White trash

Heather Law

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Thesis/Dissertation Collections at RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact ritscholarworks@rit.edu.
White Trash

Heather Nichole Law

2013
Final Approvals:

Chief Advisor: Rick Hirsch

_______________________________
Signature

Date: ________________

Associate Advisor: Elizabeth Kronfield

_______________________________
Signature

Date: ________________

Chairperson: Robin Cass

_______________________________
Signature

Date: ________________

I, ______________________________ hereby grant permission to the Wallace Memorial Library of RIT to reproduce my thesis in whole or in part. Any reproduction will not be for commercial use or profit.

Date: ________________
## Contents

- Acknowledgements 1
- Thesis Statement/Abstract 2
- Introduction: Me, a Traveling Consumer 3
- The Research: How *White Trash* came to be 6
- Garbage Archaeology Case Study: Transforming *Solid Waste* into a New Form 9
- Influences and References: Contemporary Culture 10
- The Making: Trash, Toilets, and Technicalities 16
- The Show: *White Trash*, the Installation 20
- Conclusion 22
- Images 24
- Works Cited 28
- Additional Reading Material 30
Acknowledgements

There are many people I would like to acknowledge for their support during my time of “madness.” I am indebted to them all. I would like to thank my committee: Rick Hirsch, Liz Howe, Elizabeth Kronfield, and Kevin Mulkahy, for pushing me to find my path as an artist. I thank my family for their constant support and unconditional love. I also extend my gratitude to my dear friends in The SAC Ceramics department; each one of you taught, encouraged, inspired and generally helped me in times of crises. Thank you all for sharing a part of your life with me.
Thesis Statement/Abstract

White Trash, is body of work that aims to reflect upon our personal role and contribution to the solid waste stream through routine consumption and waste disposal. From everything we eat and drink, to the refuse we flush down the drain, we all consume resources. Living in a materially saturated, mass-consumer society, we have evolved into an increasingly disposable culture. By identifying with our waste production, we then can better evaluate the pitfalls of our materialistic ways.

Common consumer products stuffed inside a toilet creates a recognizable waste pattern found within the domestic household. Our trash is considered pollution. Once disposed of, our society takes an “out of sight, out of mind” mentality. Trash receptacles, such as garbage cans and toilets, conveniently offer a sense of freedom from further obligation. Plastic or ceramic containers quell concern for wastes’ ultimate destination. By stripping away context and color, I am exposing the sheer volume of waste that we, as individuals, contribute daily. Through this, I raise questions about our current disposable culture.
Introduction: Me, a Traveling Consumer

My work stems from my rural Northern California upbringing. Mendocino County was, and still is, an environmentally conscience community. Here, “going green” was practiced decades before it became trendy. Recycling was just a way of life. As a child, taking out the garbage, recycling and compost were some of the daily chores assigned to me. I thought everyone handled their waste in this same way.

Living in the remote countryside, we had to haul our trash to the nearest landfill. As a young girl, I remember dreading the dump. My great disgust forced me to be more conscience about waste. After all, less waste meant less trips to the dump. By doing so, all of our family rubbish was sorted and packed into designated bins. Paper products were burned throughout the winter. Food waste became compost for our garden. Recyclables were rinsed and prepared to be deposited at a collection center. The rest resulted in garbage that had to be stored until we accumulated a full truckload worthy of being hauled to the dump. Consequently, at an early age I became acutely aware of the material culture in which I was raised in because of my household duties as a child.

While attending undergraduate school, I was fortunate enough to study abroad. This was basically my first experience outside the United States. In 2002, I spent five months living in London, England. Trashcans and dumpsters were almost nonexistent in my neighborhood. Everyone would simply bag up their household waste and toss it onto the curbside for pickup. The sheer volume of waste a metropolitan city creates on a weekly basis appalled me. I was more shocked by how openly they displayed their waste; it was shamelessly just thrown out on the curb, with no questions asked. It seemed that Americans took more time and consideration to neatly pack their trash in bins before wheeling it out to the curb for public display.

During my semester abroad, I was able to backpack through Italy, Belgium, Holland, France, Spain, Wales and Scotland. As a student living on grants and loans, I subsisted on a very low budget. I learned to live with very few belongings, eat simple food and require less material objects. This was a pivotal moment; I started to reflect upon my life in the states and my need
for worldly possessions. This mental shift left me thirsty for more backpacking and foreign adventure.

