Drudgery to grace: A Philosophy of aesthetics

Daniel Jennings

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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Drudgery to Grace: A Philosophy of Aesthetics
By Daniel Christopher Jennings
August 1, 2001
Thesis Proposal for the Masters of Fine Arts

College of Imaging Arts and Science
Rochester Institute of Technology

Title: Drudgery to Grace: A Philosophy of Aesthetics

Submitted by: Daniel Jennings
Date: September 26, 2000

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<td>Associate Advisor: Robin Cass</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Associate Advisor: Albert Paley</td>
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Associate Advisor: ____________________________  ____________________________
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Dedication

I would like to thank my parents for their unyielding patience and support. Without their faith and love I never would have been able to finish this undertaking. I would also like to thank Michael Taylor for his input and understanding. His humor made this journey much more enjoyable. Alidad, Khaled and Todd, thank you all from the bottom of my heart for your friendship and support. Robin, Ben and Morgan, thank you for your assistance and your friendship. You will never know how much I have enjoyed and appreciated the time we passed together. Finally, I wish to thank Michele and Kayla Manzek for providing me with an unending supply of love and smiles. You both have made me a better person for knowing you. Thank you and God bless you all.
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The search for the sublime in the concrete is the basis of my thesis exploration. Using a Hegelian approach to establish a language of form, I will develop an individual philosophy of aesthetics through cast and hotworked glass objects and sculptures. I will create objects of meditation to provide the means for personal spiritual responses in the viewer, which question the human condition. Using an installation based on diverse symbols taken from such sources as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, I will form a dialogue with the viewer. This syncretic approach to my work will provide a coherent basis for appreciation and acknowledgment of life from the banal to the extraordinary.
The search for the sublime in the concrete is the basis for my thesis exploration. Using a Hegelian approach to establish a language of form, I will develop an individual philosophy of the aesthetic through cast and hot-worked glass objects and sculptures. I will create objects of meditation to stimulate personal spiritual responses in the viewer regarding the human condition. Using an installation based on diverse symbols identified with such sources as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, I seek to dialogue with the viewer. This syncretic approach to my work offers a coherent basis for appreciation and acknowledgment of life from the banal to the extraordinary.

The premise of this thesis is that the contemplation and realization of an internal life aesthetic can be facilitated through the utilization of form to establish personal icons. The body of work represents this premise in four parts. Each division of the subject is meant to induce an aspect of a dialogue with the viewer. This dialogue starts with a question, then follows with the processes of examination, reflection and finally realization. Developing an internal repository of both form and inquisition is the aim of this work. Primarily, it is a personal exercise to culminate my two years of study at RIT. Secondly, this body of work is intended to serve as a catalyst, causing the audience to question their own truths as related to one's own development of self, a consciousness of one's spirit, and an awareness of the Ideal.

"The process of development in consciousness is conceived by Hegel as dialectically-opposing movements, conflicting principles, reconciled in a synthesis that supercedes each moment, only to undergo conflict itself and subsequent supersession. Each supersession includes the conflicting moments that gave rise to it. The fulfillment of the process is consciousness aware of itself as free cause of itself. This is Absolute Spirit, the Absolute Idea, realizable only through its
own history, The Universal in the concrete” (143, Ross).

I am a person who is governed by rules. Finding precepts to accept and live by is a continuous task. To prove a theorem one must follow rules, absolutes. There are many pathways to follow in life. We all are faced with a life journey and as a result we have to consider what are the rules for negotiating that journey. This work is a formulation of a construct that has assisted me in the discovery and creation of these rules.

PART I INFLUENCES

There have been many influences in my life up to this point. The influences that have had the greatest effect on me are my parents. They instilled a love of exploration as well as a love for life. Stories from my father about his travel around the world and my mother’s insight into people’s actions, as well as her creativity as an artist, have served me well. Having lived in Europe and the Mid-East has also given me many different points of reference. What I have learned from the art and architecture, and from the people with different cultural and religious backgrounds I have tried to utilize in my work and my life. Whether from Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, or my own Judeo-Christian heritage, religious concepts of the nature and meaning of life and reality have given me insight into the needs of humans in their life experience. Using religion as a format for one’s spirituality can provide a basis for the applicable rules of one’s life journey. I am not a true believer in organized religion but I do appreciate its aim of providing the tools to negotiate life experiences.

When contemplating my work, I look at a myriad of sources for inspiration. I look at architecture for its grandeur and its geometry (Plate 1). I look at Hindu sculpture, Buddhist miniature painting, illuminated manuscripts, and even oriental carpets (Plates 2-5). I take feelings, histories, textures and techniques from all. That process of gathering and sorting these things into a
finished piece of work is what consumes me. The investigation and journey of a piece are what drive me. The finished product many times is but an added bonus.

