In Search of Meaning

Fabiano Sarra
fxs5639@rit.edu

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In Search of Meaning

by

Fabiano Sarra

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School of American Crafts
College of Art and Design

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Committee Approval.

Andy Buck/Chief Advisor

Rich Tannen/Associate Advisor

Glen Hintz/Associate Advisor

Glen Hintz/School Director
Abstract.

When I came across the book *Baskets and Basket Makers in Southern Appalachia*, I felt a deep reverence for the craft of basketry that marked the beginning of my thesis research. What started as a new discovery for generating volume led to a search for an intangible essence that emanated from these objects. The baskets in that book had a certain feel to them, they had a soul, a proof of existence and a life of utility. Their honest radiance transports the viewer to a different time and place, drawing visual connections with the maker who crafted the object with skill and passion. The result is an object humble in nature, yet so complex and multifaceted in its nuances.

It was at this point that I turned my focus towards finding a way to conjure the intrinsic feelings that these baskets have and bring them into my own work. Through research and experimentation I have spent the last two years seeking ways of understanding the qualities I observe when admiring handmade objects, not only for the purpose of imparting my work with this information, but also as a way of finding a deeper meaning to the work I design and create. In my thesis, I ask a number of questions in observation of the objects and people I draw inspiration from. Is it the feeling of value or significance one has when admiring a well-crafted object? Is it the simplicity of the form, or the way light activates a materials surface? Or is it the thoughtful sensibility and attention to detail from the maker who created the object? What can be learned from this object? Can I even begin to replicate this feeling I have into something new?

What is in part a critical study of my own aesthetic; through reflection and making; has become a way of quantifying the immaterial or intangible feeling I seek. The work created for this thesis attempts to bring to fruition my observations and findings throughout the process.
Introduction.

I. Goals and Objectives.

Upon retuning to RIT for graduate school, there were a few ideas in my mind about the kind of work I wanted to pursue. Most if not all of those ideas have changed as my work progressed. What remained constant was my aim to have a deeper comprehension of the philosophy behind my work. I wanted to learn where my decisions come from, what my motives are and how this can guide me through the design process and culminate into work that authentically represents who I am as an artist and individual.
Context.

I. Discussion of Sources

The people and sources I draw inspiration from encompass a wide range of time periods, cultures and disciplines. Most of my initial attraction is triggered visually by form, texture, or material. Often however, this leads to a deeper search into an artist or designer’s process to gain insight and inform what I am doing in my own practice. How did they come to make the work they are known for? How did a certain style or movement come to be? For this body of work, my research began with a foray into basketry, but as I progressed I found myself reading about sculptors and designers like Brancusi, Max Lamb, Sopheap Pich, and Carlo Scarpa; each of which have a deep relationship with their materials, the processes they use and the story they want to tell through their work. It was this research that provided a theoretical precedent to support why each artist made the work that I found so inspiring. Being able to learn from these examples helped me to draw ideological connections with them and myself; giving me a better sense of how I can translate my thoughts and personal connections through the selection and use of material and process. Who am I as a designer and how can I reflect that through my work?

My first dive into understanding what inspires my aesthetic led me to realize that texture and surface was something that I wanted to investigate in my work. Up until that point I had been working almost entirely with wood, but when I brought all of my source images together and assessed them, I noticed that I was looking mostly at work not made from wood, but from metal, stone, concrete and fibers. These materials were such an important factor of why I thought they were so successful. The burnished surface of iron samurai helmets, the striking repetition and flow of cedar shingles across a temple roof, the tool marks left behind on the underside of a table. They were examples of materials used in a way that exhibits their natural properties. Surely the form of these objects are what initially drew me in, but what struck me
most was how light was interacting with them. The surfaces were activated by light, creating shadows that revealed nuances in texture and defined or masked the overall form of the object. I wasn’t seeing a roof anymore, I was seeing the deep ridges in the split cedar shake, and the linear overlap of each layer. One could imagine how it would feel to physically touch it. I didn’t realize it at first, but these details I was relishing in, were all traces of the hand. The evidence of the process used, with that specific material. The potential in researching traditional materials for my work was clear to me, but I needed to find an honest and personal reason for recontextualizing them. A reason that not only makes sense practically when applied to a design, but also shows respect for the history of the material and processes I adopt.