Two years later, I was back in Europe. Then, in 2005, I ventured to South America for a month. The majority of my time was spent in Chile. I was reunited with the rare feeling of freedom from stuff. By “stuff,” I mean every day, nonessential possessions, including technology, excessive clothing and makeup and other tokens of wasteful consumerism. Garbage did not seem to be as prevalent in South America as it was in the U.S. or in Europe. When buying bottled goods at the grocery store, purchasers were made to pay a hefty deposit for glass. Container deposit laws ensured that customers would not only return their bottles back to the grocery store, but also clean and prepare the container for future use. I was informed by a cashier in Chile that they do not smash or melt down the recycled material; instead they sterilize and refill the bottles. Consumers in Chile had an obligation of civic duty to uphold, which, in turn, created a more conscious society of consumers and waste contributors.

The following year, I had the opportunity to spend a month in Costa Rica. I quickly found that Costa Rica has similar recycling practices to those of South America. Along with grocery stores, bars and restaurants likewise enforce a container deposit tax when one wishes to “para llevar” (take out). In order to avoid extra fees on bottled goods, one would have to consume on the premises. This was beneficial for the establishment owner because it encouraged more business and guaranteed the containers were returned to the bottling plant, penalty-free. This was also convenient for the patron who then avoided the burden of recycling the bottles on one’s own.

My cousin was to be married in Hong Kong in 2006. I was sent to represent my father’s side of the family. One short week was enough time to realize I had stepped into a world of “stuff” unparalleled by my previous travels. The city streets were flooded with markets full of cheap, plastic knick-knacks and fashion knock-offs. The lack of product quality was just one, yet very telling example of Hong Kong’s wasteful ways. Most items were presumably purchased impulsively, and inevitably discarded shortly thereafter. All I could think was, “Where does this tiny country dispose of all their trash?” I left Hong Kong feeling hopeless and environmentally concerned.
In 2007, I was accepted to graduate school at RIT. Transplanting my life from Ukiah, California, to Rochester, New York, was a big ordeal. I had to decide if I was going to pay the cost to move all of my possessions to the East Coast, or sell everything I owned to purchase new belongings upon arrival. Being a bit of a packrat, I went with the first option. I then realized that owning a household of material objects placed a heavy burden on my gypsy lifestyle. I was already having doubts about being an artist and whether or not the planet needed more objects. Was I worthy enough to be a person who brings more stuff into the world? No matter how much guilt I have felt as a consumer, I cannot deny my ego that has driven me to become creator. The world does not need more things, yet I feel compelled to make them. I have learned to utilize my hypocrisy as a vessel for personal expression which helped me achieve balance between being a maker and a contemporary, American consumer. By doing so, I created art that communicates an educational message of awareness to the public saying urgently; we are in over our heads and drowning in self-created waste!

I have formed a very critical view of the United States as a whole. Traveling abroad has given me perspective on how wasteful of a nation we have become in comparison to other parts of the world. Americans strive for personal individuality, freedom and a fast-paced, fast food lifestyle. Fashion trends, consumer products and quick-change lifestyles evolve rapidly. We live in a marketplace where everything is accessible to support our disposable lifestyle. Landfills provide homes for these changes so that Americans can continue consuming with the relief of “out of sight, out of mind” mentality. Americans are glutinous. We live in a consumer society where bigger is always better, and social status is gained and recognized through material possessions. Mass consumerism has robbed our sense of craftsmanship. I feel this is strongly evident in our landfills.
The Research: How *White Trash* came to be

During my first year of graduate school at Rochester Institute of Technology, I enrolled in an introductory class to Garbage Archeology. Dr. Martha Morgan, a professor for the Material Culture Science Department, instructed the course. Though I initially found the class insightful, I did not expect its material to fuel my future MFA thesis’ fire. Over time, it unleashed my fascination with trash. The information I obtained from Dr. Morgan’s class helped me discover my voice or personal message about our American consumer trash epidemic. I learned many words for trash: waste, rubbish, refuse, garbage, junk, litter. Trash can be defined as unwanted or useless material that no longer serves the original purpose. Material objects that are seen as broken, worn, spoiled or contaminated are deemed as trash. Trash is a subjective concept, which is colloquially expressed by the western idiom: “one man’s trash is another man’s treasure.”

