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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
THE COLLEGE OF IMAGING ARTS AND SCIENCES
GLASS DEPARTMENT
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

ULTRA SHINY

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ABSTRACT

Ultra Shiny; what could be more compelling to a crowd, or a hypnotized, dazed supermarket consumer? This thesis will discuss my theories regarding package design, advertising techniques, glitz, pizzazz and pyrotechnics from the sublime to the ridiculous, as a legitimate strategy for art making, both utterly sincere and ironic.

INTRO

As humans we are attracted to shiny things, fact, it's in our nature instinctually.

We are attracted to glass because of its shiny-ness. I wanted to make glass objects that reflect or call attention to everything except the object themselves. I am not interested in glass as an object; I am interested in events that occur because of a glass object's presence. In marketing this is called the intangible, this is everything that surrounds a product's existence; how it makes you feel, what status it gives you, how others view you because you own it, etc. This interest in the intangible is why I used marketing rules or conventions in my work.

I also used performance-based elements to challenge the viewer to analyse the works and create situations where the work can be experienced through the objects and in the surroundings themselves. The surroundings of the work support and emphasise the messages I am wishing to convey. The viewer becomes part of the work as the experience envelopes and surrounds them.

Ultra Shiny is a brand name that I created due to an interest in the attractive shiny properties of glass. Being absorbed in the glass world helped me to understand the materials specific attributes and strengths, the foremost being its ability to refract light. I am interested how these recognised attributes link to its value and how the use of material can also affect the viewer's connection to the work/product. I will be investigating the materiality of glass and using its seductive and enticing nature to influence the way it is viewed. I want to abuse its nature of exclusivity and question the value of its presence in the world.

As a platform to introduce my product to the world I decided that my thesis opening would be a one night only staged artificial, 'exclusive event' used to debut the release of Ultra Shiny. The opening had VIP passes, a patronising maître d', a DJ, champagne, an ice sculpture, excessive pizzazz and rogue traders selling cheap imitation 'Ultra Shiny' goods outside in the parking lot.

The aim of the event was to create a façade of opulence engrossing the attendees in an atmosphere of exclusivity, greater than any object or commodity.

Sometimes (rather too often) an artist working in glass relies on the exclusivity of the material to add worth to an artwork (conceptually and physically). 'They' recreate an object in glass and assume that alone is enough for it to be called 'art', well it's not enough and it happens all too often. Yes, glass is valuable and pretty and hard to make but that doesn't mean you can just recreate any old thing and then slap a huge price tag on it and call it 'glass art'. It is dishonest to the potential of the medium and dishonest to the real artists out there who are trying to create something meaningful that affects people's lives, challenges viewpoints, questions society, confronts politics, tests boundaries, etc. I wanted to make a statement about this 'problem' with glass but also to call attention to all the positive things about the medium. Like its ability to draw people together. I have had the opportunity to meet and work with many talented, creative and vibrant individuals, all in the name of glass. Glassmaking (particularly blowing) in its nature requires teamwork, so glassmakers become naturally skilled in group activities and cooperation. This is really what I love most about glass, the social aspects, which is why I wanted to draw people together in the same way for my show. People are 'drawn to glass' because of its alluring attributes, but I wanted use glass in a way to point it out as the least important thing in the room.

THE APPEAL OF SHININESS, RADIANCE, AND HIGH SPECULARITY AND REFRACTIVITY

One of the most interesting things, I think, about any part of my thesis show is how easy it was for people to understand the format in which I was presenting my work. Marketing is a language everyone speaks and in which we are all fluent. It's creepy and subversive. Without even knowing it, we have all been trained to understand and respond to this form of communication. There are many researched and scientifically proven ways of communicating effectively and efficiently to you, the prospective buyer. We might not know about them, but the people selling you things sure as hell do.

Marketing strategists and advertising companies are very good at abusing and influencing our 'humanness'. Throughout the 1950s, advertising agencies relied upon psychologists and other behavioural experts to help construct their ad campaigns.

"Ads sell more than products, they sell values, they sell images, they sell concepts of love and sexuality, of success and perhaps most important normalcy. To a great extent they tell us who we are and who we should be." Jean Kilbourne, author of Can't Buy My Love.

Some brands have such marketing power that they can make us think about their product without even saying its name. Starbucks for example recently changed their logo. There is no text, only an image and a very specific colour. Journalists joke that the brand wields such marketing power that it could just have a green blob on the side of the cup and still everyone would know what kind of coffee it is.

This Christmas I played a board game that my 6 and 8 year old cousins had received as a present; it was a game based on the advertising industry. Most of the game was 'name the brand from the logo' or 'name the product from the font', etc. I was

Starbucks: An Illustrated History



1971

We start by selling coffee beans in Seattle's Pike Place Market.