When studying my influences, it was somewhat easy for me to identify what drew me to them visually. Clean lines, simple forms, texture, color or utility. Each of which came through clearly in the images I referenced. It’s the context of how something is made and why it is made that I wanted to understand more. What context am I in and how can I shape that to convey what is important to me? And then, how can this context naturally show through in the finished object? Using traditional materials and processes that refer to historic examples can certainly yield the results I am after, but why would I do that when I have access to machinery? It is this question of “why?” and how it is answered that makes the difference. This is where I have found research to be so important in understanding my own voice as a designer. Spending the time to understand the consideration behind the work of the people that I look up to, has made me realize that the visual cues that I am drawn to are, in part, a result of context or circumstance. Baskets look the way they do because of utility requirements, available resources, the need to make them quickly and efficiently and because they can only be made by hand. This context drives the individual decisions of the maker to; in a way; curate the variables that go into the production of a basket. These actions culminate into something that is beautifully crafted but also full of meaning, expressing what the maker believes is important.
Context is only one part of the equation though. The maker is the one who decides how to interact with the given variables within their context. Max Lamb speaks about this relationship in an interview with Arkitektura for the podcast *Design in Mind*. In response to the idea of material being a starting point for his design process, he states:

“Sometimes it begins with a process or a fabrication technique, which lends itself to a certain material, a set of materials, and other times it is specifically a material itself, which lends itself to a certain set of techniques or processes, so it’s this sort of three-way dialogue. It’s material, process, and me.” (Ketenjian)

In his case, material and process are the context within which he works. But the core of his work is navigating within those boundaries. The limitation of the material, the learning curve for each process, the experimentation and discovery are all part of it. His work is the way it is because he is the one interacting with the material and making the decisions. Someone else given the same set of variables would make entirely different work. And so this dialog, between the maker and the context within which they work, is really where an objects meaning is developed and cultivated.

When I first saw the images in the book *Baskets and Basket Makers in Southern Appalachia* by John Rice Irwin, it was natural for me to be drawn to baskets. They combined form, texture, history, and utility and were so reliant on the material properties of wood in order for them to be successful as functional objects. The people whose stories are shared in this book had such a deep material knowledge of wood that they were able to break apart trees by hand in order to yield the long, flexible splints from which their baskets were composed. With the wood grain running end to end, each weaver was incredibly strong and resulted in baskets that were ready for years of hard work. The combination of the laborious craft of making baskets coupled with the wear and tear endured after a long, arduous life of utility, results in an object with profound impact. For me, I saw a craft that deserved appreciation not only for the inherent beauty of
baskets, but for the incredible amount of skill and dedication required to make something that is often overlooked.

In basketry, the maker has control over the various details and levels of refinement that can be achieved throughout each step of the process. This is the hand, or the individuals voice in the dialog of making. Wood, when split into weavers is quite rough. It is the makers decision in terms of how smooth and perfect they want their splints to be. Some took the added time to pare each weaver into parallel strips, or shaved the surfaces with a piece of broken glass to smooth them out. Others left the wood as it came from the tree barely altering its natural state. Both methods result in functioning weavers, but exhibit widely differing personalities when used in a finished basket. These choices, among others made throughout the process, acted as signatures that set two baskets apart and allowed one to identify and connect with the maker.

Other details like the materials used or the shape of a certain basket can geolocate where a basket is from, tying it to the specific environment from which it came. Often basket makers used whatever materials were available to them and made baskets that were useful for the type of work done in the area. In Southern Appalachia it was White Oak; in the North East, Black Ash and Maple; In England, Willow and Hazel. Although this was something that I was not really able to convey in the work I created for this thesis, it has made me think about how this could potentially be part of future work I create. Sourcing fibers, pigment, wood and clay from my surroundings could be a way of building context between the work I make and the historical narrative of the area.

Sopheap Pich is a Cambodian artist who brings this concept of place into his work so well. At face value his sculptures are large volumetric forms built from thin strips of bamboo that are lashed together. Upon further research, one finds that his work is part of a greater dialogue regarding the reconstruction and modernization of Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge and Vietnam War. The bamboo strips that compose his work are processed by hand, the same way they were by makers of fishing traps for many generations. The wire used to lash strips
together are made from melted down bomb shell casings found across the country as vestiges of genocide and warfare. Each consideration he makes in his work is in service of this desire to tell his own version of a story that everyone in that country knows all too well.

What I find most inspiring about his practice is his decision to be true to his materials even if it means more work and longer production time. In his Statement of Practice published in the Journal of Modern Craft he writes about the benefits of having a process like this.