I learned that there are two important considerations when addressing waste: aesthetic effects and health implications. I used both issues as focal points when approaching my sculptural trash.

The human eye and nose unite in incessant protest against the sheer presence of waste’s existence. In our society, we understand that garbage, pollution and trash can be easily forgotten with a popular “out of sight, out of mind” mentality. Once household waste is placed in its bin and carried away, we put little thought into its future path. Waste receptacles, such as trashcans and the domestic toilet, are containers for disposal feed our need to make trash invisible and odorless. In our culture, we have socially constructed the idea that garbage is pollution and we have consequently rationalized that its disappearance is creating an invisible and odorless outcome. In actuality, that paradigm is false.

Decomposing waste is an optimal environment for disease, bacteria, and insects, such as the common housefly. Trash has a direct correlation to high rodent population and parasites. The plague, worms, yellow fever and cancer are just a few human diseases that have been the result of improper waste disposal. Waste is also a major cause of global warming and destruction to ecosystems: it endangers species, contaminates surface and ground water, degrades soil, pollutes air and depletes natural resources. Due to an influx of population and global demands for virgin resources, society as a whole needs to recognize its individual contribution before we cross a point of no return.
Garbage Archeology is used to determine the evolution of abstract moral concepts of waste throughout history. According to the field, material culture becomes garbage, which creates a profile or identity of its community. In medieval times, society felt it was okay to dispose of household trash out the window and into the streets. At that time, the waste that was being disposed was primarily kitchen scraps, which would either be eaten by stray animals or biodegrade. Today, this method of disposal would be highly frowned upon and seen as a social taboo. Another reason why we do not dispose of our garbage in this manner is because we have grown into a mass-consumer society where more than half our trash is non-biodegradable material and would simply pile up on the streets. The United States is one of the highest waste pollution contributors in the world.6

During The Great War, a national shortage of resources encouraged recycling in the name of patriotism. Government campaigns advocated citizens to donate materials such as scrap metal, glass and paper fiber. American cities provided street peddlers a recycle market of secondary, post-consumer goods to be sold back into industrial production.7 Post-war incentives for recycling did not become an issue until there was a rising cost in energy. In the 1970’s, recycling aluminum used 5% of the energy that it took to produce from virgin material. Modern communities have since formed several programs to collect commingled recyclables from the general public waste stream such as drop-off centers, buy-back centers and curbside collection. These programs were constructed to cut government costs and provide public convenience, but the idea of country honor or patriotism is obsolete in our present culture with regards to civic duty and recycling.8

In 2008, the prices of recyclable waste plummeted, and the trade in recycled material diminished. Across the country, recyclables began to pile up by the ton in junkyards and warehouses. Discarded materials such as cardboard, plastic, newspapers and metals were unable to find buyers in a rock-bottom market. There has since been little sign of recovery. The scrap market is directly affected by global economic conditions. Due to the excessive build up of recyclable waste with no home other than the landfill, a second life has been denied. The overall consensus is that it costs too much to recycle, and landfills are a bargain solution. But to what end?
There are few signs of a nationwide abandonment of recycling programs, but industry executives have expressed serious concerns about the current stagnant state of the system. “Before, you could go green by being greedy, but now you’ve really got to rely more on your notions of civic participation,” said Professor Jim Wilcox of UC Berkeley. Government programs developed to ease the nation’s waste predicament now fall as a civic duty of a conscious consumer.
Garbage Archaeology Case Study: Transforming *Solid Waste* into a New Form

As part of the Garbage Archaeology course requirement, Dr. Morgan had her students conduct a research project utilizing learned material obtained from class reading and lectures. I chose to investigate my personal waste contribution within my household. This involved collecting, cataloging and analyzing one month’s worth of trash obtained throughout my normal course of life (Figure 1). After itemizing my trash, I then transformed the garbage into a series of sculptures entitled: *Solid Waste*. As a direct result of this transformation, the *Solid Waste* is then given a new life and purpose, which in return extends the life cycle of my trash. The exhibition of recycled art aims to educate citizens about our current garbage epidemic.

What we throw away depicts a story of who we are and the society in which we live. One’s trash can define the social class he or she fits into, personal lifestyles, gender orientation, hobbies and occupation. America is a fast-paced, individualistic, disposable society. *Solid Waste* reinforced this statement by encapsulating my trash and displaying who I am as a consumer.