1987

We add handcrafted espresso beverages to the menu.



1992

We become a publicly traded company.



2011

We mark 40 years and begin the next chapter in our history.

disgusted with myself for being able to extract from my brain most of the answers, which were all the most ridiculous and useless piffle. Apparently and unknowingly I have become an expert in jingles, slogans and brand identity. It just shows how powerful ad campaigns and product branding can be. It made me sick to my stomach to know how easy it is to be infiltrated in this way, however my team did win.

Marketing agencies know how to speak and communicate to our most basic channels of behaviour. They know how we think, how we see, hear, touch, smell, they even know how we move (supermarkets have known for a very long time that shoppers are more 'efficient' (meaning 'spend more') if they move counter-clockwise).

Here is a quote from 'Shiny Objects Marketing' a firm of marketing consultants that give seminars and brand strategy advice.

"The basic fundamental principle of Shiny Objects Marketing is to determine what innate qualities of a brand instinctually attract the target market. The objective is to bypass the conscious decision process and go right to reflex action. When you are really thirsty you don't think about being attracted to water, you just are. Shiny Objects Marketing goes beyond features and benefits and reaches into the needs that people have"

So when you combine these facts with the tools and tricks developed by marketing analysts and consultants, basically we don't have a choice. These people are so good at what they do there is no way we can resist the bling.

This idea that we don't have a choice has been proven in studies on babies and their reactions to shiny surfaces by Richard G. Coss from the Department of Psychology at the University of California. We like shiny things due to an ability that evolved to help us find clean, drinkable water in the wild. For a primitive human, an attraction to reflection of light on the water would help find a source of vital sustenance, For a 20th century middle class teenager whose pants don't fit correctly from the white suburbs of New York City, an attraction to reflection of light would help find a diamond encrusted dollar sign necklace from Canal Street.

Seeing a shiny product draws you in, it's almost a physical response; humans automatically assume something that gleams is valuable, because back when we were cavemen it was water. Now the value distinction has changed, though, shiny = desirable = expensive.

An example of a physical response to a shiny object is that a company called Envirosell Inc. (a consumer behaviour research and consulting firm that works for Wal-Mart, The Gap, The U.S. Postal Service and others) did a study on our reactions to shiny objects and found that pedestrians slow down when they pass reflective shiny store fronts. Companies can use this information as a tool to grab the attention of their prospective customers and create a driving curiosity to keep consumers interested in the products and services the company has to sell.



DECADENCE AND IMPERFECTION

The origins of the 'laser crystal' are vague, apparently the Russians had something to do with it but that's about as detailed as it gets. In the last few years these shiny souvenirs have made their way into gift shops, gas stations, theme parks, shopping malls, etc. Apparently there is a huge market for an angels and unicorns entwined and eternally captured in crystal, who knew.

The processes used to create this piece involved 3D modelling software, clear optical crystal production and multi-photon absorption. It sounds incredibly hi tech and fanciful, but is in fact quite a simple and wonderfully symbolic (to the world of Ultra Shiny) process.

Multi-photon absorption is a process that involves focusing a laser beam to a spot (about one-tenth of the diameter of a human hair) within a block of optically perfect crystal. The laser then emits a short pulse beam and produces a tiny micro crack.



To draw more points, the laser is pulsed on and off. To make the beam move between points, it's reflected from a mirror that is repositioned between pulses. The mirror is moved by computer-controlled motors, so many points can be drawn with great speed and accuracy. A typical design might use several hundred thousand points, or half a million isn't unusual in a large block, each placed with 0.001mm accuracy. The glass itself must be clear optical crystal, since any ripples or bubbles would block or blur the laser.

Part of what drew me to this process is the balance between the perfection of the crystal and the controlled 'cracking'. There is a conflict in the processes, it is not easy to make optically clear crystal, and there is an art to it and a strict quality control and cull rate. The fact that you would spend all that time, resources and energy making something so perfect, only then put millions of cracks or imperfections in it, seemed wasteful and decadent. For me, this process symbolised disrespect for the glass, disrespect for anything I had ever learnt about glassmaking, a disrespect for the hand skills and craftsmanship I have spent a large portion of my life trying to develop, a disrespect that was alluring and enticing. I wanted to be decadent and wasteful and throw everything I had learnt away and make these pieces the focus of my show, it was two-fingered gesture (not the peace sign, the other bad one) to glass and all its stupid, complicated and fickle processes. This decadence was fitting for the theme of my show, I wanted it to seem like money was no concern, only self-indulgence and excess.



