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Heirlooms

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Heirlooms

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I. Thesis Statement/Abstract

Tools have always played an important role in my life. Whether I was in my dad's workshop or my grandfather's garage, I always had a fascination with tools. As a child, my father encouraged me to explore the use of different tools in his woodshop. As he showed me how to use them, I became the next generation to learn the skills of a craftsman. In the past few years, I have been handed down tools from both sides of my family. Most of these tools are from my father and grandfathers, although some are from my great grandfather. The history of these tools shows through the wear patterns that have emerged over the generations.

The tools are extensions of my father, grandfathers and great-grandfather's hands- a lineage that I have become a part of when I use these tools. To me, these tools have become much more than their original intention because of their connection to my family history. Therefore I created reliquaries for these tools. Historically, reliquaries contain bones of a holy person or objects touched by that person, and often mimic the relic it enshrines. These are claimed to posses the power and soul of that person through the relic inside. The containers that I created are castings of the objects the tools were used to repair. Inside these containers are the actual items handed down to me. This approach provides context for a narrative between the tool, reliquary, and my family history.
II. Introduction

My artwork draws heavily on my life. Memories of my family and experiences are what influence me greatly. I have a broad background ranging from being a mechanic, carpenter, to artist; but a common denominator in all of them is that I am a maker. I make objects. I put them together, create, mold, shape, and invent.

As a child, I would spend countless hours dreaming up ideas of go-karts, motorcycles, cars, airplanes, spaceships, and so on. I would use old, cast off, and even broken parts off of my grandfather’s farm equipment that would be scattered throughout all of the buildings as well as on the property (Figure 1). On my grandparent’s farm, nothing was thrown away. It could always be recycled to become something else. So parts were everywhere, ripe for the picking.

As a child, my skills were not great, so I would gather all of these pieces and put them in a pile in one of the barns lean-too and sit for hours trying to figure out how I could get all of the pieces to morph into what I had imagined in my head. More often than not, a new idea would change my plans, different parts would be needed and the hunt would start all over. Ultimately, few of these objects ever became a reality, but the few that did, and the overly joyous moment of creating something from a pile of parts had an everlasting impact on my life.
As I grew older, cars became more and more of my life. By the age of fifteen, I was in search of my first car. I ended up purchasing (with my parent’s money) my great grandmother’s 1962 Ford Fairlane 500 (Figure 2). My grandfather helped me work on the car for several months to get it running and operational as it had been sitting in a field for nine years. What I did not know how to do, I would research and learn how to do it. If it didn’t work, I would just take it apart and do it over again. I was intrigued how mechanical objects worked. For me to look inside an engine was like looking inside a body, seeing the heart and vital organs that allowed life to happen. I was mesmerized by all of the parts needed to create a simple function of motion.

By my late teens, I wanted to build cars for a living. I just wanted to make my own cars. However, I started to work as a mechanic at a shop and soon realized that even though I was doing the same work that I was doing at home, I had no passion for working on cars for other people. The satisfaction was missing. I later would realize that it was the creativity that was missing. On my own cars, I would alter just about every piece, so it was no longer just a car made by Ford or Chevrolet but a car that in my eyes, morphed into an object created by me. I made it my own and found that this is what made me so intrigued and excited to work on these objects.
III. Research for Thesis Work

Each object tells us something of its maker, whether man or machine, and our relation to him, her or it. It can by its condition, tell us something of its relation to other users. It can, also by its condition, suggest something of the attitude that is expected of us in relation to it. It can give us hints, by its substance and condition, of unexpected responses that we may bring to it.

-Peter Prangnell-

During the summer between my first and second year at the School for American Crafts, I began researching and considering what I should create for my thesis body of work. During this period of contemplation, I was thinking about how I made objects and how I gravitated toward certain tools that I own. By definition, the word tool means: 1. implement used to carry out mechanical functions by hand or machine 2. thing used in occupation or pursuit. Why I would gravitate toward one tool over another did not seem to matter much, as long as it was doing its job, allowing me to perform the task at hand.

While I was working in my attic that summer, I realized that I gravitate toward certain tools more than others. I recognized that I was using a particular pair of pliers. They were a small pair that I had owned for a number of years, even though a bigger pair would have been more efficient and easier to use. I had several pliers that were larger and near where I was working, but still, I chose this pair. The reason was that this particular tool had a history with me. I had owned this pair the longest. More importantly, my grandfather on my mother’s side had owned these pliers before they were handed down to me.