The process and techniques I used to create *Solid Waste* involved using cold working techniques at RIT’s School for American Craft glass studio. I took six glass vases purchased from a secondhand store and “hot popped” the bottoms off using a flame torch. This method created hollow glass tubes which were then ground down at slight angles. Once realigned, the tubes produced a zigzag motion. I filled the tubes with my household-generated waste and capped the tubes off with the original vase bottoms using ultra-violet adhesive glue. Thus, I made rubbish capsules that created a dialog and a character profile between the maker and the viewer (Figure 2).
Influences and References: Contemporary Culture

Trash, recycling, and the human relationship with the everyday object have become a reoccurring topic within the art world. We live in an eco-conscious time, and many artists are advocating sustainability by re-purposing the cast-offs of ordinary objects. Creative re-use of the ordinary object also offers some timely lessons in good old-fashioned thrift. Other inspiring artists celebrate material and process with explicit social commentaries on power, politics, identity and value. I will acknowledge the following references in which I feel a connection through concept, process and presentation.

Robert Arneson, father of the California ceramic funk movement, has been an inspiration to me since childhood. I admire Arneson’s ambitious goal of redefining the established boundaries of ceramics of the 1960’s. Contradicting traditional clay practices, he rejected the notion that ceramic artists need only produce decorative, utilitarian wares. Contradicting traditions previously associated with clay, Arneson created non-functional work to address universal concepts on American society and mass destruction. He created a platform for political artists to express themselves through clay as a sculptural medium.

In 1963, Arneson received an invitation to exhibit with his mentor Peter Voulkos and John Mason in a show at the Kaiser Center in Oakland, entitled California Sculpture. Arneson used this opportunity to present a personal manifesto in the form of a ceramic toilet, simply dubbed Toilet. Explained Arneson, "I really thought about the ultimate ceramics in Western culture ...so I made a toilet." Arneson treated the surface of Toilet with an abstract expressionist touch by painting in monochromatic color resembling the style of a Voulkos’ sculpture. A year later, Arneson made John with Art, another ceramic toilet, but he created it in a cruder approach. The sculpture had sexual anatomy appended to the flush handle, the toilet seat and the opening of the bowl. Arneson even installed a pile of ceramic excrement inside the bowl inscribed with a scatological joke on the topic of art. I, too, use satire to

Figure 3  Toilet, Robert Arneson, 1963
address my opinion on the Western art scene and my pessimistic attitude to being a maker, consumer and producer of the inevitable: trash.

Many critics questioned if Duchamp’s *Fountain* was the source in mind, but Arneson replied by saying,

*Duchamp did not make a toilet, he made an untoilet. It's about transformation --he took a toilet and made a work of art out of it -- I wasn't transforming anything.*

With *Toilet* and *John with Art*, Arneson’s satire comes from, and pays homage to, the iconoclasm of abstract expressionism.¹¹

On October 26th, 1964, Robert Arneson was interviewed by *The West Coast Art Week* and a comment came up about his toilet sculptures. His response passionately speaks to me and carries through my thesis work *White Trash* with relation to form, exposing tradition of material, and the social taboo tied to its function:

*...it's not about the toilet at all, that's about confronting a great ceramic. The most used, the most desirable product of Western culture... Play on words, play on subject again... But when you start thinking about ceramics, well, what are the big ceramics?... A brick is about ceramics, the dinner plate is about ceramic. The toilet- the toilet is ceramic, but it's not a toilet. People say “Do your toilets work?” No, my toilets don’t work because they’re not toilets. You can’t have a toilet unless you have an apparatus that flushes your waste. I just simply took a traditional form and defined it, made a sketch of it. I drew it. I painted it. I drew and painted a toilet, but didn’t stop there. I made it out of the substance that you make toilets out of- ceramic. And I glazed it, somewhat. Some white. It’s a kind of give and take, a kind of playing.*¹²

Richard Notkin is another ceramic artist I would like to note as a reference. Notkin, a former student of Robert Arneson, creates sculptural work that speaks of social and political commentary. It’s very much like my own work. Courtesy of PBS, Corning Museum of Glass made a short film interview *Meet the Artist: Richard Notkin*. Within the interview, Notkin states, “I work from a place that is deep inside me, that I am passionately angry about. If an artist can’t say what they really feel in their heart, what the hell is the point?”¹³
His artist statement says,

