Building Eugene

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Building Eugene

by

Matthew B. Obbink

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Integrated Visual Arts

Program of Study Committee
Chris Martin, Major Professor
  Joe Muench
  Emily Morgan
  Will Prindle

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2017

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DEDICATION

For my family so rooted in creativity, invention, and craftsmanship,

And most of all

To my loving wife Kristen, your compassion, drive, and support have helped me through my overwhelming challenges and greatest successes.

Thank you.
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I would like to thank my committee chair, Chris Martin, along with the rest of my committee members, Joe Muench, Emily Morgan, and Will Prindle for your guidance and support over the past 3 years. Chris, thank you for your help throughout every struggle with my furniture and wood design work. Your sense of humor, for the most part, was always appreciated. You have been a great mentor to me for nearly 15 years and I truly appreciate your friendship. Joe Muench, thank you for always pushing me to look closer, to build tighter. Your ingenuity with technical aspects of metal is unbelievable. You have pushed me to work harder to understand how important the details need to be. Emily Morgan, you are the reason for my reconnection with the power of history. My love for the late 1800’s was driven by your tutelage. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me often, and tell it to me straight, pushing me to develop deeper concepts and thinking. Will Prindle, in our brief history together, I am glad to call you my friend and mentor. Your knowledge on production, craftsmanship, and materials is paramount. Thank you for your help.

To my friends and family, thank you for understanding that I needed to dedicate myself to building things that most often times didn’t really make a whole lot of sense in this world. Your love and support will never be forgotten. Iowa State University has and will always be my home; you all have embraced that along with me.

To my wife, Kristen, thank you for pushing me to be a better person, a better husband, and a better maker. You are the most driven, hardworking, selfless person I know. No matter how tough it got for me over the last 3 years, you pushed me through, helping me understand to take it one day at a time, and one project at a time. My greatest challenge will be being half the person that you are. Thank you.
Building Eugene is the culmination of a great collaboration across generations. Bringing the ideas of my great, great, great uncle, Eugene R. Obbink, to life was my greatest challenge to date. His entire life lay out in front of me, through the pages of a small journal discovered in a box in my grandmother’s attic. In it, he tells stories of distant lands, traveling across the country in a rail car, and working in the circus. Eugene did all this while trying to prove himself as a great inventor and craftsman. Only a few images of him actually still exist, found in the box along with the journal. I needed to dig deeper into his life, to understand who he was. I did this by recreating his ideas; some I admit were pretty obscure, but truly ahead of their time. Throughout this thesis and exhibition, I understood that in order to imagine the life of Eugene, I had to develop his ideas first: a collapsible, self-portrait apparatus, a bench that sounds like a train, a rocking chair that counts, and thumb guards for an anxious nail biter, just to name a few. I created my own works from the ideas of Eugene’s journal, utilizing my skills as a woodworker and metalsmith, along with modern equipment, to achieve my goals. That goal was to create an experience for the viewer—one where each person could walk through the exhibition, interacting with the work itself, and coming to have a greater understanding of who Eugene was. In addition they could see a part of the life he lived, along with the person I am, and how I create my work. My personal experiences with wood and metal are very different from Eugene’s; however, we do connect on many levels: understanding the quality and traditions of craft, knowing the importance of a good sense of humor, and having a love for travel. As you read this thesis, and interact with the work, I hope that you will be able to look into the window of a different time, a place where there was an entire life full of invention and adventure.
“The progressive development of man is vitally dependent on invention. It is the most important product of his creative brain.” — Nikola Tesla.

INTRODUCTION

As I approach an object, I realize that whatever it may be, it could change the way I think and act in the future. How do you decide if one invention is greater than another? Do we base this merely on its individual effectiveness? Invention is merely creative thinking that has materialized in a physical form. No matter the purpose, an invention has the power to change the life of those it comes in contact with, thus ever changing the future of the user.

