Based on a true story

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Thesis Paper for the Master of Fine Arts Degree

College of Imaging Arts and Science
School for American Crafts
Rochester Institute of Technology

Title: Based On A True Story

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Date: 05/15/13
Thesis Committee

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My thesis exhibition will contain work that is derived from objects in my family history. Through this work, I will research concepts of family investigation and self-identity. With the use of glass as well as other materials, I will work from site visits, memories, and family stories to create individual sculptures. When combined, these separate pieces will function as a whole in a narrative installation. This work will pay tribute to the makers that came before me in my family, as well as further my knowledge and understanding of the importance of the objects in my life.

Inspired directly by familiar objects that have spoken to me throughout my life, I will transform the material, scale, vary the form as well as the surface textures and colors to create subtly narrative objects that speak of loss, transience, solemnity and family history. The work created will be both an homage to my family and community as well as an effort to connect to a generation I admire and relate to through the physical making of objects.

I have created objects that attempt to communicate while also displaying respect to my grandfather, one of the few men who I truly admire and strive to emulate. I endeavor to construct scenarios and create objects that both he and I can share a connection through. This body of work will strengthen my understanding of myself and my family, while also creating sculptures that can function as placeholders for family memories, community traditions, and geographically specific ideas.
“To be without history is to be forgotten.”¹

I am vastly intrigued by the past, not the stories that are recorded throughout textbooks and studied by historians around the world, but the lesser-known tales. My interest is in the stories we hear rarely in the classroom, but more often in grandmother’s stale, pale-yellow kitchen or on docks with wet feet, while ships rub and moan against pylons. These are the stories so powerful they are re-told again and again without ever being written down. These are the memories that become translated into an oral history, and later help form a historical fiction for an individual, a family, and a community.

This written thesis and the physical work derived within it, is centered on investigation of the individual and self-discovery. I remain deeply interested in who I am and why. I have become more aware of my own personal interests, faults, strengths and values. In an attempt to understand and develop myself, I have focused my research on family, geographical origin, and oral history (stories) and objects from my past. Through research into my own background and the lessons learned from the creation of the work I hope to continue developing a stronger understanding of myself.

The need to create, to build and to construct is instilled within me. While I acknowledge that this may be a trait that I developed independently, I prefer to credit this passion to those in my past who have followed a similar path. I want to embrace my heritage and credit those makers that came before me. I am consciously romanticizing the past; assigning new meaning and significance to events, while celebrating individuals and locations that I happily recognize as not based solely in scientific fact.

¹ Donald Hall, A String To Short Too Be Saved pg. 21
Recent developments within my family have increased my appreciation of; my mother’s stepfather, Edward Hawkes. Ed was born in Marblehead, Massachusetts - the same small coastal town where my mother was raised. Throughout my life I have had many experiences with Ed that centered on the sea. He was a fisherman, a sailor, a lobsterman, and an avid duck hunter; the most chivalrous gentlemen I have ever known.

When I was little I would wonder down into his basement and see the pieces and parts of the carved wooden decoys he was constantly creating and detailing. I remember his sea shanty and the sense of mystery that surrounded it. I can taste salt when I think back to the rowing lessons in Marblehead Harbor, and even after his ninety-second birthday, he would not sit at the dinner table until he slid my grandmother’s chair in beneath her. While I was always intrigued, it was not until recently that I became inspired by Ed’s personality, work ethic, and devotion. He has been a maker, out of necessity as well as desire, his entire life. It was not until the later stages of his life that we began to connect. Our conversations always began over objects and processes, as well as our shared obsession with the sea. Ed was from a generation that is fading, a group of humans
with an unwavering amount of pride and respect for where they are from and what they do. Ed’s morals were steadfast, even stubborn, his hand showed the years of physical labor he had endured, and yet awoke so quickly to demonstrate a knot or a carving technique. Since I was a boy, with a healthy desire to please, I have sought approval for the things I take part in. Hearing stories again and again about the almost cliché hardships he and others had overcome I have subconsciously always wanted to prove my own worth to my family and community.