...as the poet economizes words, I have developed a similar means of expression in the ceramic arts through the conversation of materials. I believe the aesthetic impact of a work of art is not proportional to its size, but to its content. It is not the objects created which are of prime importance, but the lives of people who may be touched in significant ways.¹⁴

I believe this statement to be true. I create art to express what I am passionate about. I use clay as my soap box to speak up about issues overlooked in our society very much the same way Notkin has. Along with the work of Robert Anrneson, Notkin is also inspired by Yixing tea pots. They are ideal subjects due to their small scale in form, cultural symbolism and narrative identity, expressed through highly-detailed craftsmanship. Notkin creates a new contemporary spin on Yixing pots. He juxtapositions American culture and political identity of war and destruction while still retaining the beautiful, trompe l’oeil quality of traditional Yixing ware. Figure 5 is an example of Notkin’s philosophy resonating through a faux Yixing tea pot. The work is a comment on the violence which occurs over the oil industry. By fashioning the spout with stacked oil barrels, the lid in a shape of a mushroom cloud, and clay peanuts placed as feet, Notkin’s statement is strong and to the point.¹⁵

I am captivated by Clare Twomey’s large-scale, site-specific ceramic installations. Twomey’s world-renowned work speaks of the human interaction with time and space. In 2004, Consciousness/Conscience was presented at the Ceramic Biennial in Korea. It entailed 3,000 hollow bone-china tiles laid out on the gallery floor. As the viewer walked through the room, the tiles broke underneath the weight of their feet and turned the viewer into a participant. Using this device, Twomey attempted to change the way the audience perceive themselves in relation
to the world. This moment of public interaction, which resulted in self-reflection, was something I was drawn to when presenting my own work.

The “end result” White Trash toilet in my installation also allowed the viewer to physically interact with the work. When one stepped close to examine the sculpture and the ceramic, shards scattered on the floor broke under the weight of their feet. Heirloom is porcelain, site-specific installation Clare Twomey produced for the Mission Gallery in Swansea, Wales. It is absolutely beautiful. Its ghostly white surface of the mass-embedded knick-knack wall speaks poetically to the loss of domestic history. The choice in casted objects and color pallet used in this work is similar to my own artistic aesthetic. Twomey inspires me to take my simple ideas and expand them into colossally, large-scaled installations.

Tara Donovan, a recipient of the MacArthur Grant, transforms huge volumes of single, mundane, everyday objects into mesmerizing installations. By piling, layering, twisting, and clustering material, Donovan creates a biomorphic “viral repetition” that mimics those of the natural world. Mass-produced materials such as toothpicks, pencils, buttons, drinking straws, paper plates, styrofoam cups and scotch tape are used in large quantities for her phenomenologically charged installations create a consumer landscape that speaks of beauty within excess. In figure 7 Donovan has created an amazing cloudscape using simple materials: styrofoam cups and hot glue. Like Donovan, I too want to provoke serious thought about everyday materials that surround us in the world. I want my audience to realize what we, as consumers, take for granted.
Tim Noble and Sue Webster, a British artist duo, celebrate and exploit the desire of contemporary culture and the nature of consumer society. Using ideas of beauty and excess in pop-culture, their most notable pieces are made from piles of rubbish collected from London streets. A light is projected against the pile of trash or assemblages, and the shadow on the wall creates an entirely different image, typically one of the couple themselves. The shadow sculpture *Dirty White Trash* is one of their installations that has stayed in my mind since under-graduate art history. This installation definitely aided the decision in titling my thesis work. The juxtaposition of a huge pile of rubbish displayed in a posh gallery intentionally becomes radical and provocative in attempt to challenge viewers’ assumptions about art.\textsuperscript{19}

I respect Noble and Webster’s confrontational approach of pushing political subject matter to extremes by using real trash. In the early stages of building my thesis, I considered using actual waste as part of my installation, but decided the permanence of fired clay trash better compliments my artist statement and vision. By using the toilet form for my *White Trash*, I intended to create an element of shock value as a way to challenge my audience.