“Building Eugene” is the culmination of a grand discovery. One fall day while visiting my Grandma Audrey, I asked her if she had any old things of my Grandpa Red’s. She told me of his military service items, from his time in WW2 flying in B24 Bombers. He also spent time as the owner of the Armstrong Hatchery, selling baby chicks to local farmers. As she told me stories of my grandpa, all of the adventures and journeys he took, this was familiar territory in my family. We also talked of Alfred, grandpa’s father, and others in the family. They all were connected to each other—all deeply rooted in building, inventing, buying, selling, and creating. She then paused and went to fill her coffee cup back up, and when she returned she had a small box with her. It looked as if it had been stuffed away for several generations. As she handed it to me, I saw the name E.R. Obbink written on the top. My interest was instantly piqued, so I asked her about it. Grandma told me that there was one member of the family whom my grandpa would mention from time to time. E.R. or Eugene Robert Obbink was the man from whom my grandpa got his name. Eugene was my grandpa’s great uncle, someone erased from most of the Obbink family photo albums. She told me he was born around 1860 and he lived a very unusual life. Grandpa Red had held onto this box of Eugene’s things for his entire life, and spoke as if he was a hero. Eugene worked in several jobs, and lived in countless places all in his brief life; my grandma thought he
had died in the early 1920’s. I opened the box, uncovering the history of a man I never knew, opening a door into a life that I could connect with, one I needed to rebuild.

At least, this is the story I tell myself, and plan to tell others. “Eugene” is not really my ancestor but rather the culmination of many men in my life and of the stories I have been told from the time I was a little boy. I asked myself, who would I have been if I had lived another life in a much different time? This thesis was my way to discover the person I would have been based on the man I have become.
CHAPTER 1

ARTIST OR CRAFTSMAN

My life as a maker started around the age of 14, when I was fortunate to have a great mentor, my pseudo-grandfather Irvin Smith. “Irvi”, as we called him, was nearly 80 years old at the time, and had lived a lifetime of craft. He had constructed buildings, built furniture, and even had a hand in restoring old cars and tractors. He taught me the importance of craft and how to achieve my goal with the fewest number of mistakes possible. We would work often on small projects: bird houses, boxes, and picture frames. With each project, I knew I was falling further in love with wood and woodworking. Throughout high school, my father and I would also help Irvin with a lot of his projects around his farm. My father, Brian, was also skilled when it came to working with his hands. His medium was far more mechanical than wood related, but he still was a very talented carpenter. When we weren’t helping Irvin on his projects, we were building our own. Practically since I was a little kid, my father, brother, and I had been remodeling our house on the farm, my father’s auto body shop, and many other buildings on our acreage. My father has always been dreaming of the next great invention. On our farm, I could also spend time creating anything whenever and wherever I wanted. We had a vast grove of trees for forts, a massive pile of old car parts to construct with, and all the tools you can imagine. Anything I could dream up, I could make, or try to make.

I attended Iowa State University in the fall of 2001. I chose art for two reasons: I loved creating and it was really the only thing I was any good at. I spent my first semester at ISU going through basic classes of classical techniques and traditional ways of thinking. I was finding my groove, but still struggling to find my passion. In the spring of 2002, I took my first official wood design course and I was hooked. I never thought about creating this way before. I could use the skills I had grown up with and
make something truly unique. This put me on a distinct path of creating for the next 4 years. I did my best to take at least one if not two woodworking classes every semester I could, to try to work above and beyond the course requirements. Time spent in the shop was time that melted away, and it was time well spent. All throughout my time working with wood I kept evolving as a photographer as well. I found documenting and storytelling with the camera as a great escape from the world. Although so different from wood, it did help me develop many concepts I still use today. In 2005, I took my first Metalsmithing class. I had grown up around metalworking, helping my dad with fixing cars. This was different though, as it had a smaller, more intimate feeling to it. Each piece I would design and create came from flat sheet or raw stock. I would need to carefully cut, form, and manipulate each of the pieces to my final goal. It was a new challenge, since woodworking was getting fast for me, and using hand and power tools had made the process effortless at times. Metalsmithing was so different. It was slow, steady, and meticulous. After graduation in 2006, I bounced from shop to shop, working as a full time professional woodworker and cabinetmaker for the next 9 years. Each day was a new adventure, a new challenge. I worked through a lot of struggles, and learned more than I could have imagined. My college education set me up, but working through projects on a day-to-day basis helped me grow greatly as a maker. However there was always something missing for me. My creative side had been replaced with the more functional, “need to pay the bills” person. I needed a change, so that is what I did.