“While other people who use similar materials might think of this as time that could be better spent doing something else, I see this as just another aspect of our labor, which we learn to enjoy …..But I feel that doing everything the slow way is “our” way because it requires that we pay attention to every little step we undergo. Everything takes longer therefore our works emerge at a more measured pace, but I believe it is in this way of working that we learn new things….it is their physical labor, and their attentiveness to this process that is key.” (Pich 222,224)(Pich 224-225)

I find this outlook to be very influential for my own practice. Pich’s choice to refuse more convenient methods; in a way; states his willingness and desire to stay true to his countries roots and take on the responsibility of preserving the values and traditions within his culture.

This mentality is becoming more common in recent years and has been significant in my own way of thinking as a designer, maker and consumer in the world. Coffee grown and harvested in micro lots, roasted in small batches by roasters that want to showcase the hard work of otherwise unseen farmers. Jeans woven on vintage shuttle looms from cotton hand dyed in ancient indigo vats in Japan. Restaurants working closely with local farms to source and produce meals that showcase the natural beauty and flavor of fresh fruit and vegetables. These are all, in their own way, examples of how people around the world are taking on this responsibility of doing things the old way, the slow way, for the sake of preserving something and conveying its story. In my practice, I think about this concept a lot when navigating
decisions throughout the design and making process. There are so many ways of building a piece of furniture, but what methods can I employ that will not only hit the mark visually, but also leave me feeling morally content with how the work was made?

At the time I was making my work for this thesis, I was in the context of Graduate School, with access to a machine shop, a CNC, and a collection of hand tools at my disposal. My committee, faculty and peers were available to provide feedback and guidance, and I had the gift and limitation of two years to produce a body of work. In a setting that seems to be somewhat privileged when compared to a historical setting, how, in this context, will I make work that has the elusive character that I seek? It was important to me that my work was honest and humble, with a creative approach that was thoughtful and respectful towards the long history of craft. I did not want to substitute concrete for something lighter or easier to work with and I did not want to use anything extravagant or pretentious. I knew I wanted to design pieces that were more volumetric in appearance and so I focused on finding alternative methods for generating hollow or solid forms and planar surfaces. The natural charm and character of a material was what I wanted to highlight, so I needed to be careful of over-controlling and over-refining my materials and processes. And lastly I wanted to take risks, and challenge myself. Like Max Lamb, much of what I love about design is being presented with the opportunity to learn new things and experiment with how they can be used. It can certainly be a distraction from progress at times, as I have experienced, but it is the greatest motivation for me to continue designing and making things.

These goals and challenges I set forth for myself were what guided my work throughout the course of graduate school. They came through observation, through the act of making. Ideas evolved as I evolved. Without these principles to refer to, this thesis would have taken an entirely different course. It just goes to show how much influence the maker actually has within the dialogue of making.
Body of Work.

The body of work created for this thesis served as a way of investigating the questions that arose during my research. Each design was a thread of inquiry in service of quantifying the elusive, intangible essence found in traditional handmade objects. While working within the context and parameters set forth in the previous section, it was my goal to design objects and furniture that had a sense of timelessness, and could fit well within the context of a modern home. Each piece played a role in furthering my understanding of what matters to me as a designer and provided framework for what I need to investigate further in my research.

As mentioned previously, my investigation into basketry began with the discovery of Baskets and Basket Makers in Southern Appalachia. I saw potential for using weaving as a way of generating surfaces and volumetric forms that would be difficult to produce with solid wood but felt it would be best to begin this endeavor with some simple baskets at first. The book, as inspiring as it is as a documentary resource on the history and culture of basketry, did not cover the practical aspects of how baskets are made. To learn more about this, I sought out Appalachian White Oak Basketmaking: Handing Down the Basket, a book many consider to be the most comprehensive manual on this style of basketry. Together, Rachel Nash Law and Cynthia W. Taylor composed an invaluable resource that archives the craft of Appalachian basketry and discusses many of the regional variations and signature details that weavers would use to set their work apart from each other’s. After reading through this book I decided that it was time to put what I had learned to use and test some ideas I had for future pieces.

The samples I made were woven from commercial rattan reed and basket hoops that were sold off-the-shelf, known as “carnival hoops”. I purchased the materials at first because as interested as I was in processing my own weaving material from a log, it did not make sense to commit that much time to something without knowing if I even enjoyed the process of basket weaving yet. The baskets I made were successful attempts, but the quality of the reed took so
much character away from the baskets. For an object that took as much effort to make, the results were too close in appearance to store bought baskets. That was when it became apparent to me that if I am going to investigate this process further, I would need to either find a source for handmade splints or make them myself. Materials were so important to the outcome of the historic examples I admired, not only for the strength and longevity of the basket, but also for the way the baskets would age over time. The aesthetic qualities this imparts on the basket was more important to me than the convenience of ready-made material.