In addition to the visual artists mentioned above, TED talks (Technology Entertainment Design) has been a wonderful source of inspiration. TED is an annual conference that honors guest speakers such as noble laureates, inventors, entrepreneurs, artists and others who have extraordinary vision. A common theme presented at this annual ‘idea fest” is a quest to protect and enhance the future of life on this Earth. William McDonough is one of the many TED presenters whose messages resonate within me as an artist and as a conscious consumer. William McDonough, an architect and co-author of “*Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things,*” suggests that every manufactured product, including the packaging, be created to have a “closed-loop” cycle. This would result in every fabricated component being either recycled infinitely or biodegraded back to into a natural ecosystem. McDonough assesses what kind of culture we live in and he has concluded “we have a design flaw”.\textsuperscript{20}
refundable beverage containers are bought each year. Recycling forms a key component of waste reduction by adding or continuing the life cycle of an object. “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle” is a common phrase that aims to educate consumers on the effects of trash production.\textsuperscript{21} Is recycling a civic duty bestowed upon the masses or should this quandary be placed in the hands of the marketers and manufacturers to reconsider the role of material objects in our life? McDonough presented \textit{Cradle to Cradle} to the White House, stating, “Our goal is a delightfully diverse, safe, healthy and just world, with clean air, water, soil, and power-economically, equitably, ecologically and elegantly enjoyed.”\textsuperscript{22}

We live in abundance and we need to not fear limits. Therefore, the design must change. The change that needs to occur will only happen through education and consciousness. I aim to make work that addresses this message of reflection and hopefully inspires others to act “green”.
The Making: Trash, Toilets, and Technicalities

I struggled with finding the ideal way to convey a message of consumption, personal waste and disposal. I wanted to base my sculpture on domestic household waste, but felt there were numerous ways to visually communicate this. I knew the *Solid Waste* case study I submitted for the Garbage Archaeology class was the keystone. My goal was to expose the sheer volume of waste an individual generates within their home by using trash and material possessions to create a consumer profile.

I started my second year of graduate school by conducting research on material possession that illustrates consumer profiles within the home. The focus was on one’s need to collect, hoard, and store objects. I went to eight different homes and took pictures of how the tenants displayed their personal belongs. I documented the tenants’ communal and personal areas within their domestic habitat. Pictures were taken of counter tops, shelves, inside closets, cabinets, drawers, and refrigerators. I then posted these prints on my studio wall, creating a profile grid of all the households I captured. I planned to use these images as inspiration for my thesis installation. After months of staring at these pictures, I realized that ultimately, all of that material wealth was subsequently trash. The aftermath of consumerism is the point I needed to express. In other words, there was a direct correlation between one’s wealth status, and the nature and size of their waste.

Once I figured out trash was my focus, “how?” became the biggest question. The words of Julia Galloway kept cycling through my head: “Material is content”. What would be the best medium to execute this idea? My committee kept on asking, “Why clay?” I wasn’t able to answer that question until the spring quarter of my second year. Ceramics have adorned the home for centuries. Once fired, ceramic becomes permanent in this world. This relationship to the domestic and its state of permanence is a perfect juxtaposition for trash. Choosing to use the common porcelain toilet to be the form for *White Trash* confirmed that clay was the correct material for this body of work.
Bottles, cans, jars, disposable cups, and takeaway containers were the objects of discussion. I collected my personal garbage and then made plaster molds of these mass-produced throwaways. Using slip-casting as a method to recreate my trash was ideal. I could mass-replicate waste similar to those commodities created in factories. Seam lines from the plaster molds were left on the clay prints to reiterate the cold, machine-crafted sensibility of these common objects we interact with daily.

I began to arrange the clay trash in various ways. I tried stacking the forms, suspending them from the ceiling, mounting them on the wall, etc… However, none of the arrangements were close to what I envisioned. I had a huge hemisphere bisque mold in my studio space and I tried packing the mold with the clay trash to see if compressed waste was the answer. Thankfully, it was.

The compressed trash could take on any shape, but a basic pile form was not visually stimulating. Since my work was about individual waste contribution, I tried compressing trash in the human figure. This solution was too literal for me. Going back to the compressed trash pile, I asked myself, “Where is waste compacted?” Waste receptacles provide homes for trash, but a trashcan configuration was too obvious. Another waste receptacle used daily within the home is the porcelain toilet. Once I made that connection, I knew the domestic toilet was the solution.

The toilet itself is considered an impolite word in our culture. We have created euphemisms in order to talk about this taboo subject matter so we do not have to say it outright. We also use dysphemism to explain or express something with an extreme emotion in the most awful way. There are thirty-two different ways to refer to feces in our culture. I feel this touchy topic of human excrement is perceived similarly to that of material waste, both topics being different forms of human pollution.\(^{23}\) By using the toilet form I will then create a provocative platform for both topics of human waste.