My work has a direct correlation with the Northeast of the United States, mainly New England. It is here that my obsession with stories of the past grew into a deeply regarded appreciation for the era and locale that generated them. Location has a direct connection with our ideas of identity, as individuals, such as an American, a Yankee, a New Englander, a Mainer or a Marble Header, are titles we assume in order to break down our identity into more specific classifications. It is common to transition between
pride and resentment towards the location you are a part of. As I grew up and went through adolescence, I felt a disdain for the rural environment to which I was accustomed. I distinctly remember wanting nothing more then to get off of the farm in central Maine and move to a more urban environment. What I did not realize at the time was the admiration that had grown inside of me for this type of environment and how years later after living in a metropolitan area for some time I would come to recognize and acknowledge that sentiment. After being removed from the environment I had been raised in, I began to recognize the strong connection I felt for place. Without knowing it, I had learned values and customs associated with this environment. I realized I had learned about physical labor, ideas of growth that one must put in work - physical and mental - in order to receive reward. Ideas like these had been taught to me from my parents, of course, but I also believe they were imbued in me simply based on my physical surrounding. These lessons taught by place are taught first to an individual, fostered throughout a family, and later serve to define a community. They span generations and can even be taught or merely recognized by those who only briefly visit an area.

We examine the objects society leaves behind in order to learn about the people involved. This study can be done on a much smaller scale in order to understand a community, a family or even one’s self. Whether utilitarian or decorative, we connect with objects because of our constant engagement with the tangible items around us. It is easy to see how an object can embody, and eventually evoke, a memory or an experience. An object can hold stories as powerful as written word, and these items become Narrative Objects. It is my opinion that the Narrative Object is not an object that is
created with this intent, but instead one that develops and grows over time, slowly achieving this result. The level of reverence we hold for an object can be based on its material worth, but also from the perception of its intangible qualities or personal associations. Many artists and writers have explored this idea of perception; one such project was called *Significant Objects* started by Joshua Glenn and Rob Walker. “The goal of our project was to test the following hypothesis: Stories are such a powerful driver of emotional value that their effect on any given object’s subjective value can actually be measure objectively.”

Through out this project Glenn and Walker collaborated with other writers to create stories about seemingly insignificant objects and then resell these objects accompanied by the newly written historical fiction of the object. The test was to see if these objects monetary value increased when the buyer was presented with a story reflecting the objects “past”. When the fabricated histories were most in-depth and interesting the object’s values did increase, dramatically. “It wasn’t that he was a miser, because he cared nothing for the money he saved by collecting used nails. And when he died he did not, like the misers in the newspapers, leave a hundred thousand dollars in the back of a mirror; he left a hundred thousand straightened nails. He saved the nails because it was a sin to allow good material to go to waste.”

It was a particular material that first opened my eyes to what now has become a lifestyle stylized around my studio practice. Glass took me from a disillusioned adolescence with little appreciation or respect, and set me on a course towards the investigations I am continuing today. Without this admiration and attraction towards a material I do not know what path I would have followed. The characteristics of glass

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2 Joshua Glenn and Rob Walker *Significant Objects* Introduction
3 Donald Hall, A String Too Short To Be Saved pg. 26
allow it to immediately speak about time and history. The translucency of clear glass immediately evokes a feeling of transience or an object temporary in nature. Our preconceptions of glass inform us of its fragility as a material. Glass has many suitable applications, however, there are few instances when a non-glass functional object could be transitioned from its original material to glass and still be considered utilitarian. This ability to transform from a utilitarian object, to the inherently useless one, allows the maker to propose a higher meaning to an object that would otherwise be seen as mundane. There is a quality to the heavily used objects that is unattainable by any other method besides the passage of time and the wear from use. This aged quality imbues these objects with a level of importance far beyond that of the new. This importance is elevated when the creation of that object was done by hand, and elevated further when that hand in the creation is possessed by an individual with whom the user is familiar. This result is one that I am intrigued by, and a property of objects I strive to achieve within my own work.

My interest in glass has fluctuated over the years, starting with a strong admiration, transforming into distain and coming full circle back to the desire to understand the material fully. This desire has driven me to investigate as many processes as possible with glass. From glass blowing, to casting, cold working and machining, as well as slumping and fusing. I am interested in an ability to approach glass from a glass-makers perspective while being open to use the material in ways that are not common practice. Thinking about processes used in wood and metal-working as well as processes more familiar with industry, I strive to achieve unusual joinery, surface texture, and forms.
In this body of work, I began with an object I felt held an emotional value for me. I analyzed the most appropriate way to create an alternative scenario that both related to the original object, but led the viewer towards a feeling or emotive response. This work is meant to speak to the viewer on a solemn level. The objects in themselves contain ideas about loss, emptiness, transience, loneliness or sadness. I want to highlight an object’s ability to tell a story and hold emotion.