When sourcing wood for the Constructed Baskets, I was able to find some air dried white ash for the coopered section of the baskets at a local Sawyer down in Mount Morris, NY. The weavers are black ash and came from a basket maker who pounds, splits and cuts weavers to order in the Berkshire Mountains. It was my decision to use ash for this project because it is one of the traditional materials used for baskets in Western New York.

The design for Constructed Baskets I and II evolved from an Appalachian melon basket. For both pieces it was my goal to stick closely to the process of how these baskets were made while finding a way of revitalizing the traditional archetype. I have always had a tendency to design using simple geometry, maybe because of my background in graphic design, but I feel that basic shapes like the circle, triangle and square, when used thoughtfully, have a way of imparting a modern feel to designed objects. I first sketched out the top profile of the baskets using circles and rectangles, and when I applied the process of basketry and coopering to those shapes, the final design developed into a combination of spherical and cylindrical surfaces. I think the result has a more contemporary appeal, while still maintaining the inviting textures and warm characteristics of baskets.

The weaving on both Constructed Baskets is done in a modest style. The ash came already split and scraped smooth, but I left it natural and did not dye or oil it. I started the basket with a simple wrap around the hoops, and filled in the body of the basket with a plain weave, over
and under until it was done. Simplicity was the main reason for these decisions, but I also wanted the weaving to appear somewhat ambiguous, not referencing one culture or region too closely. My goal was to learn from the people before me and make something new. It was never my intention to make an “Appalachian” basket or a “Mohawk” basket. By alluding to my influences without directly copying any one style or archetype, I hoped to make something that could shed light on the social value baskets have had in cultures across the globe, and feature the inherent beauty they have as objects, objects that not long ago were part of everyday life.

In the article Wrestling with Tradition: Revitalizing the Orkney Chair and Other Culturally Significant Crafts, the role of the designer in this sort of situation is examined. In many countries, design-led initiatives are being used as a way of preserving the cultural significance of traditional crafts. It was never my desire to attempt doing this myself, but I think it is worth considering since I am a self-taught outsider dealing with a lot of history and meaning that I might not understand. The information I have, was sought out on my own, it was not passed down to me, so it became important for me to give back by sharing what I knew about basketry with other people. A quote from Wrestling with Tradition says:

“If we learn a “traditional” dance, eat “traditional” food, or wear “traditional” clothes, we tend to feel that we are connecting with an unbroken chain of shared activity, stretching far into the past.” (Twigger Holroyd 292)

Although the article continues to speak about the possible misconceptions of this statement, I feel that basketry is one of those traditions that has this power. By making baskets it feels as though I am connecting with the past through craft, studying other makers and their process until I find what works for me in my own scenario. The act of holding a basket also has the tendency of drawing that connection to the people who used them and depended on them. Other primitive tools and implements that one might find at an antique shop can also carry this profound ability, leaving you wondering how old something is, who used it, what it was used for, how far has this object traveled, and what it has gone through to get to where it is now.
After completing *Constructed Basket I and II*, I was left with several questions and some discouraging realizations that would eventually cause me to step back and contemplate the way I navigated through the design and construction of these pieces. Some of it came from a lack of confidence in what I was producing, and some of it came from whether or not I felt the baskets I made were successful when measured against my intentions. Why was I weaving these baskets? Will people ever actually use them to the point where they have the same character and patina as the baskets I was initially drawn to? Are people going to see my intentions or will they think I am appropriating or exploiting cultural information? These questions stopped me in my tracks for a bit. I was confused as to what I was trying to do through my work, worried about how much time I had left in school compared to how much time it would take for me to develop my idea towards furniture applications, and not really sure how everything was going to develop into a thesis, if at all.

What really put me over the edge in this moment was when the glue seams on *Constructed Basket II* started opening up because of a sudden rise in humidity that summer. The coopered sections of the piece expanded so much that the large three-way miter was opening up in the center of the basket. I felt defeated. So much time went into engineering elaborate jigs and fixtures to construct the solid framework for this basket. To see it falling apart was a major failure in my eyes. It wasn’t until later that summer during a workshop at Penland School of Craft that I would being to understand where these feelings were coming from.