The toilet mold consisted of two large press molds: the bottom base was made into 4 sections, and the top tank was a three-piece mold. The mold for the toilet base had three parts for the vertical walls and a large top section, which pressed down to form the toilet bowl. The bottom base mold ended up being over 150 lbs of plaster and made it very hard to maneuver. In order to
pack the bottom mold, I had to lay the three verticals walls down on their sides, slap in clay slabs, then lift the walls upright and use strap-wrench tie-downs to squeeze the walls tightly together. Once the three walls were lined up, I then dropped the top mold piece onto the wrenched sides. I allowed the clay toilet to set up for two days before removing the plaster mold.

I made thirteen full-scale toilets over a course of two months. I wanted to create a linear progression, starting from a slab-constructed toilet with no evidence of trash to a conglomerate of compressed trash that resembles the toilet shape. The first toilet in formation was created to keep to the original toilet shape. When packing the mold walls, I first threw the clay slabs out on the concrete floor to get a worn, hand-built quality. As the toilets progressed, the clay slabs become more torn to expose the inside of the sculpture, which were packed with slip cast trash. As the slab toilet starts to dematerialize, the slip cast trash becomes more prevalent. I would remove the slip cast trash prints out of their molds at a very wet stage and then piled them up in the toilet base and tank molds to be smashed into compressed waste toilets. At the end of the linear progression were toilets composed solely of slip casted trash. The last toilet in the line was created to look as if the trash toilet was over flowing with waste (Figure 12).

I bisque fired the toilets to cone 04 and glaze fired them to the same temperature. I glazed the casted toilets all white to imply a sterile, industrial tone to the sculptures similar to the commercial toilet from which I took a mold of. I wanted to strip all contexts from the trash and have the sheer volume of the waste be the focus. The color of the work also passively touches on the topic of white America and the gluttonous society in which we live. *White Trash* is not only an observation of society as a whole, but also an investigation on the individual consumer. *White
Trash is a reflection of me, and my personal contribution to the solid waste stream in America. The garbage we create is an extension of our self and our behavior.

During crunch time I came across a serious problem. Two weeks before my MFA opening I started blowing up toilets. The kiln in which I consistently fired my work had its elements replaced, which resulted in catastrophe. While my faithful kiln was being repaired, I tried out the brand new oval kiln that arrived in the studio a month prior. The new kiln fired extremely quickly and was air tight; the atmosphere differed drastically from the original kiln I had fired in over the past few months. I had toilets crazing and shivering to such intensity I had to cart them outside to allow room for them to self-destruct. Due to the lack of time for problem solving, auto-body paint was my fix all. The glazed toilets and the painted toilets had a slight variation in color temperature, but in the end when all the work was installed and presented at my MFA show, it did not matter what medium was used to cover the surface. White Trash’s content was strong enough that no one even noticed the slight difference in pigment. The point is not to change a thing in your studio routine when under the wire. The kiln gods will not be acting upon one’s favor.

Clay Body

Hawthorne Bond 50%
XX Sager 25%
OM4 ball clay 25%

Nytal talc 2%

* For slip cast add a dash of Darvan deflocculant- mix to preferred thickness
The Show: *White Trash*, the Installation

The title of my MFA show is also the title of the installation, *White Trash*. At the entrance of the gallery sat the original toilet I used to make the toilet press mold. The original toilet, and sculptural toilets, were all presented on tall pedestals at height. Originally, I planned to exhibit *White Trash* on low plinths to reference the placement of toilets within the home and also suggest the euphemism of toilets as a throne. Having *White Trash* displayed low to the ground gave the audience an aerial view, which as a result created distance between the sculptures and their message. I wanted the subject matter of my installation to be presented up close to the eye of the viewer. An “in your face” presentation pressed the issue of one’s personal connection to *White Trash* and provoked a reflection on one’s contribution to the solid waste stream of America.

SOHO Gallery is in an old, industrial building located in downtown Rochester, New York. The walls of the space are composed of brick and cinder blocks painted white. The gallery floor has a poured concrete slab, which has been sealed by grey latex paint. When constructing the pedestals, I chose to match them to the color of the gallery floor and then replicate a poured concrete slab surface for the tops of the pedestals. This recreation of the gallery floor implied that the toilets were still being presented on the ground but the subject matter of *White Trash* had been elevated in order to confront the audience.