Individual artists by whom I have been influenced were introduced to me by purposeful investigation as well as by accident. I look at the work of Isamu Noguchi (Plate 6), his use of line, form and his writing on meaning in modern sculpture. Arnoldo Pomodoro (Plate 7) has written about his purpose of creating pieces for “investigation and contemplation.” Radu Varia Brancusi (Plate 8) strives to elevate his work into something that can only be experienced, not understood. It is a lofty goal, given people’s need to strive for understanding even when there is nothing to be understood. Rodin (Plate 9) deals with many of the same issues in his work. The essence of beauty is not something that can be understood. It can be truly contemplated only through the thoughts and feelings it evokes.

A number of glass artists have had an especially great influence on my work by providing both artistic and technical insight. The firsthand experience gained from watching and interacting with all of these artists has been invaluable. Michael Rodgers shared his process of working through his subject matter as well as the origins of inspiration for his work (Plate 10). Jane Bruce also added to my insight into process (Plate 11). Her ability to quantify her own work has been invaluable to the understanding of my own. The encouragement I have received from Dick Weiss and Walter Lieberman has been two-fold (Plate 12). Looking at their work and its subject matter has grown increasingly valuable to me as they have interacted with me not only about their process but their thoughts and ideas about my work as well. It is the willingness to freely share ideas and observations openly that I find to be most influential and instructional.

There are also some glass artists whose work alone has strongly influenced me. Howard Ben Tre’s work is more about sculpture than about glass (Plate 13). While glass is his medium, it is not
the focus of the work. He does not let himself become bound to the medium. Bertil Vallien shows more of a focus on the material in his work (Plate 14). He makes a strong use of symbolism in much of his work, providing a visual narrative for the viewer. I find myself falling somewhere in between. I want to use form and material to create a narrative for myself as well as for the viewers. While it is not necessary for them to see all of my work in the same way I view it, I would simply like them to be inspired to question, and with that questioning gain answers or, even more importantly, new questions. It is this questioning that draws me to Josiah McEhheny’s work. His work represents a continuous personal journey and an effort to make sense of the journey itself (Plate 15). It is the investigation of his world that is the important part. The viewer sees the product of the action; the process of the questioning is the work. Through all of these artists’ work I gain a better perspective that enhances my criticism of my own work.

The development of my work and my own understanding of it would not have been possible without the influence of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). His view of history as a progression in consciousness is what intrigues and inspires me. The idea is the force that drives the development of consciousness. He was dialectic in his approach to rationalization of man’s sanguine history. This dialectic process of thesis/antithesis was the only way to reach a synthesis, a higher state of consciousness. His teleological view of this dialectic was his reasoning behind his participant view of history and the individual’s relationship to it. I can relate to this Hegelian view that the individual is being led through this dialectic process in pursuit of the Ideal.

“Now, therefore, what the particular arts realize in individual works of art is, according to the Concept of art, only the universal forms of the self-unfolding Idea of beauty. It is as the external actualization of this idea that the wide Pantheon of art is rising. Its architect and builder is the self-
comprehending spirit of beauty, but to complete it will need the history of the world in its
development through thousands of years” (Ross, 159).

I relate most to this position of the artist having extreme importance and yet being a participant. Every artist I have had the opportunity to interact with has expressed this idea that it isn’t a choice; it is a necessity to create, to develop, to pursue an understanding of the world they live in.

PART II  THESIS WORK

The first piece is Line of Questioning. (26”x10”x78”) (Plate 16-18) It is made up of a pedestal (14”x10”x78”) painted an extremely pale celadon. It has seven hot-formed amorphic glass protuberances standing at regular intervals down its entire length. The pieces of glass are mounted to patinated copper plates that are themselves mounted to the pedestal. The glass pieces are sand blasted except for a polished facet on the tip of each piece. On each piece there is silver lettering spelling out the word “Why” in seven different languages, one word per piece. The words in English, Russian, Arabic, Spanish, French, and Korean are illuminated by a light that emanates through the glass from openings in the pedestal underneath each of the mounting plates.