The workshop was called *Ideation* and it was taught by Christine Lee. Over the course of two weeks, students in the class were encouraged to experiment with whatever material we wanted to work with. Emphasis was placed on discovering the hidden potential of materials and suppressing our natural fear of making mistakes or producing bad work. The first few days were rough for me with my recent failure still in my head, but through discussions and critiques with the class it became apparent to me that two things were getting in the way, “perfectionism paralysis” and “masterpiece syndrome”. I have always known myself as a perfectionist, detail oriented and meticulous, but I never thought that what I assumed to be a strong suit was also
my own worst enemy. The more I thought about it, it was to true, I was getting in the way of my own progression. My perfectionism led me to design a huge three-way miter into a basket that is coopered from 3/16 inch material, I knew it was an obvious risk but I ignored it for the sake of making the object exactly to specification only to see it inevitably fall apart. I wasn’t listening and responding to my materials, I was trying to control them and coerce them into an application that wasn’t complimentary to their physical strength and weaknesses.

What I experienced in those two weeks changed how I approached my studio practice from then on. I was no longer worried about making mistakes, because it was now apparent that they are an important part of every creative practice. I cared less about what other people might think if I make something “unsuccessful”, knowing that I would learn something beneficial from that experience if it happened. I learned the value of experimentation for the sake of discovery. And lastly, I regained my lost confidence and was ready to move forward.

After returning from Penland with fresh ideas and new experiences, I decided to switch gears and put baskets on hold for the time being. I had the opportunity to experiment with concrete in Christine’s class and so it led me to begin thinking about the solid forms and textural values achieved through casting.

That summer I drove past the Alfred H. Smith Memorial Bridge while crossing the Hudson River on my way to Maine. It was impossible for me to resist being enamored by the massive concrete piers that supported the bridge. I was obsesses with them and began making small blocks inspired by their long tapering form. As I started playing with different orientations of the blocks, other shapes came to mind which led to new compositions, ultimately leading to a family of blocks in varying shapes and sizes that shared a similar visual language. While observing the different configurations, I focused mainly on the subtle details that would reveal themselves when I shifted blocks around slightly. This process would eventually lead to the design for Pedestal I.
While working on this project, I was reading Jun’ichirō Tanizaki’s *In Praise of Shadows*. Some quotes that stood out to me are:

“This was the genius of our ancestors, that by cutting off the light from this empty space they imparted to the world of shadows that formed there a quality of mystery and depth superior to that of any wall painting or ornament.” (Tanizaki 20-21)

“Such is our way of thinking—we find beauty not in the thing itself but in the patterns of shadows, the light and the darkness, that one thing against another creates.” (Tanizaki 30)

“The quality that we call beauty, however, must always grow from the realities of life, and our ancestors, forced to live in dark rooms, presently came to discover beauty in shadows, ultimately to guide shadows towards beauty’s ends.” (Tanizaki 18)

Much of what Tanizaki writes in this book speaks to the allure of Japanese aesthetics for me. There is a tactile quality to rooms he is writing about, and a human connection to those textures that is somewhat primal. I think this, in a way, is what I value about traditional craft in Japan. The amount of care given to the selection and use of materials within a home, is carried through wholeheartedly to the act of making objects. It made me think about the piece I was working on and how much influence the environment within a room has on ones ability to decipher the details within an object.

With the design for *Pedestal I* being as simple as it was, I wanted to think more about the environment it would live in and how it could encourage viewers to take the time to really look at the piece and understand it formally. Maybe a well-lit room wouldn’t be the ideal setting as Tanizaki argues, but maybe shadow would allow one to acknowledge its subtle details and distinctions. To push the concept of needing light to read its surface, I decided to use natural Basswood. In certain light the wood is so neutral that the surfaces wash out making the
surfaces look flat, but in low light situations, the facets of the rounded forms take on a tonal gradient and the large volumes cast dark shadows on each other’s surfaces. It was a pleasure to work with basswood and it took shavings beautifully. So much so, that I had minimal sanding to do before applying finish. If you look closely at the surface you can see marks left behind by my handplane, a treat for those who get lose enough.

For the top I used white oak; slightly darker than the basswood but more durable making it well-suited for a horizontal surface. The design is based off of solid blocks of wood and so when translated into a hollow form, I had to decide whether the top would transition seamlessly into the base, or somehow create a distinction between the surfaces. I saw this moment as an opportunity to create a detail that highlighted where the two surfaces come together. By cutting a deep recess into the edge of the table where it meets the base, it allows shadow to fill the space and separate the top visually. I enjoyed the effect this transition had on the design, but it did confuse some viewers into thinking the top was a removable lid. This was an interesting response that was not intended, but it made me think about why they might be an illusion of function, and what this piece would be like if there actually was an interior space that was accessible or visible from the outside.