In the spring of 2015, I returned to study for a Masters of Fine Art Degree at Iowa State University. I felt I had more to get out of the place that built me as a maker. I had changed immensely since I had been there before. I was no longer an artist, I was a craftsman. I spent the first year just trying to figure out what that even meant, and I came to realize that you can be both. My understanding of projects went from the production mentality of an 8-5 bench man, to a skilled woodworker using the
knowledge he has to achieve far greater goals. My life was now being split nearly 50/50 between my
two passions of wood and metal. Each project took cues from each medium to form cohesive ideas. The
more complex the idea, the more my passion grew to create it. Through the completion of my projects, I
was turning into a maker—someone who was equal parts artist and craftsman. The support from my
professors was overwhelming, and it pushed me to create even more work. The education that I
received outside of college had paid off as well—I could problem solve faster, build cleaner, and
complete tasks that previously would have made my head hurt. Each project forced me to challenge my
skill sets even more. My work became new and different: I could use my skills as a maker and my sense
of humor to connect with the viewers of my work. I took my technical, meticulous skills and used them
to create these odd works of art. This way of working let me connect with my audience on a higher level;
the interaction with the work now drove new ideas.
CHAPTER 2

DISCOVERING EUGENE

As the foregoing account makes clear, my personal history has always been a strong part of whom I am and why I do what I do. I have a long line of makers, dreamers, and inventers in my family. “Discovering” Eugene drove me to a new place in my career as a maker. Now, Eugene is not just any person. Indeed, he is not even a person at all, but a figment of my imagination. I imagine that he lived at the turn of the twentieth century, an age of true mechanical reproduction and craftsmanship. I would have loved to experience that era, and in a way this is how I can. The essence of Eugene is as a culmination of every inspiring maker in my family. His humor comes from my father, his skill from Irvin, his heart from Grandpa Red. My love for story telling gave me a great opportunity to showcase the life of a man I truly could invent. The story starts as I “discover” a long lost box of Eugene’s, his whole life as I know it—bits and pieces really: a few ambiguous photos, a compass, and a journal. The journal is the key: it’s one of many and has his ideas in it. As I page through nearly 35 years of his life locked in writings and drawings, I know that I need to rebuild his dreams, his ideas. Building Eugene is not only the act of building the designs in his note book, but building the man himself. I needed to create the person himself first, then I could understand the ideas that he would produce. Each idea that I find in this journal unfolds the greater story of who this man was and why he lived the life he did. It is a bizarre act to tell a story about a man that is a great part of your history even though you are really just making it up. The more stories I create about Eugene, the more I believe he is real. The journal is a bit out of order, pages not clearly marked, some even torn out as if the idea was not good enough to keep, or maybe the thought too dark to share. I am piecing a life together during his late teens to his mid-forties, the years of his greatest work. If you were to open this journal, which is real in its physical form, you also
would be able to see this man’s life; however, I see it as a much greater picture. The stories in between the pages come to me in my sleep, driving me to stay awake to put them down on paper. Eugene is me and thus I am Eugene. So herein lies the great debate I have with myself. As an artist and a maker, creating unique things is what we do. But how honest do you really have to be when you create those things? Does anything go? I am creating a man from my family tree that did great things, designed bizarre things that I then built, all to convince the viewer that he actually existed. I have had a great struggle with this as I do not like to tell a lie, this is a story I want everyone to believe. The reason Eugene was created is it is my chance to escape. If I create an alternate personality, I can be whoever I want to be. I choose to keep the specifics of Eugene and his life obscure, this way I can find new ways to reinvent him. This is a grand view on the changes I have made, and the person I have become. My life has been consumed with making many things, but what happens if I make things that have no greater purpose than to entertain an audience? Humor, laughter, and lasting impressions are what I hope for with my work, and that is what I have worked towards with this exhibition.
I have followed many artists who have influenced me directly in my work. Each artist has helped me understand new ways of thinking, expanding my imagination to understand the things that I would like to create. Every artist has many connections although they may work in entirely different ways. Dr. Seuss, Tom Loeser, Arthur Ganson, Shea Hembry, Dan Grayber, and Daniel Wallace are the people I have chosen to showcase here, as they have dramatically impacted my work. History has also had a tremendous influence on my life. Machines are a way of our lives; the mechanics of the late 1800’s drive my ideas. The craftsmanship and engineering had to work in sequence to make the machine operate properly. Not all of these objects serve a direct function, many have obscurity in their mechanics, and this is what truly captivates me.

