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Recollecting Home

by Will Tracey

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Art

School For American Craft
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

Rochester Institute of Technology
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I. Abstract

I went home, to the area west of Boston, prior to the spring quarter of my first year as a graduate student, with intention of rediscovering an untapped part of my visual experience. I was hoping to find new inspiration, something from which to extract new forms. It was a simple response to a basic frustration with the design process I had become accustomed to, and a growing unease with the nature of our techno-centric society. When I began making furniture, I immersed myself in *its* history, and it was out of this immersion that I drew inspiration. Making and the history of furniture were aptly married, and were well suited to a certain way of learning about both the history and the working of wood. I had begun to feel that after designing and building furniture for almost a decade in this way that it was no longer a completely satisfying approach.

I was compelled to search my own history in an effort to bring a more personal perspective to my work. With this goal in mind, I set out to explore place, and the significance of my aesthetic experience. A brief but influential trip home was necessary in that pursuit. Living in Rochester presented an opportunity to examine home from a fresh perspective, and this simple trip, a long weekend really, served to jump-start the search for a new approach.

I grew up in Hopkinton, Massachusetts, a town that had once been home to a whole host of mills and small factories, a town with a past not unlike many in New England. To begin to re-examine my visual history, I sought out the remnants of the history of the place I came from. I began to document them, capturing snapshots of familiar things and places. I collected them, not knowing what might come of it. The things that I found were simple yet significant: mill buildings, smokestacks, granite markers, hitching posts, cast iron ornamentation and implements, monuments, millstones, scattered machine parts, in addition to other industrial and cultural leavings. These markers of another time pepper the New England landscape, and while many of these leavings have been reduced to quaint decoration, they continue to quietly exist. They are at once emblematic of an industrial past, and reminders of the forward momentum of time and progress.

I propose with this thesis to build a body of work that draws upon home as its primary source. Home has played a major role in my visual experience. However, it has been only recently that I have begun to unearth the relevance in my work of the place where I grew up. Home is a place filled with relics and remnants emblematic of another society, its philosophies and its ethics. Their roles have changed, yet they continue to have a place in our world. For me, not only are these things markers of home and its broader meaning; they have become symbols of work and making.

By exploring the relevance of the architecture, artifacts and implements of our recent past I will seek out their new significance. I will examine the visual, the metaphorical, the literal and the lyrical, investing the results of this search in the creation of new work. My aim is not to recreate objects from our past, but to use them in an effort to discover something about the relationship between form and meaning. In addition to the aesthetic side of this investigation, it is my suspicion that it will also lead to a discovery of something deeply personal about home.

II. Discussion of Sources and Research

My initial efforts involved looking to new sources, many of which were wooden objects or architecture that seemed to evoke a sense of home. This involved collecting and taking pictures of many places and objects. Some of these things were of the Colonial era, the leavings one typically associates with New England: cedar shakes and early headstones. Many images were characteristically of the late nineteenth century: brick and stone mill buildings, as well as the hulks of long dormant machinery.

Through furniture, my efforts to position the relevance of home have lead to new observations. It would be simple to say that cultural relics exude a nuanced significance. Having taken these things for granted, I was not conscious of the impact that they had already had. The markers I have come to associate with home have been both preserved and left behind to decay, with seeming randomness. These artifacts have been colored by adaptation and growth in the years following their own ascent as markers of progress. Yet they also serve to provoke; they provide an important insight into the society that created them, its history, and its ways of working.

Tied up in the essence of home is an unavoidable nostalgia, a romantic notion that is all too comfortable. Taken at face value, the past may have been a world where the handmade trumped the shoddy produce of machinery. This perception seems to be assembled from relics whose value is seemingly unassailable. Cultural leavings seem to punctuate a tension between objects made by hand and those made by some mechanized means. In this body of work I chose to focus on an exploration of that tension through my recollections of home, both literally through objects and spaces of importance from my childhood, and in the broader sense from New England at large.

As technology supplanted many traditional ways of doing things, contemporary pleas for a return to the handmade are telling of this nostalgic power. One poignant example is to be found in Alex Bealer's introduction to his 1980 "Old Ways of Working Wood". He writes of the book's aim:

"One purpose is to attempt to continue to some extent the traditions of intangible beauty found in handcraftsmanship in houses, furniture, and other articles made of wood. Another is to record the techniques of using antique hand tools effectively before the dreary sameness of the technological age completely erases methods developed by human genius over a ten-thousand-year span of history."