The feedback I received about Pedestal I was positive, but I was often asked to explain its main role as a piece of furniture. Was it furniture or was it sculpture? What was supposed to go on it? What purpose does the raised area in the top surface serve? Is this intended to be a stand-alone piece, or is it meant to play a supporting role for whatever is placed on top of it? These were questions that I had often considered during the design phase of this project, but it was my decision to ignore them for the sake of seeing what it would look like. I wanted to fight the tendency towards feeling like whatever I make should have a clear function. It was my way of finding out whether function was an aspect of my studio practice that was necessary for me to feel satisfied with the result of my efforts. It has never been something that I pushed in my designs before. In many cases the form of an object is my focus and function is applied
afterword, but for this piece I wanted to see how far I could go in the direction of making the function ambiguous.

When observing *Pedestal I* in regard to the character that this piece was intended to have, it is rather successful. It’s soft color and stable form maintains a quiet presence within a room, which is something I find intriguing about this piece. Functionally, it works well enough as a table surface even if it is unconventional to most viewers. It is more of a hall table for occasional use or for permanent display of other objects. The misconception of it having a lid did bother me a bit, but it sparked an idea that led into the design of the *Pillar Table and Planter*.

The initial concept for my next project was to deal with the relationship between the interior and exterior spaces of a volume. I had the idea to make something that appears to be made from wood, but has an interior lined with thinly cast concrete. At the time I was looking at the work of modernist architects like Lina Bo Bardi, Louis Khan, Carlo Scarpa and Le Corbusier. The architectural details and spatial compositions constructed from raw concrete exhibited many of the qualities and characteristics that I saw in baskets and other handmade objects. They are made from entirely different materials, but much like basketry there is physical evidence in the concrete that celebrates the skill and mastery that went into the process of engineering and casting these massive structures. Concrete, much like weaving, can take on any shape or form, it can be cast as smooth as glass or it can look as rough as a bed of gravel, and as it ages, it develops a stunning patina similar to stone.

I knew the inherent risk of bringing a new material into my practice partway through my thesis year, but I was already convinced that it would provide the textures and visual depth that I felt was missing in my work. It would also open up the possibilities for creating more contrast between the interior and exterior surfaces of my next piece. I was excited for the process of learning how to use a new material, and ready to do whatever it took to overcome the challenges I would inevitably face.
The concrete interior space that I envisioned was originally intended to be used for storage below the table surface. It would add universal function to something that otherwise looks like sculpture and I imagined the concrete would take on a dark cavernous feel. The plan was to cast a solid base that has a cylindrical void in which a thin concrete tube would fit. The exterior would be made up of stacked wooden rings and the top would be removable to access the storage. A water tower photographed by Bernd and Hilla Becher it what inspired the pointed motif that surround both the table and planter. The tower had a simple detail below the water reservoir that caught my eye, so I altered and adapted what I perceived from the photo into what would later become the blocks that construct the outer shell of the table and surround the base in concrete. Some of the blocks are removed to create a void that allows the viewer to peer through the outer layer and see the concrete behind it. Walnut was used for the wooden components and the concrete is pigmented with carbon and black oxide to give it a darker shade.

For me this piece was really about developing its presence within a room. I wanted it to be darker and have a lower center of gravity with heavy proportions and stout features. The concrete is raw and unpolished, direct from the mold. The textures and variation in colors are results of the casting process and give depth to the surface of the concrete. The only thing I didn’t think through, was the top of the table and how the lid would actually work. It was a major fault on my part and something that in the end affected the original function of the table as a storage vessel. I was so caught up with learning a new process and the aesthetic variables of the design that I pushed off resolving the top until the end. The idea I had of making a lid that was removable didn’t work out and I couldn’t think of an elegant solution that was compatible with the base that already existed. In the end I abandoned the idea and had the top caned. It resolves the issue of needing a top while allowing one to peer into the concrete interior that rests below the table top.
The planter came about as a way of saving the first cast of the table base that was mistakenly poured upside down. To avoid wasting an otherwise successful cast, I inverted the base and made an alternate variation of the table design, carrying the facets and textures up from the base into the wood and finishing below the top with a ring of points. The top is constructed similarly to the table but rather than caning it, it is left open so the concrete interior could be used as a vessel.

