driveway, or to the imagination and intimate interaction I once lent to that fallen tree limb in the backyard. All that I had learned, and unlearned, about color, composition, form, etc. would also be applied—although the outcome would, as the resulting thesis work shows, be surprisingly simple (one of the lessons I had learned as a graduate student being how much, or how little, to say, and how best to say it).
CHAPTER 8. COMPARISON TO PREVIOUS WORK

In reexamining some earlier work as an MFA graduate student, there are some correlations to the thesis work that suggest at least a stylistic and materials based progression. Most apparent is the incorporation of found materials into the work. Perhaps less apparent is a tendency to combine natural elements, or that which either represents or imitates natural forms, and man-made elements whether they are images, objects, or materials. For example, I might combine an artificial flower, representing the natural element, with a plastic comb, representing the man-made element. At its most basic level, it might simply be the combination of fluid, organic forms with ones that are more rigid or geometric as seen in the individual sculptures. In the case of the final thesis installation, it is the combination of the expressive forms of the sculptures and the inexpressive forms of the table and chair.

An example of this tendency can be found in a drawing made earlier in my graduate school career. The initial element of the drawing was a reproduced biological illustration of a microscopic life form. I then added several multicolored squids to some of the empty spaces within the drawing. Because the microorganism and the squids shared similar references to aquatic life forms, it made sense to me to combine the two otherwise disparate images. Having therefore created the kernel of a narrative relating to the ocean, I added an image of a ships captain and his long lost love, along with some hand written text which spoke of “the sinking ship” and “days at sea.”

The drawing combines images of natural forms, such as squids, with several references to human civilization, in this case the captain’s uniform, and written words. Similarly, one of my assemblage pieces made after the drawing, is a crude replica of a jellyfish made out of a variety of found, industrially manufactured materials (fig. 27). One reason for this tendency is the enjoyment of creating a unified work of art that combines several disparate elements.
After considering these examples, there is a strong possibility that at least some of the thesis sculptures represent the age-old desire for a man to finally “come ashore,” to leave the seafaring life of a ship's captain, or a jellyfish, or squid, and begin his new, settled life on terra firma. Perhaps this is why two of the sculptures seem to recall some early Darwinian life forms making their evolutionary transition from water onto dry land (fig. 28).
CHAPTER 9. CONCLUSION

I know that any creative endeavors I make in the future will always begin with resourcefully finding or choosing materials the way I have with the thesis sculptures primarily because it is simply in my nature to do so and because I am conscious of the effect that buying new materials, even art related ones, as well as the disposal of them, can have on the environment. There are already too many existing materials that can be used. I also want to try working only with found materials and without the application or “artistic flourishes” of paint, mainly because I felt I had become too reliant on it with some of the sculptures.

I learned a great deal from working on the sculptures and this installation. Most importantly I learned that I have what it takes to make a fairly large, successful, and varied body of work, and to exhibit it in an interesting and engaging way. This certainly leaves me feeling significantly more confident then I was when I first started working on them. I anticipate, however, that I will use my creativity in more practical ways in the future, perhaps in how I teach my future students.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX OF THESIS SCULPTURES
(not pictured in written thesis)