Dr. Seuss has always captivated my imagination with his stories, characters, and most of all his contraptions. To this day, I still find myself re-reading the same stories I did as a kid, finding new inspiration in his pages. Whether it was the tree chopping machine from The Lorax or the musical instruments from How the Grinch Stole Christmas, each drives me to wonder if these or similar things could exist in real life. The use of sound in my work is directly connected to Seuss and his brilliance. His creativity with his machines directly correlates with my work. Each one he creates has its own magnificent function—in some cases many functions—all over the top and complicated in their own way (Seuss, Dr. 1957-1985).
One of my main sources of inspiration in furniture design is the work of Tom Loeser. He is from Madison, Wisconsin, where he teaches furniture design at the University of Wisconsin. His work centers on the idea of play. He uses bold colors, mixed with traditional woodworking techniques, to create whimsical, functional pieces. Most notably is this chair called “LadderbackkacabreddaL” (Loeser, Tom 2005). Here, he marries two traditional chairs, a rocking and standard ladder back chair, to make one cohesive design. By utilizing his technical background, understanding how to create a well-made chair, he then could push its limits to double its duty. His use of color, texture, and proportion also play a role in his designs. Interaction with the user is a strong part of my own work; I understand the power of this by studying Loeser. His work directly impacts the viewer. You are only able to understand the full effect of the work as you interact with it, such as with his series of drawer-filled cabinets called “Sliders”. As the viewer, you are able to pull out a set of four drawers to discover what is inside, and then you slide the entire cabinet frame to the side exposing four new drawers. With each piece he creates, you can see his careful consideration of design, concept, and how this piece will affect the viewer.

Arthur Ganson is a kinetic sculptor from Boston, Massachusetts. His work is a mix between mechanical engineering and choreography. He builds mechanical sculptures that fascinate me. In most cases, they are built in a crude, rough way; however, the end results are stunning. Oftentimes, many elaborate mechanics function to move a simple prop, such as a walking man or
a toy chair. His use of movement captivates audiences; it is a ballet of mechanics. His main focus with his work is in the process of making it, something I agree completely with in my own process. The obscurity of his work implements humor amongst those who interact with it. As I study Ganson’s work, I am unsure if he is creating these works to get a laugh, or it is just the byproduct of his complicated structures. The piece called “Machine with Concrete” (Ganson, Arthur, 2004) is a perfect example of its perpetual uselessness. It has a motor at one end, and then a series of gears that all connect to one another. Each gear ratio is set to 1/50, which means each rotation of the driving gear will turn the connected gear only once to the driving gear’s 50 turns. Ganson connects a total of 12 pairs of gears, the last of which is embedded within a solid block of concrete. If you do the calculations, it would take 2 trillion years to move the last gear; this is why it does not matter what it is made of. He describes it as “This machine was inspired by dreaming about gear ratios and considering the unexpected implications of exponential powers.”

Shea Hembrey is an American conceptual artist. I first discovered Hembrey after he gained attention surrounding his release of “SEEK”, a Biennial of art showcasing 100 artists in 2011 (Hembry, Shea 2011). Interestingly, he created all 100 artists and their work himself. Hembrey used the 100 different artists in his studies of alternative realities and storytelling, showing me that there are no limits when it comes to art. Eugene came from what I learned when studying Hembrey. There was no rule set in place that told me I couldn’t create an alter ego, or recreate my life in the late 1800’s. The freedom he got from getting to be 100 different artists helped me to understand that if you separate yourself from your original way of thinking, you can create new and interesting work.

Dan Grayber is a sculptor from Oakland, California. His work stems from one simple philosophy—build mechanical objects that solve one simple problem: to hold themselves up. His small
scale (and in some cases large scale) pieces are meticulously engineered, spring loaded, self-contained objects often weighted with a stone or concrete. As the weight pulls down on these contraptions they will self-lock themselves into the container that houses them. Grayber’s work boils down to solving very simple tasks with incredibly complicated mechanisms. I find myself studying these machines for hours online, although I have never had the opportunity to see one in person. His level of inventiveness and attention to detail is incredible. His work is based on gravity and tension and you cannot help but have a sense of those elements as you view his work. They are completely at rest, but you are waiting for them to move (Grayber, Dan, 2014).