The presentation of the crystal was as important as the objects themselves. I wanted them to be rotating because I had images of car shows where the porches, polished and gleaming, are slowly rotating on a platform with scantily clad ladies sprawled across them. It gives the impression that this object is so miraculous and revolutionary in its design that all sides must be viewed. The LED lighting coming from underneath the crystal added extra “bling” and refracted light around the room. Some cabinets I saw at the Toronto Museum of Art inspired the cases that I built. There was some Japanese Netsuke on display in these cases, one of which was by itself in a proportionally giant case. The ratio of case to artifact gave an impression of priceless value and significance to this treasure. The fact that this netsuke was behind glass was also important. Objects contained behind glass are unreachable/untouchable by the viewer, deeming the onlooker unworthy to have physical contact or a personal experience with the piece. The object is too valuable to be soiled by the touch of an insignificant human’s hand.

To have artwork behind a glass case is very unusual at an artist’s opening (especially an MFA exhibition). At every other MFA show at RIT that year and the year before I knew the artist personally. I probably could have (with permission) touched or picked up the work at the other shows, but the display cases instantly put a barrier between the work and the visitors to my show. They were privy to something special, unique, not to be touched by human hand, but also like the Porsches in the show room.... accessible for the right price.

THE PECKING ORDER

For me this piece deals with issues such as hierarchy and exclusivity. I created the design and elements of the piece with the history and symbolism of heraldry design in mind. There is a rich history of heraldry and the significance of the elements in each design is intricate and meticulous. Initially I was drawn to heraldry because of the fashion industry's adoption of its symbolism.

The origins of heraldry lie in the need to distinguish participants in combat when their faces were hidden by armour. The heraldry distinguished side and rank of the bearer and has become synonymous with royalty.

The glass piece was developed from this design of my own Ultra shiny coat of arms. The design was based on research into the use of symbolism in heraldry. There are very specific meanings to the designs one can choose, especially the supporters (the creatures or humans often at either side of the shield) and the patterns and colours.

I chose for my 'supporters', the two animals either side of the crest, the magpie and the protozoan. The magpie is a bird often associated with the hoarding and theft of shiny articles. The protozoan on the right is a one-celled animal and the smallest of all animals. Most of them can only be seen under a microscope. Their role in society is ambiguous; some protozoa are harmful to man as they can cause serious diseases. Others are helpful because they eat harmful bacteria and are food for fish and other animals. I chose the protozoan as it represents the simplest of organisms, it can also be a parasite that relates to the alluring, simple desire of shininess.

One creature is reflecting greed and insatiable want, the other stupidity.

The shield represents the bourgeois bravado of glassmaking. The piece is large and hard to make, it presents itself to a person experienced in glass making as a time consuming and sweaty production. I see this piece as a commentary on glassmaking hierarchy; it took sweat, muscle and dedication to produce. It connected the creation of my own coat of arms, my own heraldry, my own status, with the production and fabrication of a ridiculously large and extravagant hierarchical design. But in the end that doesn't really mean anything, the heraldry was made up, it's just a big lump made from glass and has no more importance than the space it takes up.



YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

When I was trying to think of more radical and extreme ways to infiltrate my audience with Ultra Shiny, poisoning and the events of the Jonestown Massacre (Kool-Aid poisoning cult) came to mind. Weighing out the odds of instant fame and notoriety verses morality and prison sentences... I decided it might be a little extremist and perhaps I was getting a little over the top. However the thought of somehow ingesting Ultra Shiny seemed like the ultimate way to infiltrate a person. There is a process by which one becomes part of something else by eating it, like Holy Communion where you eat the representation of body and blood of Christ, it is called transubstantiation, the changing of one substance into another. This doesn't necessarily have to occur through consumption, but it becomes more personal if it is. Eating Ultra Shiny seemed like the most empathetic way of experiencing it. You absorb it; it becomes part of you, inside you, in your stomach, in your blood, all through you. Eating is such a commonplace thing, we think about it all the time but hardly ever really consider what is happening when we do.

I recently had food poisoning for the first time; I was infiltrated by some small bacteria, I was unaware of this minute particle that was going to have such a huge impact; it ruined my day in an unpredictable and volatile way. It made me think about how food affects us in different ways, I have



friends that can't eat certain things such as gluten, shellfish or tomatoes; I don't drink coffee anymore because it makes me tired... I wanted the brand of Ultra Shiny to be so powerful that it could change you from the inside, out.

The word "brand" originally meant anything hot or burning, but has now become a word that indicates ownership. I was drawn to referencing the branding of cattle as it is such a cruel and unnecessary form of claiming ownership. The act of marking livestock with fire-heated metal logos to has origins dating back to the Egyptians. Romans had symbols used for brands were sometimes chosen as part of a magic spell aimed at protecting animals from harm.