He goes on to forecast that the remaining decades of the twentieth century would be ripe for a handwork renaissance in the face of a stultifying future brought on by industry. Bealer places the burden of carrying on these traditions not on the professional craftsman, but instead firmly upon the shoulders of the affluent hobbyist.¹ How right he was, but his predictions failed to foresee the irony of the manner in which it would be carried out: by small, quality conscious tool manufacturers, armed with cnc equipment and the Internet.

Given the place "handmade" seems to occupy, there is at play a potential crisis of meaning. As much as it is simultaneously a paradoxical and illogical, it seems that making furniture by hand is both a very appropriate response one to the industrial era. Contemporary denizens of the "handmade" range widely from those who are literally making things with no machinery, with the assistance of a limited number of hand tools, to manufacturers whose wares are anything but handmade, yet the homepages of their websites features slogans like "Handmade American Furniture". It is now common to find simple Modern furniture being fabricated with some of the most sophisticated numerically controlled machinery in a factory setting, yet this work is being marketed as "handmade". What does that mean? Our contemporary problem is not so much one to do with poor quality of manufacture, but of the disconnection of the maker from the made object often through technology.

Go back a century or so from Bealer, to the time of Morris and Ruskin, and you can see a very similar cry being made against the looming ills of industry. The descriptor "handmade" was being assigned to objects of uniformly good quality, and machinery was still in the infancy of its development. Early machines, often largely handmade themselves, were looked down upon in favor of the highly developed handwork of the day and the cultural systems that had evolved around it. As machinery became better and its speed became an asset, it began to take on a new meaning. To see the effect that machinery has had on our collective concept of craftsmanship, one only has to note that it has become a compliment to point out that something hand made "looks like it was made by a machine". The concept of perfection, similarly, is now judged

upon the degree and consistency to which evidence of the hand has been erased from the making of an object. It is often difficult to discern whether a thing has been made by hand, and it seems that only through sensitivity to imperfection does our contemporary eye have the necessary evidence to make that judgment. This was not always the case.

David Pye describes the dilemma posed to handwork by the introduction of machine tools as the “workmanship of risk”. Pye's own woodwork, mostly carved vessels, illustrates this concept in an interesting way. These were made with the assistance of a carving engine, a guide of sorts, in which a carving tool or knife was mounted on an arm that allowed a user to carve patterns with a degree of regularity that would be challenging to achieve without. As Pye points out, it is the involvement of the hand that brings risk to a made object, machined or otherwise.² Evidence of that risk, introduced by the hand, and seen as deviations from some notion of perfection are not found in the product of a machine alone.

It was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that a profound debate began on the role of the machine in craft and society at large. That this debate that has not yet been settled, and the resulting anxiety has remained perceptible, is indicative of the complexity of the issue. The same threat that preoccupied the Arts and Crafts philosophers, the giving way of so called traditional skills to automation, is still very much on the horizon though it seems not yet realized. The anxiety inducing technology of the day, and the broader implications of the industrial revolution are now giving way to rise of digital technologies in a revolution of another sort. The machine tools that came out of the first industrial revolution are now, not without some irony, referred to as “manual” machinery, to be distinguished from the computer-controlled variety that is replacing it.

In the course of my investigation of the nature and relationship between handwork and machinery I came to be interested in the making of machines, and the aesthetic values imbued in their design and construction. This steered me towards an investigation of patternmaking with a depth of consideration I had not previously considered giving this specialized form of woodworking. It became apparent that patternmakers have had a profound influence on our constructed environment. Not only did they provide the patterns from which all manner of castings were made, from architectural features to farm equipment, but they also made the patterns for machinery. This would prove to be of great significance.

As a woodworker, machinery has made up a good deal of my day-to-day visual experience. This machinery was in large part designed by patternmakers, who imbued these tools with both utility and beauty. The strangeness of the manner in which utility is met equally with a visual presence is undeniable. What is

interesting about that relationship is that it comes as a consequence of patternmakers having to pay attention to two materials: wood, and cast iron. They used wood to develop forms that had to adhere to properties of cast metal and the nature of the casting process. Necessary to the casting process, draft angles and flowing transitions impart a certain sensibility, owed not to some aesthetic doctrine, but to the logic of the process.

This process of patternmaking, of transforming wooden objects into iron ones represents a cycle of making that became very important to the work comprising this thesis. These machines were made first as wooden patterns meant to be cast into iron, to become tools that would work more wood which would in turn beget more iron in a cycle of making that is now largely extinct, or radically altered.

III. Critical Analysis

At the outset of this body of work I had several goals: to generate work that was deeply personal, to explore the use of wood beyond a purely technical investigation, and to pursue a form language that was centered outside of the history of furniture. The compulsion to unearth the relevance of my experiences through furniture weighed heavily on the process. Amongst these goals I found this desire to develop a connection between my experience of the place that I come from and my work to be most important. I had largely overlooked home as a source for the development of a personal design vocabulary.