“Big Fish: A Novel of Mythic Proportions” is a novel written by David Wallace in 1998, which was later also adapted into a 2003 film by Director Tim Burton. This is a story about a son reuniting with his estranged father, who has fallen ill. The two have a failed relationship because Edward, the father, had always told stories of great exaggeration, mixing fact with fiction. The son, William, had never known what to believe until, with his father nearing his final days, he decides to find the truth in the tales, in turn truly understanding his father in the process. This movie had a dramatic effect on me when I first saw it. My father, Brian, was and is an incredible story teller. As long as I can remember, he would tell me tales of his life. I couldn’t help but see my father in the role of Edward, and myself in the role of William. My father and I have a good relationship; however, like many others, we have our great differences. When I was “Building Eugene”, I thought often of this film and my father. The stories that Edward told were not lies, they were just exaggerated to increase the value of the meaning. This is
exactly how I want people to view Eugene, a man that lived a life full of adventure, stories, contraptions, and laughter (Wallace, David, 1998) (Burton, Tim, 2003).

It is hard to ignore history when it is part of who we are. The turn of the century (1800-1900) is a time period that fascinates me. The first industrial revolution ended around the mid 1800’s, while the second industrial revolution is generally dated 1870-1914—this is the time period of Eugene. My studies of The World’s Columbian Exposition, also known as “The Chicago World’s Fair of 1893”, helped me understand what was being built during this revolution. The fair housed new and unique inventions, everything from electric power to the bicycle. I had imagined Eugene spending 3 days there in October arguing his brilliance to many of the fair vendors in the Machinery Hall. Odd inventions were prevalent during this time, everything from new ideas for the next medical advancement, to different modes of transportation or flight. My work will always honor the traditions of craft of this time period. Things were built to last, to have a greater, long-lasting purpose.

Craftsmen utilized the techniques of those who came before them using materials such as wood, brass, steel, and stone. My work uses these same materials to honor the integrity of their significance to building these historic objects. Each time I machine a piece of wood or brass, I imagine myself working these materials in the same ways they would have at the turn of the century. However now I can incorporate new and innovative techniques and technologies to create my designs.
CHAPTER 4

BUILDING EUGENE: THE WORK

All of my work for “Building Eugene” has one thing in common, Eugene’s Journal. This small, simple, leather bound journal housed all of the ideas for this exhibition. Throughout its pages, there are stories of his life, travels, love, and sadness. There are drawings, designs, and layouts of his many ideas ranging from brilliant to nonsense. Each page adds to the life of a man I am just starting to get to know. Building Eugene is just as much about developing and understanding the man that he was as it is about understanding the maker that he became in his short life on earth. I constructed the journal out of handmade paper pages, aged with tea, coffee, and dirt. It is bound with a leather cover, also distressed to appear to be over 120 years old. Each displayed page was hand drawn after giving careful consideration to how I wanted to portray him as a man and a maker. Loose penmanship tells the viewer that Eugene was poorly educated, however his ideas contradict what you may think would be poor intelligence. Only half of the journal has been developed as Eugene’s life will never be completely documented or discovered. This is a never ending story of a simple man with big ideas.

“Sit and Play a Tune” was one of the first furniture pieces in my career as a maker that had a greater purpose. That purpose was sound and interaction with the viewer. Eugene would often write in his journal about his connection to the train. Growing up near the tracks in Iowa, he became fascinated by the trains that passed through his small town. He would run next to the train every chance he got, trying to get the conductor to blow the steam whistle. He loved the sound. All throughout his life, he would talk about the comfort of it, how it reminded him of his home and what can be achieved by
traveling on the railroad. His journal was littered with sketches and ideas on whistles. I took his love for the whistle and connected it to something I love very much, furniture. Eugene’s sense of humor was ever present, and the idea to incorporate the two together, the whistle and the bench, was born. The physical structure of this bench is constructed out of Quarter-sawn Sycamore, locally sourced here in Iowa. The overall shape and style of the piece is modern with care given to traditions in furniture design. The mechanics and function of the bench were paramount. The whistle was the greatest challenge—it needed the right sound but also a correct look for the piece. It is made from walnut, with a streamlined shape to match the design of the bench. It has eight different chambers, each with a slightly different tone. Each set of four tones is connected via a copper tube down through the bench and connected to a rubber baffle underneath the bench seat. As the viewer sits on the bench, the seat lowers, thus compressing the baffle and forcing air up the tubing and to the whistle. The left and right side of the bench seat are able to move due to their connection point at the center. It was designed as a large wooden joint, with a central brass rod that allows it to move freely like a hinge. Each side of the bench has a slightly different sound; this in turn gives anyone who is interacting with this piece the opportunity to truly have an experience with it.