In the piece *Piscatorbis Sacrum* I recognized an object that was familiar to a specific geographical location, and one that was held dear in the memories of a group of people from this area. The plastic five-gallon bucket, rim lined with lures, is a symbol of an older generation of surf fisherman. Before the sport of fishing was what it is today, fisherman would carry their gear down to the water’s edge with a simple bucket. The bucket would contain any materials they needed, and the rim allowed ample storage places for lures, and kept them from tangling up with one another. Now most fishermen have tackle boxes or specialty bags for carrying lures; and the day of the old five-gallon bucket has passed. However, to a certain generation of New Englanders, specifically, this object is special, it speaks of a more simple time, an age of modesty perhaps. I wanted to speak of the loss of this object, while alluding to the loss of tradition and even a generation. While I cannot expect a viewer from Missouri to recognize this deeply New England object, I
can expect them to understand a single lure dangling on an empty bucket. Through surface texture, lack of color, display, and text I can also push them along a path leading them closer to feelings that will resonate within them; feelings of loss or sadness. The logistics of creating a glass five-gallon bucket became complicated. I was aware of the quality I wanted the bucket to have, but was unsure of my ability to kiln cast such an object. I came to a process of combining the kiln casting process with the blowing process. After achieving a wax positive of the bucket, I invested this in plaster silica and contained that within a rolled steel drum, this mold was then heated up within a kiln pulled-out, while I and a team of blowers dropped a large bubble into the mold. I was able to achieve the proper shape and surface from the mold as well as maintain a certain level of accuracy on the interior of the bucket. Technical processes such as annealing and using a more complicated mold were avoided entirely, and I was able to focus more on the object at hand. The glass bucket was later divested and through the use of cold working as well as flame working I was able to create and adjust the appropriate details to achieve the overall object.
I am often concerned by the stigma that comes with fine art today. I believe in some circles Fine Art is seen as exclusive, it seems sometimes that the viewer must be so learned in order to understand the concept behind the work that the work is overlooked by the average human. I am interested in society’s ability to appreciate sculptural fine art on a more simplistic level. Although I appreciate and recognize the years of art history that all artists evoke when a piece is created, I am also interested in the reaction that comes from the unlearned individual in art. The narrative objects I have found so appealing are often objects of folk art, or simply tools designed and built with a purpose and embellished with a personal maker’s or communities aesthetic. These objects are not held to the same esteem that the Fine Art Object is today, however, I find them equally as compelling. I am interested in the ability of sculpture to function in a similar manner.

Throughout the creation of this work, the process has suggested ideas and concepts that I have not yet investigated. I plan to continue exploring the work I am making now - I do not believe I have said all I can about these objects. At the same time, I will begin investigating work that will lead me in new directions. I have become interested in survival, both in a literal sense as well as metaphorical. I have begun thinking about the skills I have developed and how to use those to create the lifestyle I desire. Through this thought process I have come to of possible scenarios that relate to these ideas, using glass as well as other materials to create non-existence methods of survival such as floatation devices. I will continue a disciplined studio practice in hopes of gaining residency opportunities as well as obtain chances for myself and studio practice in order to travel, adapt, and continue to be influenced by the world around.
I am interested in discovering a confidence within myself, recognizing my strengths, and the qualities I possess that can be translated into teaching methods/opportunities. This thesis work has taught me a great deal, I have spent energy investigating my material, thoroughly learning and experimenting in all of the traditional ways of working with glass, while crossing over and bringing other processes to my material. My hope is to continue expanding my abilities to create, build and make, while at the same time strengthening my intellectual knowledge of what we as makers and artists do. I have become interested in building a body of work off of this thesis work, by using similar objects as starting points, though abstracting them into my formal, less-literal, sculpture. This abstraction will allow me to begin focusing on the more bare elements of what makes an appealing object, while still referencing the ideas I am passionate about. I have been focused in a particular scale for all of the Thesis research, working with realistic size and proportions to these already existent objects. This work has helped me realize that I have a desire to be comfortable in all scales - large and small. By abstracting some of these forms it will give me the freedom to use scale as a conscious choice for the overall concept of the work. I would like to continue to expand my understanding of hand skills and my physical capabilities with materials, however I have a strong desire to grow intellectually, through research of my contemporaries as well as those who have come before me. I hope to understand the Art World more thoroughly with all of its offshoots. I am passionate about learning all aspects of the art world in hopes that one day I will be able to pass my own education on to others through a well rounded and experienced teaching process.
Bibliography

1. Donald Hall (1960), *String to Short to be Saved: Recollections of Summers on a New England Farm*, Jaffery, New Hampshire, David R. Godine, Publisher.


Piscatoribus Sacrum
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2013
Apple Knocker
Cast Glass, Found Wood
2012
What Remains
Blown Glass, Found Rope
2013
Raft For Ed
Cast Glass, Rope, Paper
2013
Unfinished Untold
Kiln Formed Glass, Copper
2013