In previous work, I had been mining the history of furniture as a way into new forms. In doing so the possibilities for a personal and more relevant connection to my own history, the history of where I come from, had been clouded and very nearly ignored. I found my design sensibilities caught somewhere between a preoccupation with historical furniture forms and an investigation of the nuances of making objects from wood. I had grown too comfortable with the refined considerations that were the result of a design process that was largely inherited, and in many ways was focused all too much on technical consideration. This process was a valuable one to my development as a designer and maker, but it was incomplete. The initial two quarters of my graduate experience magnified this feeling, and forced me to re-examine my work. I became interested in the impact that a close examination of home might have on my work. From the start I felt it critical to identify these relationships through a process of making. Put simply, the mantra of sketch-model-draft-construct was too tight, and held little in the way of room for direct

investigation in the material. I wanted to re-locate the exploration in the making of the object rather than relegating it to the design process.

My first attempts at this led to interesting discoveries. In an effort to encourage the unexpected, I chose to resist the temptation to evaluate the new work until it was well under way. This was successful in generating several pieces, the first of the group that would come to comprise this thesis. In the final quarter of my first year I built the *Millstone Table*, the *Little Red Vessels* and a vessel on stand called *Crucible*. Looking to these objects on the bench as they were being made opened up new possibilities. I chose to paint the work, a decision that was a very conscious one. Having made a good deal of furniture that was about wood and its grain, I wanted to obscure these qualities, to literally hide the wood so as not to be distracted by its visual impact. Paint became central to the way I developed this new way of working. As I painted more of the work, I came to see paint as a way to highlight qualities of the material I had not been able to capture with natural finishes. Form could be seen more clearly, whether overtly through tooled surfaces, or subtly in the way the grain telegraphed through the paint.



Millstone Table, Mahogany, Paint, 20" x 18" x 30"



Little Red Vessels, Mahogany, Paint Brass, 8 1/2" x 7" x 27"

These pieces were interesting not for their appreciable qualities, but for the new paths they began to suggest. There were elements of ritual, references to architectural forms, overt references to specific objects, and in combination these elements suggested a way forward. I began to find that the objects I was working on were still very much about a history of functional forms.



Crucible, Mahogany, Paint, 17" x 17" x 29"

I also began to connect with these new pieces on a more personal level. In *Crucible*, I developed a vessel that was in many way symbolic of my father. My father would come home from his day and empty his pockets and put his change, keys, and whatever else he might have had in his pockets into a bowl he kept on top of my grandfather's tall cabinet of print drawers. This was almost as tall as he was, a simple piece of "Mission Oak" as he would call it, but as a child I thought of it as quite imposing, tall and orderly with its vertical repetition of drawers. My father kept an apple ladder in his studio for many years that was not unlike this piece of furniture in its tall utilitarian rhythm. He would eventually come to paint ladders, standing alone at the center of a minimal field of waxy color. The crossing of these images serves to anchor *Crucible*. The small bowl carved into the form at the top of the ladder literally references the casting process, but it also serves as a place to empty ones pockets.

Were it not for a loosening of process I would not have arrived at a piece like *Crucible*. Having set out to use making *as* the design process with these first pieces, I found that there were themes that I found under

the surface. From this vantage point it seems an obvious strategy, but at the time it was an unknown course. This conscious undertaking was both liberating and risky to the outcome of the objects themselves. I went from thumbnail sketches to constructing objects with very little filtration in between. This created opportunities for analysis much more in the material as it was being worked, rather than in some preparatory stage. Where pieces might have become false starts they instead became new paths as yet unrealized. I assigned potential meaning to the initial ideas as a way into a piece, though the outcome frequently offered something completely different. The consequences of this shift in process were both profound and unexpected. In many ways this reliance on the unknown allowed me to trust instinctual decisions. It forced me to inquire further, beyond the mulling over of aesthetic decisions. Exploring the initial source opened up an understanding, which has in turn offered new inspirations.

These inspirations were evoked, often most interestingly, through memory. This role played by memory is not to be understated in this process. Many recollections were simply peripheral; some were just fleeting images, and some of them were useful as specific memories. These recollections would at times initiate an idea for a new piece, such as the *Banister Bench*, which began as a recollection of a moment on a staircase. The view through a stair rail to a sculpture, a ceramic house that has lived on my father's dresser for many years was a vivid one. The reconstruction of that moment as a piece of furniture was effectively an attempt to encapsulate the emotional quality of that experience. The resulting piece of furniture, I think, does communicate some of these qualities, but it does something else for the viewer. It invites viewers, through the use of an architectural language, to engage in the recollection of their own experiences.