“Inside the Mind of a Maker” is a contraption of wonder. Eugene interacted with Edison’s Kinetoscope around 1899. He was amazed that you could peer into a box, turn a crank, and watch a moving image appear. He wrote about this inspiration in his journal. He drew a different kind of viewing machine, one that housed images he composed of his life. He wrote “if you peer into my machine, my mind will become clear”. I took his idea and transformed it to what you see today, an object for viewing the meaningful things in my head. It becomes a
way for the viewer to interact with the machine, and in turn interact with me as the maker. When you
look into the oculus on the top, then turn the crank, a light will appear, images will begin to turn, and
music will play. I had many technical challenges with this piece. The outer structure had to be designed
to honor the craftsmen of the past. I chose to make the entire case out of rich walnut; it has a warm
inviting feel that is also comforting to look at, and it evokes the horn of a Victrola or ear trumpet. Brass
and steel components nest into the main body for functional and esthetic purposes. A leather cone
rounds out the top. This gives the viewer a soft spot to rest their ear to listen to the music as it plays.
The overall structure grabs your attention, makes you curious, and encourages you to interact with the
work in order to understand its full potential.

During a brief stint at an industrial ship building factory in Vancouver, British Columbia, Eugene
worked as a secretary for a man named Douglas J. Hemsworth. He wrote “5 May 1887, at 27 years old I
sit in a small hall, working for a man I can’t respect. His screams from his quarters remind me of a ship
screaming in distress, gridlocked in the reef off shore”. After reading/writing this in his journal, I started
to dream up what it would be like to work for such a man, in this place. “Signal Horn for an Industrialist”
came from this story. Signal cannon, used on ships earlier in the 1800’s, were used for the main
inspiration of this piece. I imagined Eugene building this horn, then delivering it to Douglas, giving him a
much more efficient way of getting someone’s attention. Eugene’s pages show details of the ship
builder’s use of steel bound with large hammered rivets, held in wood scaffold as tall as a 10 story
building, each one holding massive sections of the ships. He chose to incorporate a level of humor into this signal horn. Eugene would have
loved to deliver it; however, I don’t imagine it was ever originally built
as he left Canada to travel back to the U.S. soon after he designed it. In

Figure 8: Obbink, Matthew, “Signal Horn for an Industrialist” 2015
realizing the design, I cut, formed, and soldered each section of the horn’s barrel. They then were attached to one another, using the same riveting techniques the boat builders would have used during Eugene’s day. This piece is a true testament to “Eugene’s” serious love of mechanical joinery, mixed with his ever present sense of humor.

The “Potassium Protector” was first designed by Eugene in 1902; however, it looked quite different than mine. Eugen’s original drawings show a simpler case, one that you could throw in your bag. He developed it for a friend, Ken Baker—a banana enthusiast you could say. During this time, one could find bananas in the major cities but they were expensive at nearly 10 cents each. Baker would often buy one every morning on his and Eugene’s walk to Navy Pier in Chicago. Baker would often have smashed the banana mere minutes after he bought it. Eugene had a small shop in his flat down near the river and he hammered a banana case out of copper. It fit the banana perfectly, housing it tightly and protecting it from the wear and tear of the day. Taking this idea, I developed my own “Potassium Protector” elevating the design with brass and exotic, “Chechen” wood. My design is better fit for sitting on the edge of a desk rather than thrown into a bag. The brass elements are carefully scored and folded to make up the main body of the container. Wood elements form the base and lid to the structure. The wooden banana is just a prop to show the function of this design.

“One Million Rocks” Is a concept that I came up with after seeing Eugene’s “counter” designs. Riddled throughout his journal, there are drawings of various counter mechanisms. Each one is rooted with the same intent of showcasing how well his furniture was constructed. His counters were designed to be housed along with his furniture and to serve as visible evidence of their durability. He wrote “after
losing a sale to a couple in Des Moines, Iowa, (in 1890) of two handmade rockers to Sears, I needed to prove to the public that mine could easily outlast theirs”. He would later go on to write that he housed a counter underneath his rocking chair, with an attached arm that would rest against the floor. Each time the rocking chair would rock, it would count. His counter went seven full digits, as he promised a full one million rocks on each chair he built. I am unaware if any of his chairs made it completely to the full one million mark, but there is no doubt in my mind that this marketing scheme likely sold many chairs for him, after he proved ins durability. Eugene was equal parts craftsman and salesman. Today, competing with mass produced furniture is a constant battle. I took his idea for counting rocks and applied it to my own modern rocking chair design. Built of local Iowa Ash, with brass details, this rocker has many elements of traditional Windsor chairs, with a contemporary twist. The counter is constructed with a mix of handmade parts and laser cut pieces meant to work together with precision. My hope is that it will easily outlast the one million rock mark.