When entering the space, the viewer was greeted by a line of five toilets that showed a progression of deterioration in a right to left formation. I had to build the toilets in two parts for practical reasons of kiln firing and transportation. Once the toilet bases were positioned on their pedestals, I used plumbers putty to attach the base to its matching toilet.
tank. The plumbers putty is a two-part grey adhesive. By applying white nail polish, the spot welds were covered. The dimension of the toilet bases ranged around 20”x14”x26” and the toilet tanks sized at 15”x16”x8,” totaling a mass of 35”x16”x26”.

Directly across from the line of five toilets stood one lone toilet that showed an extreme decomposition from the original toilet form. The “end result” White Trash toilet was positioned against the wall opposite of the commercial toilet at the entrance of my gallery space. This toilet was create solely from slip cast trash and barely resembles the introductory toilet of the series. Bisqued slip casted trash and ceramic shards were piled up from the floor as if the toilet form was over flowing with waste. As the viewer stepped close to examine the sculpture the ceramic shards scattered on the floor crunched under their feet. This affect enhanced the installation’s message about one’s personal environmental footprint created by being a part of consumer America.

Figure 12 White Trash-end result, 2009
Conclusion

How does garbage, and our production and distribution of it, factor into how we construct ourselves as a nation? Enculturation is needed when an individual decides what standards set by society should be followed. We define ourselves based on the framework of society. We see ourselves as individuals because we come from a culture that defines us as such in a capitalist, mass-consumer society. Consumerism is behavior and behavior is culture. Material culture is garbage and through this it creates a national identity.

As a whole, America still believes in manifest destiny. It will take an extreme culture shock to disrupt this paradigm and acknowledge the destruction that has already occurred. Personal decision-making is based upon human interaction and environmental surroundings. Human agency is the ability for people to make choices and then influence those choices on the world. *White Trash* attempts to create a cultural reflection on the current state of American consumerism and non-biodegradable waste. Garbage is an extension of our self and our behavior. In order to live up to society’s norm, there is no way we cannot produce trash. Through education, personal reflection and mass communication, we can find a resolution to our solid waste crisis.

Since my thesis exhibition, my artwork remains a direct response to American consumerism and social identity through material objects. These social topics will be a common thread for most of my future work. It has taken me several years to find my place as an artist since leaving RIT. The lack of studio access and facilities graduate school had previously provided altered the materials I began to work with. Paper, a common, disposable material with a short life cycle, was readily available and a nearly cost-free art medium. By using scrap paper from old publications, I fashioned a series of wallpaper installations with the idea of creating beauty out of the ordinary. The paper crafted interior decor challenges the value of materials utilized in our culture by examining what is deemed luxurious and what we perceive as waste.

There are many uncertainties about my career as a craftsman; but what I do know is that I am a studio artist. Over the past year I have spent hundreds of hours building my own studio so that I
can create again in a similar setting that of graduate school. In addition, I am learning how to be a sole proprietor of a small production business: Law Artistry. Currently, I am designing a ceramic home/interior design line that unites elements of high art with mass culture. It is comprised of clay casts of everyday, mundane objects, similar to the White Trash exhibition. The work will be pressed or strung together to create larger forms representative of posh origin. The juxtaposition of objects which signify aristocracy yet composed of low-brow subject matter intrigues me by deliberately creating a clash of the American social class system. I feel this is American consumerism culture in a nut shell; a nation of cheap, factory made, knock-offs that are color coated and gilded in artificial bling to then be marketed as high fashion.

Law Artistry’s ceramic design line aims to produce formal serving ware, elegant lamps, delicate flower vases, chandeliers, candelabras, and other home accessories symbolic of high society yet with a blue-collar twist. In addition, Law Artistry will release several architectural tile motifs for kitchen and bathroom installations. The objective is to transforms the domestic setting into a formal gallery space by creating a social dialog on American consumer culture and personal identity through material possessions. We are a product of our environment: a disposable nation. We are what we buy, we are what we use, and we are what we throw away.
Images
Works Cited


   <http://www.macmillandictionary.com/thesaurus-category/american/Human-and-animal-waste>
Additional Reading Material