The pliers had a history, a lineage that made that tool more desirable than the other tools that I could have chosen in that instance. I realized that making
objects was only part of the fascination and excitement. The use of the tools was another, unexplored side of my fascination of creating things. This also explained why I have collected so many tools over my lifetime. Even though I am in my late twenties, I have accumulated many times the amount of tools that my father owns. I own hundreds of screwdrivers, not because I use all of them but because there is a history to them. Of all the tools that I own, nearly all of the hand tools were used before I owned them and more often than not I will use an older tool before a newer one.

All of my basic skills as a handyman or craftsman are derived from my father. As a child, I would spend countless hours with my father in his woodshop behind our house. I helped build the woodshop in our backyard when I was six years old. I could barely hit a nail straight but I would watch my father all day long with the various tasks that had to be performed. My parents say that I have always had this fascination with tools. Always following my father and grandfathers around, I shadowed their activities.

I remember that my grandfather on my mother’s side wore overalls almost every day of his life. He would carry his wallet, a can of Skoal chewing tobacco, a screwdriver and a pair of pliers in the front center breast pocket of his overalls. Every farm truck would have so many tools on the floorboards and dash that it was impossible to know what they actually looked like, so as to never be unprepared while in the field.
On my father’s side, I remember my grandfather had a small one-car garage that he added on to his house. It had a cellar beneath it that gave the garage a distinct musty smell as you opened the door. His small wooden workbench was always kept in neat order. Above the workbench was a shelf of waxes, solvents, stains, and other jars with a fine layer of dust and attached to the shelf was a screwdriver rack overflowing with a variety of screwdrivers. This might be why I also have an affinity towards screwdrivers today.

On both sides of my family, I have had experiences that have formed and shaped me in some way when it comes to using tools and fixing items when problems arise. With my father, the experiences were relevant more in terms of materials and uses, about woodworking and general repairs around the house. My grandfather on my mother’s side provided experiences that were more mechanical since he owned and operated a dairy farm. He was the one who helped me restore my first car, the Ford Fairlane 500. On my father’s side, my grandfather showed the finesse of tools with gardening, patience, and problem solving. These early memories shaped my character, personality and interests as a person.

A piece of my history that was important during this time and until I entered graduate school was the fact that all four of my grandparents were still living. Since they were older, I had received some of their tools and had used them for years. During my first year at graduate school, my grandfather on my mother’s side of the family passed away. When I returned home for his funeral,
my grandmother told the grandchildren they each were allowed to acquire something of my grandfather’s things. I immediately went to the garage. I ended up taking some hand tools, a chainsaw, and a few other small items. I did this knowing that what I took, almost every household in America had an item that would be identical or very similar and were likely never thought of as heirlooms. Most of his tools were not brand name tools; some were no longer usable, but to me they were priceless.

During my second year at graduate school, I lost both of my grandparents on my father’s side. It seemed only fitting that I would create objects that would house precious objects of my family. A few years earlier, my grandfather gave me my great grandfather’s Model T Ford tools. These were only a few objects that have been handed down through the family. I was chosen as the caretaker of the tools because I was the only one interested in automobiles. These tools have always been displayed proudly in my home and remind me of the rich history of my family. I am glad that my grandparents knew that I held these tools dearly, and that I was creating a new history with them.
IV. Heirlooms

“Of all things, I love the best/Those that are well used.”
-Bertolt Brecht-

How does an object become something more than the object itself? What is needed for it to transcend its original purpose or meaning? How can the importance of that object be shown? These questions are what I try to address in the body of my thesis work. The term relic addressed these ideas for Christians during the Middle Ages. However, when I started to really focus on my idea, the term relic didn’t seem fitting. I am using tools handed down to me, so a more personal term was needed: heirloom.

**heir-loom** /er’loom/ *n.* 1. possession or property in a family for several generations 2. piece of property as a part of an inheritance

An heirloom can be any object that has greater importance to an individual because of its memory, history, or connection to that person. These can be sights, smells, or feelings that link a person to that particular object and make it important. The same object can be important to another person. However because of the memories, experiences, and views, the reason for its importance will differ.