I am really excited with how the table and planter came out in the end. I think they give off the darker impression that I was going for, almost blending brutalism and gothic architecture in its detailing. Even though I am happy with the caning in the table top, it was still a major oversight on my part to neglect resolving the original concept before I started building it. For my last piece it was my goal to continue in the vain of the aesthetic I have developed with the Pillar Table and Planter while giving greater priority to a specified function. In order for me to stay on track with this goal, I needed a manifesto of sorts. A list of clearly defined goals that I would stick to no matter the circumstances. With this list I would guide myself through decisions in the design process and in the end have something to measure my success against. To get started I thought it would be helpful to design a piece that is significant to me in some way so that I could apply functions that are informed by my own personal experiences. A dining table was something that I had been thinking about for a while. I love cooking and feel that food is one of the best ways of building community and nurturing the people you care about. When I lived in Colorado, my friends and I would go over each other’s apartments and cook dinner together. Some of my fondest memories with these people happened during those times. When the food was ready we would gather on the floor around a coffee table to share what we collectively made. Being tall it was always a bit of a challenge for me to get my legs under a coffee table but I never opted to sit in a chair because sitting on the floor was important to the atmosphere around the table. It fostered a feeling of togetherness, physically grounding us to this place around the table.
My ideal dining table had to meet a few requirements. Aesthetically, I wanted to continue where I left off with the Pillar Table and Planter, still creating austere presence but with a more modest demeanor. Functionally it had to be large enough to fit several people around it, and it had to be comfortable for sitting on the floor. Table legs often get in the way when trying to squeeze everyone around the table so legs were out of the question. A pedestal base would resolve the issue of needing legs, and could also be the answer for the shift in aesthetic I wanted. By casting the base in concrete it would have the weight necessary for supporting a larger table top.

With some guidelines set in place for the design it was time to focus on how it would all come together. The basic premise was that it would have a concrete pedestal and a wooden table surface, but what would they look like and how would these separate components made of differing materials come together? For guidance in this situation I looked to Carlo Scarpa whom many consider a master of architectural detail, obsessing over how materials and space interact with each other within the built environment. In the essay The Tell-the-Tale Detail, Marco Frascari defines a detail as “a minimal unit in the process of signification”, moments within architecture that exhibit the designers awareness and control of their intention and create points of interest that enhance the overall quality of a space. This concept can be easily adapted to other creative disciplines. In his essay, Frascari writes:

“…It is possible to observe that any architectural element defined as detail is always a joint. Details can be "material joints," as in the case of a capital, which is the connection between a column shaft and an architrave, or they can be “formal joints," as in the case of a porch, which is the connection between an interior and an exterior space.” (Frascari 226-227)

In the context of my table, there were a few potential opportunities that would be considered material joints, such as where the base of the table meets the table top and where the table meets the floor. It also has what I think of as a formal joint where the table surface transitions
from concrete to wood. Knowing that the overall design of the table is quite simple, I felt that these transitions were critical in order to make this piece successful. They needed to be inventive in their use of craftsmanship but elemental in form, clever but not overly engineered, and timeless. What is so inspiring about Scarpa’s work, is his way of creating details that show his deep understanding of the traditions and history of the craft that goes into the construction of his designs. In many of his details it was as if he was asking himself “what is happening in this moment when these two things come together, and how can I highlight that action with unapologetic acts of pure craftsmanship?”

Something that I wanted to attempt with this design was to have the concrete base pierce through the table top. It would create a stronger relationship between the top and the base which would otherwise be hidden, and the concrete would serve as a durable surface that could withstand heat from hot pans and plates of food. The other thing I wanted to attempt was to make my mold out of wood, similar to the concrete formwork used to cast Scarpa’s work. The process of making the polyurethane mold for the last project was so wasteful and toxic, and I figured that I could build a form more accurately and faster out of wood anyways. The wood would also create a texture that would reference traditional methods of construction and because the wood expands when the concrete is cast into it, there would be a greater chance for minor imperfections, something I was hoping for.

When designing the base, I wanted it to have only what was necessary in order for it to carry out the function I had originally prescribed. Trying to design a rectilinear block that is free of ornament proved to be more challenging than I thought, and it took a while for me to see the beauty in the simplicity of the base that I decided on. I wanted it to have more recesses and areas that cast shadow, but in reality the base was an element that I knew would be hidden almost completely out of sight. I had to accept this and remember that its purpose is to provide ballast, and to create a joint between itself and the top, anything else I added to it would be superfluous. The recessed surfaces in the base are designed to accept panels that are attached to the bottom of the table surface. The panels are bolted in place, mechanically
unifying both elements while allowing the table to be disassembled and moved when needed. For the top surface of the table I decided to make the concrete area project slightly past the wooden surface and boxed in the concrete with brass bar. The edge of the brass is beveled to accent the slight difference in planes and signify an intentional transition between materials.