Line of Questioning was placed as the introduction to my work. It serves as a first step in the process of my thesis investigation. It speaks to the universality of questioning through the use of the various languages. The word “why” was used because of its primary place among questions. Why can, and is, used to examine all other questions. Children do not ask how, where, or when the sky is blue; they ask why? My use of the amorphic forms is to represent natural growths. Through the curves of the glass I wanted to show movement, growth, a continuum. The polished facets
emphasize the importance of the inscribed words. This emphasis is further enhanced by the addition of light. The light not only speaks to the vitality of the subject; it acts as a symbol for life. The success of the Line of Questioning is tied to the communication of my work. The pieces were meant to be a starting point for the illustration of my thesis work. In that regard, I feel it was successful. It forms a basic statement on what the rest of the work is both about and what it hopes to induce. Taken by itself, there is much that could be improved upon. If it were the sole subject of my thesis I would have done more to the pieces, perhaps dealing with other questions as well as increasing the number of pieces. Technically, the only thing I would have done differently would be to use a brighter light source to better emphasize both the piece and the light itself as an integral part of the concept. Formulating a starting point for my work was my main goal as related to my thesis and to this end I feel it was successful in leading to the next step in my examination.

When dealing with questions in my life, I find it necessary to understand the process. To form a process one has to create or discover rules, or steps to follow. This process is what I have tried to illustrate in my next piece, Recognition, Remotion, Response (Plate 19-21). All three pieces are kiln cast glass. I used clear culled to produce a translucent white color very reminiscent of alabaster. They all sit on 24"x 36" pieces of patinated black steel that lie directly on the floor. Recognition (8"x14"x14") (Plate 22) is a kneeling human form with hands folded in its lap and face turned upward. Remotion (9"x10"x16") (Plate 23) is a slightly larger human form that rests on its knees with its arms outstretched and its head down over its knees. Response (12"x9"x24") (Plate 24) is yet another slightly larger human form that rests on its stomach with arms and legs outstretched. As well as increasing in size, the succeeding forms become increasingly figurative. They morph in size and realism. They are displayed in a line facing east with Remotion to the right of Recognition and Response to the right of Remotion.
These three pieces were meant to illustrate the process of examination, specifically the examination of a question and the steps involved. There is first the recognition of a question, which involves the acceptance of it. This acceptance is why I chose to posture the form on its knees with head facing upward to communicate a feeling of openness. Recognition is also the most realistic of the three forms to show it is the beginning of the process.

The second piece is Remotion defined as the act of departing. The position of this piece is one that communicates both supplication and introspection, leaving past thoughts. There is a representation of cognition of the accepted question with its outstretched arms and head turned down over its knees. This meditative stance parallels the supplication of religious worshipers. My response to Remotion is one that draws heavily on the prostrate worship postures of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. This form grows larger and transforms itself into a slightly more figurative form. This dialectic process is concluded in the next piece Response.

Response is a necessary part of any process of questioning. The answer need not be definitive, it can be yet another question, but it is still a response. This piece, Response, is the third step in this process of questioning. It morphs into a larger, more figurative form communicating an idea of growth and transformation. This transformation of form illustrates the outcome of the process of living. Its outstretched arms and legs that are starting to rise off the floor suggest an inherent feeling of freedom and the possibilities available to anyone willing to pursue life. It is this continuous process that becomes the journey. One finds destinations along the way, but it is this continuous process of synthesis that becomes life.

The creation of this piece was a breakthrough in my thesis work. It optimized my work. It has helped me understand my work to a greater extent than ever before. To this end, I feel it was extremely successful. I wanted it to represent this dialectic process I use in dealing with my work in
a somber meditative way. By placing it on the floor, I wanted it to exemplify the feelings of worship and universality that life represents. It embodies the sensation I achieve at times when truly contemplating why. After this piece of examination, I was drawn to create some personal pieces for my own reflection.

The series of quilted vessels are what I created for this purpose of reflection. This series is made up of four pieces all kiln cast glass. *Quilted Vessel #5 (20”x16”x40”) (Plate 25)* was cast using cullet, cobalt and borax, which created an opaque glass that contained swirls of white and blue resembling marble. It is a footed boat form with variegated copper leaf on the foot, the rim and the buttons that form the quilting. *Quilted Vessel #12 (22”x16”x16”), Quilted Vessel #13 (22”x16”x16”), and Quilted Vessel #14 (22”x16”x16”) (Plates 26-31)* were all cast using chunk de verre. All three are transparent shades of blue in color. They are in bowl form with small ringed pedestal feet.