Eugene had and dealt with many personal struggles noted in his journal. He often didn’t have a place to sleep, a meal to eat, or a place to call home. He frequently wrote about his struggles with constant anxiety. His nervous habits ranged from severe anxiety attacks to continuous nail biting with his thumb nails being impacted the most. In the fall of 1885, he lived in overcrowded Chinatown in San Francisco, California. He noticed that the streets were full of sickness and disease and the plague was still affecting many areas of the city. No matter how hard he tried, he continued to bite his thumbnails, fearing
getting sick himself; he knew he needed to change his habits. In 1886, he drew images of brass covers for each of his thumbs; each one housed several spikes. His notes later explain that the first few weeks after he had built the thumb shields, he spent most of his time with bloody lips. My “Don’t Bite Your Thumbnails” pieces were created using this same concept. Each unit is constructed out of 16 gauge heavy brass, with a mechanical connection at the knuckle, and spikes covering the top caps. The interior of each cover is wrapped in leather to fit snugly and comfortably over the thumbs. I guess I have to accept the fact that I inherited the good with the bad, the mind of a maker and the anxiety of one also.

“Six-Whistles” was developed from another of Eugene’s obscure concepts. As a stage hand for the Cooper-Baily Circus, he would travel by rail car for weeks at a time helping set up the tents, organize shows, and even tend to the animals. In 1876, at just 16 years of age, he was taking an immense amount of responsibility, a different life now for someone who just 2 years before was caught stowing away on the train after a stop through Iowa. A unique talent of Eugene’s was training the more simple animals for the shows, he was never allowed to go near the elephants or tigers, as they were seen as far too valuable. He embrace the ones he considered the stars of the show—the six platypuses. He trained these bizarre half-land, half-water animals to perform an aquatic show for all spectators in Tent 3. His challenge was trying to communicate with each platypus. After weeks of trying with no success, he noticed Larry, the eldest platypus in the group, reacting inquisitively whenever the train whistle would blow. Eugene thought that if he could design a six-toned whistle, he could possibly train each one to listen to each different tone. During long rides on the train, Eugene would sit in the blacksmith’s car and watch Hank Greenburg, the circus’ blacksmith, build and fix things for the circus. With Hank’s help and using his own “beauford whistle” that Eugene had from his time in the
Navy as a pattern, they designed one for Eugene. By altering the sizes of the cones of each whistle, they were able to change the tone of each one. Eugene could then rotate the set of whistles to cue each one of the platypuses to when it was their turn to perform. After just a few days of training, their love for the whistles and Eugene’s hard work had paid off as it was quickly becoming a popular show for spectators. Using his images and descriptions from his journal, I was able to form my own whistles and house them in a similar mechanism that would let me play each tone at a time. This was truly an engineering marvel in platypus training, one that is still used today.

In 1891, camera technology was advancing at a swift pace; however, for most photographs you still needed a stable tripod for clear images. Eugene wrote in October of that year, “I must develop a way to take my camera with me, to easily shoot my self-portrait with an effortless set up”. So in early 1892, he started designing and constructing one of his greatest challenges to date. The “Self Portrait Apparatus” was the first portable, self-contained, collapsible, that was very easy to carry and set up, thing of its kind. This was a challenge to reproduce as there are countless factors to take into place with this contraption, the first of which is building a “period” style camera. In my case, I used two different cameras to achieve this. The first was a 1920’s box type “Brownie”. I used the internal structure and film advancing mechanism for 120mm film from this. The next was using the lens, aperture, and shutter housing from a 1905 Kodak Eastman No. 1 folding camera. The design was based on the same one Eugene had in his journal. It was made from a main wood body, with brass front and back caps. The entire camera and shutter release was then fit atop a ball and socket joint housed at the end of the
collapsible section of the apparatus. This section, the collapsible area is designed after a simple scissor mechanism. This connects to the chest plate of the main body of the unit. It is rounded out with a set of shoulder straps, formed out of bent laminated wood. Once completed, the user can wear the entire setup easily. You must first fold out the base leg, resting the wheel on the floor. Then you are able to extend the entire camera housing out the recommended 7 feet to capture a clear image of the user. Once locked in place, you may squeeze the rubber ball to release the shutter, taking the image of yourself. You then can easily retract the entire unit, advance the film, and extend it back out for the next shot.