In cultural terms, inheritance ensures the continuity of assets specific to each family, and hence the perpetuation of memories, feelings, and values that shape the identity of that family. In economic terms, inheritance concerns the economic upward or downward mobility, although most everyone only thinks of inheritance as upward mobility and the main focus of descendants today.
More and more, many people believe that inheritance only concerns the wealthiest segments of the population and or trust funds, land, and real estate. In our quest for self-reliance and for modernity, many people have lost track of the commitments made of their ancestors for the assimilation of today’s society.\(^5\)

The heirlooms that I have received from my family are not of great wealth, trust funds, or real estate. They are the tools of my family that create a direct link to my hands. It is when I use these tools that I feel the most accomplished as a maker. The tools themselves have knowledge of what to do. They know their place and do it well. They have, after all, been doing the task that they were made to perform for longer than I. It is this knowledge that when in my hands, my heirlooms and my love as a craftsman create a deeper connection to my past.

I question what people do with their heirlooms that have been handed down to them. Are they on display proudly in a china cabinet, put into a safety-deposit box, or forgotten in a shoebox in a closet, under the bed, or in the attic. Some are never seen and the history behind the object becomes lost to the next generation, forever losing its importance and history to that family.
V. Historical and Contemporary Influences

Historically, reliquaries contain bones of a holy person or objects touched by that person, and often mimic the relic it enshrines. These containers are claimed to possess the power and soul of that person through the relic inside. Described as more rare than precious metals and stones, the relics were thought to be even more valuable than the reliquaries that housed them which were made of gold, silver, and gems. Their admiration brought with them the hope that the saints would offer favors and plead with God for their salvation. The more important the saint, the greater the power the relic would be perceived to contain.6

An example of this type of reliquary is The Arm Reliquary of Saint Valentine (Figure 3). Thought to contain a fragment of an arm bone, this reliquary is similar to a formal statue. With pierced sides stepping in three proportionally smaller tiers, the base creates a foundation of which the arm stands erect. The sleeve rolled up to the elbow provides a visual break, referencing the living saint’s hand with the actual bone of the martyred saint after death.

The vessels that contain my relics are objects that were part of everyday life in the history of my family. My relics are the tools that worked on and maintained the function of these objects and have been passed down to me. I
feel that they contain the stories of my family’s past and even though there are many other tools that are identical in physical form, these tools are one of a kind and far more valuable than the precious metals and stones that comprised relics of the past.

My contemporary influences include Marilyn Levine, whose work is derived from the everyday objects. Levine often named her pieces for the people to whom they belong (Figure 4). Her tromp l’oeil work which in French means “to fool the eye” demonstrates her control of the clay. It is her ability to mimic age, wear, and use that allows her work to become more than just copies of the original. Mark Treib writes that “…deception is not necessarily an art experience”.7 Levine’s ability to “tell the story” of an object as evidenced by its physical signs of use, has resulted in a body of work that has remained pertinent and contemporary for more than 30 years. Like Levine, I am not just copying the forms; I am infusing a story and history into the forms. My work is not about the engine, but the person and story behind the engine that is important. I think this is what separates art from artifact. Levine’s ceramic sculptures are a portrait of the people from whom they originated. She uses the immediate recognition of an object to draw in a viewer. By doing so, she creates a connection, which allows the story to be told.8
I am drawn to Levine's work because of her narratives and like her, I am telling a story through an object. However, my work differs from hers in that I am not creating a connection to the viewer through the form rather I am creating the reliquaries to house the objects that tell the story. Importance is manifested by the time invested in creating a home for these objects. The story is told differently, but the end goal is the same: To create a piece that first draws a viewer in to question its identity and only upon closer investigation, does it reveal its story. Levine’s work contains a concealed narrative. Like her work, my pieces might not tell the entire story, but it is not needed: The creation of containers for these objects establishes their importance.

I am drawn to the work of Steven Montgomery for a different reason. It is his mechanical inventions that cause me to think of my grandparent’s farm and those imaginary machines that I created as a child. Like Levine’s work, Montgomery’s work also uses trompe l’oeil. However, unlike Levine and myself, Montgomery’s machines are fictional, drawn from his upbringing in the industrial decay and urban landscapes of Detroit (Figure 5).

Montgomery has mixed feelings about machines. He was in an automobile accident that resulted in the car being completely burned up within only a few
minutes. This resulted in his ambiguous relationship to machines, which nonetheless reflected the growth of the urban life of his youth and are sources of his esthetic heritage. In addition to this, Montgomery insists that he has no real knowledge of machines.¹¹ My own work draws from my extensive knowledge of machinery. I think it is my knowledge and respect for tools that make me realize how important even the most simple of tools and machines are to our society.