The food at my show was presented on platters that had Ultra Shiny Coat of arms sandblasted on to the surface. Each individual snack was also branded with an Ultra Shiny Logo, the brand was a small metal logo that was heated up and the pressed onto the snack. The branding of the food (pun intended) showed ownership and I also wanted it to seem absurd that literally everything was branded... even the food (also the napkins, glasses and cups).

The Ultra Shiny food was my favorite piece in the whole show, I am not sure how many people even really considered it as a 'piece'. But that it is sort of the point. I wanted Ultra Shiny to be such a powerful product that the consumption of it could change you as a person, whether you knew it or not. It was subversive and subtle enough that people didn't realize as they were eating the work that they were entering into a secret contract between Ultra Shiny that would last for the next 24-48 hours.

NECESSARY FLUFF

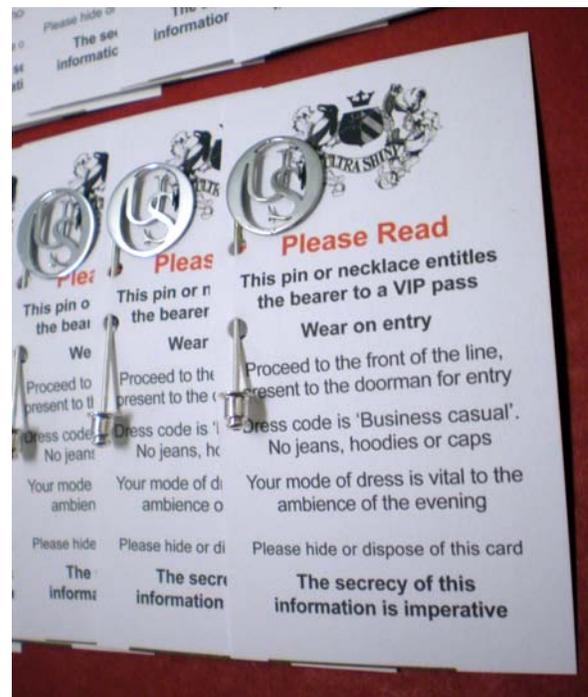
There were a few items in the show that don't warrant a lot of examination but were small (or large) gestures that added to the ambience of the evening:

There was DJ playing appropriately 'of the minute' music.



There was an ice sculpture that melted as the evening progressed. One factor of this piece that I enjoyed was that a lot of visitors to the show thought the sculpture was made of glass until they realised it was dripping!

I handed out VIP passes to select individuals before the show, they included an Ultra Shiny pin that was worn on the lapel of the chosen guest, the pin came with a card that said...



A rude and pompous maitre d' greeted you as you approached the show; a glass chain blocked your entry. If your name was not 'on the list' (not many were!) or you didn't have a VIP pass, you were made to wait.



I spray painted a whole wall with gold Ultra Shiny logos, the inspiration for this came from Louis Vuitton handbags that are excessively branded in this way.



There was an animated slide show that played many different repeating patterns of Ultra Shiny logos. This was an idea I developed from researching high end fashion shows, Prada had similar projections in a show at Paris fashion week. I wanted everything to be covered in Ultra Shiny insignia, projecting this animation was a simple and eye catching solution.



Finally, outside in the parking lot there was a truck filled with Ultra Shiny knock off goods. These were a parody on the fake reproduction 'designer' goods you can buy on the street in many cities across the world. These goods are bought in an attempt to receive the intangible part of the product (how the goods make you feel). Often the fakes are hard to discern from the real thing and are a fraction of the price. The 'fake' goods I had were meant to imply that Ultra Shiny was already a couture product, it was sought after and fakes were being made and sold. After all it is said that "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery".



CONCLUSION

Every day we are bombarded with advertising and marketing schemes. We have become used to seeing and being around this form of seduction as it envelops and engulfs our world. We become infiltrated with slogans or jingles or logos that give us instant recognition of products.

Our movements, thoughts and actions can be dictated, without our instant recognition, by instinctual and emotional judgements and not complex methods of reasoning.

I would like to believe that any decisions we make in life are based on some highly complicated, highly developed thought process, not on some primitive instinct that we really don't understand or have any control over. But we are all only human after all; highly complex and emotional creatures that are susceptible to those emotions that make us human.

Our innate attraction to shiny things is part of glass' rise and downfall.

I stated before that I am interested in events that occur because of a glass object¹'s presence and not the glass object itself. There is a lot of stuff out there in the world, some of it useful some of it not. This statement rests on my thoughts about glass' role in society, the world, etc. It can be a very useful material (windows, spaceship insulation, telescope lenses, etc) so my point is that using glass productively is a lot more significant and fulfilling than just looking at it.

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