Banister Bench, Cherry, Mahogany, Charcoal, Paint 67" x 13" x 18"

In some instances, utility became vital to the development of meaning, while in others the functionality of a piece was born out of a more conventional furniture language. In yet other instances, the work was about function, but that function was compromised or employed in an unexpected way. These more poetic objects, often celebrating common but timeless functions, seemed to have the most interesting combinations of form and meaning. With *Candle Box*, a simple vessel was rendered in such a way as to provide it space and nuance in its meaning. Intended as an homage to the memory of the annual purchase of candles for my mother on her birthday, the piece was simultaneously evocative of references to the monolithic form often taken by burial markers and Japanese form. It was also oddly similar in the division of its parts and the movement of the lids to Brancusi's *Kiss*.



Candle Box, Mahogany, Paint, 7" x 4" x 16"

The *Reliquary for a Burned Inch* was similarly intentioned. Rather than a memory of a family ritual, it sought to provide a vessel for a memory of a common oversight when measuring from the first inch of a rule or tape measure rather than from its end: a measuring mistake that results in cutting a piece of wood one inch shorter than required.

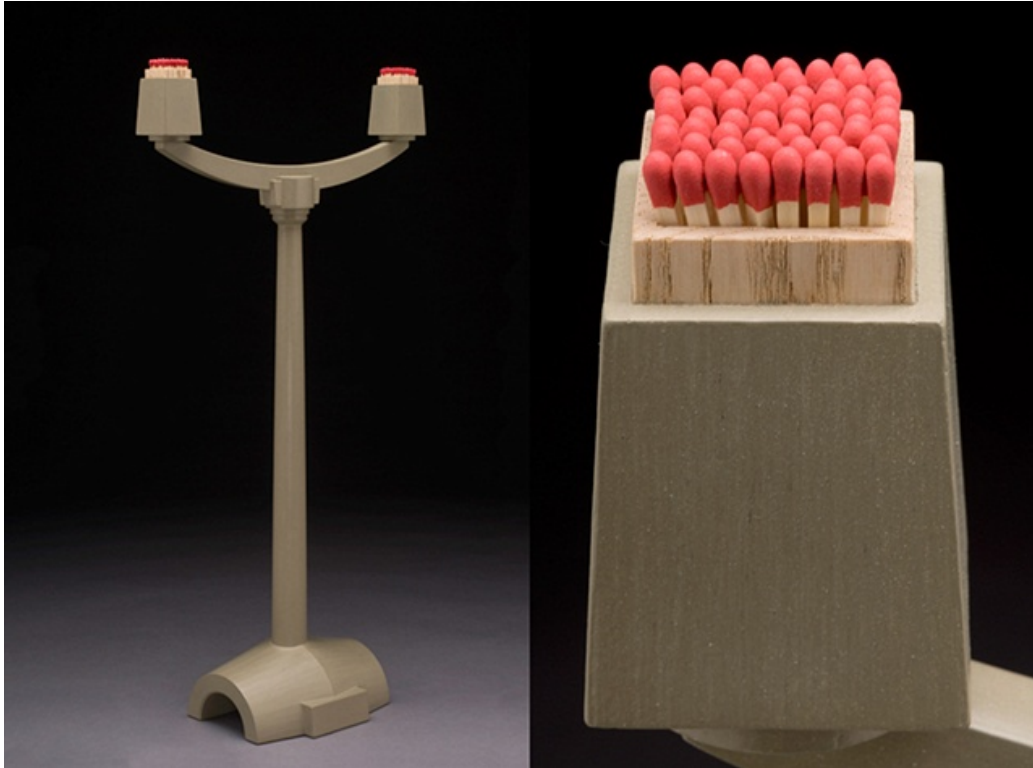


Reliquary for a Burned Inch, Mahogany, Paint, Gold Leaf, Brass 16" x 4" x 23"

Some of the strategies I experimented with brought work dangerously close to the potential clichés bound up in aesthetic New England. Nowhere is this more obvious for me than in the *Millstone Table*. In this piece, paint and texture are joined with forms that are evocative, but the surfaces of these forms miss the mark in their near decorator quality. Employing the more literal reference to a millstone to strike at a perceived meaning proved deceptive. Upon further contemplation, the millstones that inspired the table have power less for what they look like than for their role they might play as markers of a way of life. Taken one way they are little better than garden gnomes, though they do retain some inherent beauty. When taken another way, they have the potential to draw allusions to an important cultural process. The *Millstone Table* treads too close to the former.