Donald Kuspit wrote that Montgomery’s machines state a profound contemporary truth: machines, however flawed, have become gods.¹² However, I believe that early tools and machinery that built the infrastructure facilitated growth and development today have been forgotten by society. The heritage, history and ethic of these early tools have been lost but without the tool, there would be no machine. The tools that have been handed down to me link me personally to this history and create a connection to everyone who has also benefited from their use.
VI. Technical Information

In the initial search for an object to cast, I was a little overwhelmed by the idea of casting an entire engine. The complicated forms and hundreds of pieces felt daunting. However, since most of the engine pieces were cast in the first place, I knew that with enough patience, I could achieve this goal. The first task was finding a suitable engine with enough of its original parts to cast while still being affordable. Even though my great grandfather owned a model T Ford, Model A Ford engines are almost identical, with only a few parts that only a professional could distinguish. After researching I found a suitable candidate in Detroit, Michigan through an online auction house.

It seemed fitting that I would be picking up an engine where my great grandfather’s Model T was originally built. It was in need of major repairs but still remained relatively complete engine. When I arrived back at school, I started the long arduous task of disassembling the engine. Interestingly this led me to purchase more of the original Ford tools that were used to build the engine, complete with the Ford logo. After the entire engine was disassembled, I realized that I needed to cast pieces in an assembly line manner, as casting one at a time would take too long.

Before this experience, my mold making consisted of using objects that I could get ready to cast in just a few minutes or at most, an afternoon. With these much more complicated forms, however, I found that preparation to cast took as much as a day or two. The clay I was used began to dry and created crevasses
for plaster to creep into. I resolved this problem by using oil clay, because it contains no water and did not shrink or dry out. As an added benefit, this clay did not create flash rust, which had caused the plaster to stick a little after the first piece of the mold was cast.

As I started the casting process, I soon realized that a simple piece could end up as a seven or eight piece mold due to one appendage. This created an artistic dilemma about whether to keep the original, historical accuracy of the piece or delete that part to facilitate an easier casting process. I decided that unless the structural integrity of clay could not work, it needed to be as close to original as possible.

One of the challenges I faced was where to place the sprew or spout to pour the slip into and out of the mold. In many pieces, the logical place to create the sprew were the mounting points between parts. This sometimes resulted in the need for a more complicated mold. The most challenging portion was the engine block itself. The engine block is cast iron, weighing over one hundred pounds. I would have to move this while attaching more and more sides of plaster, which was increasing the weight by each side. In the end, I cast the engine right side up using the bottom of the engine as my opening to pour the slip. I also cast a PVC pipe thread and cap into the plaster mold of the engine block so that I could drain the slip out of the bottom without moving the large mold. After testing several slip casting bodies, I did not like my results. The shrinkage rates were too high which would result in the engine being too small. I
ended up using a commercial low fire slip from Standard Clay Company which had excellent working capabilities and resulted in a 5-7% shrinkage rate, the lowest that I tested. This shrinkage rate was undetectable when the forms were not placed against the originals.

Since there were many pieces that would be attached to the engine by only a small surface area and have a relatively large mass, I had to figure out how to assemble the engines after the firing. I found that by reinforcing the clay pieces that were going to be attached, I could anchor a bolt into one of the pieces. Once these were in place, I made key slots to accept the piece on the one to which it would be attached. When both steps were completed, one piece could be slid into place. Using this system, the work could be easily fired and an engine could be assembled and disassembled for shipping and moving without the worry of small protruding pieces breaking off of the engine.

All of the pieces have some sort of hidden compartment when closed. These compartments contain a variety of objects pertaining to my past. I had to create boxes from Medium Density Fiberboard (MDF) that would fill the cavity inside the engine to house these objects. I used epoxy to connect the boxes to the ceramic engine and then, used automotive body filler to smooth the gaps and create a smooth transition, so the viewer would not know where the ceramic ended and the MDF box began. I then used a carbide ceramic tile bit to mortise out spaces for the three hinges on each of the two engines. Fearing that the hinge point could chip the ceramics when being opened and closed, I
permanently bonded the hinges to the engine with epoxy. On the other engines, I epoxied bolts into the ceramic that would then mount the containers to the ceramic.
VII. Installation

Self-expression through homegrown skills allows us to reflect on what generations of Americans have considered creative and important. In considering where we were, we can begin to get an idea of what we will become, and craft is the living link.

-Jimmy Carter-\textsuperscript{13}

A Rich History was painted gold and then made to look old by mixing a custom color similar to the color of used oil on old engines (Figure 6). The gold represents wealth not in economic terms but in cultural terms. By hand rubbing the dark color over the entire piece and wiping off areas that would naturally be subjected to wear, I created the stained look of old engines to create a link to time. To finish the interior of the box, I used pasteboard that looks like the inside of a shoebox. By doing this, I was replicating how individuals would keep old keepsakes, heirlooms, and photos in closets, attics, or under beds. Inside the box, are photos depicting several generations of my family and sharing my rich history.