When I first assembled the table for my thesis exhibition I was filled with relief and excitement, partially for the fact that the top actually fit, but also because I felt like I had accomplished what I had set out to do with this design. When measured against my original goals, I was able to check off all the points on my list. Aesthetically it shows my sensibility towards craft and tradition, and functionally it provides a comfortable place to gather with friends and family. In a way, Low Dining Table could have been the only piece in my thesis exhibition for the fact that it is the most successful culmination of all of my creative endeavors. But, I would not have arrived at this point without the learning opportunities that were presented during the preceding projects.
Conclusion.

I. Reflection

Throughout the course of my graduate studies I felt like I was after a goal that I had not defined yet. I knew I wanted to become a better designer and maker and I had some ideas of how to make that happen, but it took a while to really comprehend what I was looking for in my work specifically. I made many mistakes along the way, and became distracted chasing false goals multiple times before I could even begin to comprehend what I was after. What is mentioned in my abstract has to do with a concept that was not fully apparent to me until I had enough time to process and realize that it was this “intangible feeling” that I have tried to instill in everything I made for this body of work. For this reason it is difficult to write a paper without giving the impression to the reader that I knew what I knew all along. I feel it would be dishonest and deceiving to pretend that that were the case and so I am writing this as an gesture of humility. Much of what is written comes from a chain of inquiry that led me through the making process from one project to another, but much of it has evolved and expanded during the writing process where I have had the time to synthesize what was happening during the chaos of thesis year. This time of reflection has been invaluable as a maker and designer and has been paramount in the discovery and pursuit of my true goals; not only in the studio; but also in how I want to interact with the world in everyday life. I feel that these goals were only partially resolved in this thesis; it’s only the beginning, and it has left me with more questions that I intend to answer as I carry on in my studio practice.

In search of quantifying the intangible feeling that fuels my interest in traditional craft and making, I have found myself understanding how process and materials are, in a way, a detail in their own right. The idea of cultivating significance within an object through the choices made by the maker is a key element in achieving the essence I observe in the sources that inspire my work. It’s not always the finished object that I am drawn to, sometimes it is the
materials connection to the land, or the labor behind the creation of something. The parts of the process that are often unseen are what I find most powerful, and are what I want to have show through in my work.

In the end no matter how much I try to create this feeling through process, consideration and innovative use of material, a certain element of my work will only be understood and developed over the course of time. In In Praise of Shadows, Tanizaki states:

Of course this “sheen of antiquity” of which we hear so much is in fact the glow of grime. In both Chinese and Japanese, the words denoting this glow describe a polish that comes of being touched over and over again, a sheen produced by the oils that naturally permeate an object over long years of handling—which is to say grime….Yet for better or for worse we do love things that bear the marks of grime, soot, and weather, and we love the colors and the seen that call to mind the past that made them. (Tanizaki 11)

As much as I attempt to coax the feeling of antiquity out of a newly made object, much of the beauty I am after in truth comes from time. Time inherently alters and transforms an object giving it its own form of value, cultivating its significance. In a way I am simply trying to do what most makers are, which is attempting to make objects that last, so future generations can use them and appreciate them. What sets me apart from other makers is that I am more excited to see what my work is going to look like in fifty years with dents and scratches in the wood and lichen growing on the concrete. I hope that the furniture that I make from here on will develop the sheen of antiquity that Tanizaki writes about, and remind people of the past, but I know that this quality is impossible to replicate without the passage of time.
II. Future Endeavor

From here I plan to continue to explore this concept of cultivating significance through the exploration and use of historic processes and materials in my practice. I will continue to push myself to set goals for each design and further investigate what factors in my practice are truly important to me as a designer. I would like to conduct some more calculated experiments with concrete to find out what mixtures can yield certain consistencies so I can further develop an understanding of potential uses for the material in my work. I hope to be exposed to new sources of inspiration and continue my progression as a designer and maker alongside my contemporaries. With a clearer understanding of the goals and philosophy behind my work I hope to continue feeding my interests in craft history and asking questions that can only be answered through making.
Illustrations.

*Constructed Basket I*
Constructed Basket II
Pedestal I
Pillar Table
Pillar Planter
Low Dining Table
Works Cited.