Common cultural processes aided in the development and understanding of this body of work. I found that with a liberated blend of design and making, it is possible to influence the shifting nature of meaning though making. Having attempted to locate some of these themes in the work, inspiration often gave way to another perspective. Initially apparent meanings arrived at the other end of the process holding new and

unintended insights. The *Matchstick Stand* is perhaps the best example of this. It was begun in the group of parts that would also result in the *Reliquary to a Burned Inch*, it is at once a known quantity, a functional object in the form of a candelabra, and a bearer of multiple meanings. There is a certain unease, which is its source of power. Is it meant to be lit? Or, is it meant to be used, however briefly as a light source? Is it simply a container? It falls somewhere in between those places. It's not simply a hybrid, but an object that moves back and forth between interpretations.



Matchstick Stand, Ash, Mahogany, Cherry, Paint, Matches 14" x 7" x 21"

I made attempts with this work to expose process in a variety of ways, through form, through paint as well as through the leaving of tool marks. At their best, the marks left behind by a tool are expressions of the physical interaction between maker and tool. They are reminders of the energy and purposefulness of the act of their making. The crowned exterior of the *Chimney Cupboard* was left surfaced with a hand plane in an effort to preserve the quality of the surface at its most labored stage. It was difficult to resist the urge to continue to refine the surface, but the decision was made in an effort to reveal the act of making. The form was rendered more directly as a consequence. Painting the resulting surface captured the potency and the closeness of the maker to the act of generating that surface with its final form.



Chimney Cupboard, Mahogany, Douglas Fir, Paint, Graphite, 83" x 25" x 14"

IV. Conclusion

Through this body of work I found a process that stimulated interplay between making and meaning. As a result, much of the work was improvisational in nature, and on the whole more personal for the challenges presented by this way of working. The objects evolved while they were being made, not simply in detail, but in significant ways. They were pushed and pulled, and sometimes set aside as their forms began to suggest new solutions, new connections, and altering initial interpretations.

By drawing inspiration from architectural fragments, from foundry patterns and machinery, from history, and from home, these new forms encouraged a layered interpretation. Some of these pieces began as if they were to be cast, as a part for a machine or maybe a fragment of a building, only to be re-formed in an unexpected combination. The parts themselves may have had a degree of familiarity in execution, but their roles within the greater whole of the objects were new. By revealing the importance of my relationship to the material, these strategies shed fresh light on the act of working wood. I think what gives wood its

essence, is not the seduction of its grain or its organic qualities, but the subtleties of the ways in which it can be worked. I found with this new work that by leaving the evidence of making, it allowed form and the physical generating of that form to maintain a real resonance.

I did not anticipate the degree to which it was going to matter, but this upsetting of my conventions would produce a wholly new perspective. When I began to make the work that would come to characterize this thesis, I chose to explore a history that was much more relevant to the place that I come from than that of any of the previous sources I had explored. I thought that I understood New England's potential influence: as primarily a visual one, whose broader meaning was somehow tied up in that quality. As it turned out, its meaning was situated more in ideas about work and place than it was expressed simply in the visual presence of that place.

I had been treating the results of these beginnings as if they were found objects, perhaps the most significant revelation to come from this body of work. Starting to make parts with only the slightest suggestion of a final shape, and by bringing them to unexpected places in the finished objects. Moving fluidly between some of the pieces, I stacked, assembled, re-assembled and re-configuring parts, in the process discovering interesting ways to impart depth. Other work preceded along side these more loose pieces and benefitted from the back and forth.

Matches, candles, letters, things now antiquated but still very much in use today, are symbolic of what once might have been the height of technology. These formerly vital objects survive today in a limbo caught somewhere between reluctant obsolescence and nostalgia, and this body of work attempts to exist in the space created between those concepts. Things that have at once become both important historical markers and decorative fodder have proved an interesting source, with the resulting variety of aesthetic implications all the more confusing and increasingly personal. Some of the work draws upon the architecture of buildings, while some draws upon the architecture of machinery, both of which served as potent symbols of work and making.

These recollections embedded in objects and furniture, engage the viewer, inviting interpretation, and communicating a sense of home. The material around which this body of work revolves is located in the space between the actuality of these sources and their doppelgangers that exist in the form of memories. Through the discovery of process, I have come to realize that it is a history of making that is embedded in the things that I find most emblematic of home.

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² Pye, David. *The Nature of Art and Workmanship*. London, Cambridge U.P., 1968. Print

VII. Image Description

1. Banister Bench, Cherry, Mahogany, Charcoal, Paint 67" x 13" x 18", 2007
2. Banister Bench Detail
3. Candle Box, Mahogany, Paint, 7" x 4" x 16", 2007
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