Heirlooms was finished by painting the outside with a flat black automotive paint and gold leafing all of the nuts and bolts. By gold leafing these parts, I am showing the importance of these items, as these would be the parts originally
touched by the tools. When the lid is opened, a gold leafed platform with the tools of my great grandfather are displayed. The relics that this engine edifies are pliers on a raised bed and an oilcan nestled into the platform (Figure 7).

This is the only engine on which I did not use the actual mounting points that would have attached the engine to the car. Instead, I made a two-piece pedestal, with the bottom leafed in gold and the upper pedestal which cradled the oilpan of the engine, painted the same flat black as the exterior to create more mass. This surface treatment was also a nod to the Arm Reliquary of Saint Valentine.

The piece called *I Remember Him Using Them* was the most technically difficult piece to complete. In my exhibition, this piece hung from a steel bar cantilevered six feet from a pillar in the middle of the gallery. This was a challenge because the engine and bar weighed almost two hundred pounds. I first had to fabricate this bar from a 1.5x4x.125 bar stock. This is more than what was required; however, I wanted the piece to look like rusted iron. By making the
bar larger, it created the illusion that the piece was very heavy. I welded the bar with a brace and mounting plate that I could drill into the concrete pillar. I then anchored this to the concrete wall to support the weight and leverage that the engine creates when hanging.

For the relic in this piece, I created a drawer by milling brass stock into a “T” shape that I could slide into an aluminum T-Track that was imbedded into the base of the engine block (Figure 8). I mounted the brass shaped as the “T” onto the top of the oil pan, which then slid into the track and onto the engine block. The oil pan contained an industrial ¾ inch drive socket set (Figure 8). This was used by my grandfather to work on his large tractors and other equipment on the farm. The crank pulley became the handle to pull the oil pan open and to reveal the black lacquered inside. This contrasted with the rust of the outside and allowed the chrome finish of the tools to create a deep reflection.

*Starting the Lineage* is a piece that represents myself. The combination of a ceramic glaze with an automotive sealant served to convey this meaning. The piece was glazed white and then sandblasted to give a soft, satin feel and look. I choose white, as historically, it represents purity and a new beginning. The
pieces were glued together using Automotive Perma-Blue Gasket Sealant. The bright blue sealant, which is flexible and squeezes out of all of the joints, provides a sharp contrast with the white glaze.

The opening on this piece was a drawer that slid open at the water pump (Figure 9). I made a box carcass to fit into the cylinder head in the same way that a carcass is constructed for a chest of drawers. Once the carcass was in place, I created a polished steel drawer that mounted to the water pump and slid out of the cylinder head. I stitched a white leather drawer insert that fit in the bottom of the drawer with blue thread to link the white leather to the outside of the piece. On this leather is a sculpting tool that was used extensively during the construction of all of the pieces in my exhibition. I polished the steel legs and painted the base the same color as the engine to create a clean, new look.
VIII. Conclusion

Through the process of creating and sharing my thesis exhibition, I have come to appreciate the deepened interest of my heritage. Tools utilized by three generations of my family represent hours of toil and accomplishments often reflected in the wear of the tools over time. As viewers studied my exhibition, I had hoped and even anticipated that the investigation led some to reflect upon their own history to comprehend its linkage and significance to them.

During and since the exhibition, viewers provided numerous responses and made inquiries about my work. I valued their responses and perspectives that facilitated much pleasure and validation for me. The challenges of the entire exhibition process pushed me to explore art, skills, techniques, and problem solving at levels that I had not experienced before the rigors of the thesis work. Moreover, the entire process led me on a journey for many hours of contemplation. I realize that the completion of the thesis exhibition really opened me to the exploration of how to continue this body of work. Most likely the journey to explore and research has really only begun, but at a new level and from a different perspective.
IX. Images

Heirloom
Ceramic, Gold Leaf, Model T Ford Tools, 30” x 18” x 32”
A Rich History
Ceramic, 30” x 18” x 27”
Starting the Lineage
Ceramic, sculpting tool, polished steel, 42” x 18” x 27”
I Remember Him Using Them
Ceramic, ¾ inch drive socket set, 40” x 26” x 27”
X. Works Cited


10. Perreault, John. “Big Apple Clay / Is There a New York School of Ceramics” American Ceramics Volume 14, Number 2