These four pieces were all executed with the idea of reflection in mind, utilizing Trompe l’oeil to show the paradox that life many times offers. Things are not always what they seem. *Quilted Vessel #5* uses its opacity and decoration to force the viewer to investigate. One must examine the form to discover what it is made of as well as find out if it is soft or hard. It is the paradox of appearing soft yet being tactiley reminiscent of stone that provides for an interesting dichotomy that begs for reconciliation in the mind of the viewer. The other three vessels speak to the same issues while at the same time expressing a purity that is communicated through their transparency. Their ability to capture and transfer light truly illuminates the continuous process of reconciliation of light and dark, hard and soft. This process of thesis/antithesis into synthesis is what the pieces are all about.

These four pieces were more internally motivated than the other work in my thesis. In my
own life, I am greatly served by objects that are useful as focal points for meditation. I consider these to be more internally motivated because they were conceived and executed primarily for my own use as such iconographic objects. The success of these pieces can be addressed on three levels. First, they all were very successful technically. *Quilted Vessel #5* weighs approximately 200 pounds and was cast in a two-part mold that weighed close to 500 pounds. The other three vessels all weigh around 100 pounds and were cast in three-part molds. The second point is that I feel they accomplished what I set out to do personally. They embody the questions I deal with on a daily basis in my work. Who am I? How am I perceived? How do I perceive others? The third and last point is their success in relation to the audience. On this point I feel they were not as successful as they could have been. I have found that my audience for the pieces was much more preoccupied with the technical aspects of the pieces than the concept behind the pieces. I am not sure how I could better communicate my aim in this regard, whether it would be through scale, color or some other aspect. This experience of creating my work as dialogue leads to the last point, realization.

*Moppet, Father, and August* are the three pieces that make up the realization series (Plates 32,33). They all measure (22”x22”x8”). They are constructed of a fabricated aluminum and copper frame with sides formed by burgundy-colored cast glass panels. They also sit on cast glass feet. The interiors of the pieces are upholstered with cream-colored silk. All three have an image on a glass plate that rests inside the boxes. The images are of myself as a child *Moppet*, my father as a young man *Father*, and my grandfather as a young man *August*.

These pieces were created to realize a sensual product for this process of questioning. They form a literal outcome of my own internal dialogue. They embody the practical application of questioning one’s life and one’s place in the world. In *Moppet* (Plate 34), I am illustrating the naive innocence that I find myself searching for in my own life: that sense of peace and security that is
only available to the young. *Father* and *August* (Plates 35,36) are an effort to embody the source of much of that security I had known when I was a child. Dealing with the images as if they are being put to rest is a way to acknowledge and recognize those feelings that I long for. The pieces form a peaceful resting place for thoughts of days gone by. The glass in the panels is formed to appear quilted in the same manner as the series of quilted vessels. It speaks to the same concerns of the inherent dichotomy of life being both hard and soft and the ever present need to reconcile the two on a continuous basis. There is also the decorative effect of celebrating the thoughts and pieces of life held within. The images that are held on the half-inch plate are given depth through the use of glass. To the viewers, the images are clear, yet untouchable, due to the distance provided by the glass.

The intent and the vision of these pieces are realized. They speak to the realization of a product that came out of my own aesthetic. I feel as a whole the pieces are successful. The craftsman has answers to technique involved in the making of the piece. The only thing that I feel would have improved these pieces would be the use of a more transparent glass. Better lighting would have helped in this aspect, but I feel the depth and the dialogue in the quilted vessels would have been better achieved if a lighter glass were used.

PART III CONCLUSION

The past two years spent working on my Master’s degree have been more rewarding than I ever imagined. The process of learning all of the technical aspects of this material opened whole new possibilities in my work. With those possibilities came the necessity to further comprehend not only where my inspiration was coming from but also where it was heading. In my thesis work I hoped to encapsulate this whole process that I utilize to form my own aesthetic. It is that search for the sublime in the sensual that drives me. It is through this journey of discovery that I have started to
create a vocabulary of form for myself to further my journey. I do not believe I will show again with such a wide view of work. I plan on pursuing more work that has to do with the process of examination, the step-by-step explanation of a process. It is through the practice of examination that I gain insight and understanding for my own life. All of my work is a necessity. It is not a choice. It is something I need to do in order to move through life. It is a continuous process of moving from the banal to the extraordinary. It is a journey from drudgery to grace.
Gloriette, Schönbrunn, Vienna
Ferdinand Hetzendorf von Hohenberg, completed 1775

Plate 1
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Celestial Woman Under a Tree Branch
Attributed to Khajuraho, Pradesh. Sandstone, 80.6cm. AD 1075-1100
Plate 3
Crossing the Stream
Keichyu Yamada, Watercolor on silk, 7.5"x5". 1898
Plate 4
M.945, fol.107r from the Hours of Catherine of Cleves illuminated in Utrecht, c.1440
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