A handful of small photos were locked in the pages throughout Eugene’s journal. Many of these images were of landscapes he loved and things that inspired him. He would have made these images by contact printing his 120mm negatives on hand coated paper. Eugene used what was called “salt-printing” to achieve these images; something he admitted was outdated, and rarely still used during this time. He was able to take any paper he had access to, soak it in a salt water mixture, and then apply silver nitrate which made the paper light sensitive. He could then place his glass negative tight to the paper inside two plates of glass. He would leave the image out in the sun for several minutes until the positive image appeared on his coated paper. He wrote that he learned this process while taking portraits for extra money during stops along the Circus route. Images included pictures taken with his “Portrait Apparatus”, with his beloved dog, “B”, as he called her, and many images of his travels.
CONCLUSION

It is difficult to sum up the experiences I have had with this thesis over the past two years. “Building Eugene” in many ways built the person I have become. Through deep understanding of the power of history, I created a man so connected to me. My family has always given great importance to the act of making, Eugene was no exception. To create someone was a difficult responsibility. My intent was for this experience of seeing the work through the pages of Eugene’s journal would be as believable as any other historical fact in our history. The issue came as I was finally showing the work; the issue was my insecurity with not telling the whole truth. I understood throughout this process that there would be those whom would believe, and others that wouldn't. What I didn’t realize is how difficult it would be for me to play along telling even more of Eugene’s history. The funny thing is, the more I developed him as a person, and the more I myself believed he did exist. It is in our nature to be curious, to ask questions and need answers. In the time following the opening of my show I have had countless conversations about Eugene. The more I tell his stories, the more I battle between believing them, and feeling guilty for lying to people. The concept of Eugene was originally a way for me to escape my own reality, for me to be able to build anything I wanted. He gave me the opportunity to live a different life, during a much different time. The great thing about that is he also has become a hero in other people’s eyes. The connection between concept and craft became so important with me throughout this body of work. Understanding that each is equally important will drive my work to great heights in the future. I just cannot simply build a pretty object any longer; there must be a great story behind each and every piece.
My personal struggles in my life will forever be transparent in my work. Struggles with anxiety, depression, self-consciousness, and confidence will always be underlying themes to my work. The great part of my process however comes when I deal with and heal from those issues as I make the work, the act of making becomes my true form of therapy. I will forever battle with the stresses of creating a perfect piece. Issues with craft, the ideas of concept and their connection together will always drive me to the brink of insanity. I try to tell myself that I need not make each piece perfect, but I cannot stop driving towards perfection. I will learn to understand the beauty in handmade objects, the imperfections become a trademark of the love of doing things the way I do. These defects, no matter the size, will show that these objects are truly crafted for a greater purpose.

Where do I go from here? Eugene will always be a part of me, and my work. His story will be ever evolving, and never ending. This first journal still has many ideas left in it to discover, and perhaps I will discover many more journals in the future. I will try to separate myself from him also in my work. I now understand how important it is to have many different avenues of ideas in my own personal story as a maker. Craft, tradition, materials, and mechanics will always remain paramount in my work. “Building Eugene” was and will always be a turning point for me, and I know now that the best is yet to come.
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APPENDIX

THE WORK / THE EXHIBITION

_Self Portrait Apparatus_

2017

Ash, White Oak, Brass, Leather, Camera Mechanisms

_Eugene’s Journal & Self Portrait Display_

2017

Handmade Leather Bound Journal, Period Style Salt Print, Compass and Square
Various Works

Sit and Play a Tune

2016
Quartersawn Sycamore, Walnut, Brass, Copper, Rubber
Signal Horn for an Industrialist

Potassium Protector

2016

Brass, Chechen Wood, Wooden Banana
**Self Portrait Detail**

2017

Silver Salt Print

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**Don’t Bite Your Thumbnails**

2017

Copper Plated Brass, Leather, Cord
One Million Rocks

2017

Ash, Brass, Laser Cut Acrylic Mechanical Components

Six Whistles

2017

Brass, Mohagany
Inside the Mind of a Maker

2016

Walnut, Brass, Steel, 120mm Slide Film, Lights, Music Box, Leather

Eugene’s Desk Installation

2017

Steel Desk, Chair, Antiques, Image