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The Manufactured Experience

An MFA Thesis

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Abstract for "The Manufactured Experience"
An MFA Thesis by Debra Ruzinsky

Repeatedly what I see around me are places and messages that generate manufactured experiences, manipulated by someone with an agenda to promote. My thesis work, entitled “Sweet Reassurance,” is a personal approach to re-invention; a conceptually driven body of work that explores my obsession with irony, a need to vent frustration with public policy, complacency, and misguided priorities. The work springs from a notion to create proposals for architectural projects that are rather absurd and could never really be realized. They are my brand of visionary architecture, existing somewhere between the Utopian and the Dystopian.

I have developed a vocabulary of elements—representations of the tools of war, of ways of “sugar-coating” the truth, of advertising-style graphic elements with which to sell the message. I resist the notion that I or anyone else should be so easily manipulated by pretty pictures that cover horrific truths. I am drawn to the “how” and the “why” behind the creation of places where nothing existed before. Layout, hierarchy, and placement of objects in the work address the nature of power.

My interest has been in molding, combining, and transforming real objects into something other, to create an idiosyncratic visual language.
When I was 6 my family took a trip to Expo 67 in Montreal. Here was a Utopian vision of the world that left an indelible mark on me. Throughout the fair were depictions of reality and fantasy—visions of the world as it could/should be. Buckminster Fuller’s transparent, acrylic-skinned geodesic dome, and Moshe Safdie’s “Habitat 67” were two structures displayed at Expo designed to promote technological innovation and inventive thinking. Both were physical manifestations of the desire and motivation to improve the details of daily life.¹

Throughout my life I have been very interested in the “material culture” of the world. The term was coined by V.E. Tatlin, and refers to the processing of materials into objects for use in every day living.² In retrospect, I realize that my fascination with material culture has driven the course of my interests and choices in ways that nothing else has. I am drawn to the “how” and the “why” behind the creation of places where nothing existed before. Tatlin, Safdie, and Le Corbusier are all Utopian thinkers who intend that their structures have an influence on society. Le Corbusier believed in architecture as a surrogate for social reform, exclaiming "Architecture or Revolution. Revolution can be avoided"³. Sigfried Giedion, in his “Space, Time, and Architecture,” while referring to Le Corbusier, discusses the need for architects to “have the rare gift of a peculiar sensitivity that we would like to term 'social imagination.'”⁴
Canadian architectural writer and cultural journalist Adele Weder offers an assessment of Habitat ’67 in the January/February 2008 issue of the Walrus Magazine. In her article, “For Everyone a Garden: The Failed dream of Montreal’s Habitat ’67," she states:

The Modernists’ most naive conceit was that they thought they could design social equality into existence. Le Corbusier’s famous Marseilles Unité d’Habitation apartment complex was built in the hopeful aftermath of World War II, but by the 1960s was derided as a bleak, monotonous warehouse. Habitat, our own answer to the Unité, seemed as if it would be different. As futuristic as a dna model yet evocative of a Mediterranean villa, it looked like the perfect space age home. And it fit in perfectly with Expo’s faith in technology for creating a just, endlessly prosperous country.5

The theme of Expo 67 was “Man and his World," inspired by the philosophy of French author Antoine de Saint-Exupery (1900-1944.) According to Saint-Exupery, “To be a Man is to have the conviction that when one lays a brick, one is taking a hand in building the world."6 As I make work it is with a desire to reinvent what I see around me, to re-lay the bricks in a way that I would prefer to see them utilized. I desire
authentic experience. Repeatedly what I see around me are places and messages that generate manufactured experiences, manipulated by someone with an agenda to promote.

My thesis work, entitled "Sweet Reassurance," is my approach to re-invention. It is a conceptually driven body of work that explores a personal obsession with irony, a need to vent frustration with public policy, complacency, and misguided priorities. These things color the nature of my product. The work springs from a notion to create proposals for architectural projects that are rather absurd and could never really be realized. Instead, they function to provoke and to comment. They are my brand of visionary architecture, existing somewhere between the Utopian and the Dystopian.

Research and exploration have guided me through the production of sculptural objects, presented as if they are models for human scale monuments. I have developed a vocabulary of elements to include in this work—representations of the tools of war, of ways of "sugar-coating" the truth, of advertising-style graphic elements with which to sell the message. I resist the notion that I or anyone else should be so easily manipulated by pretty pictures that cover horrific truths.
I first learned about glass from Dick Marquis, while he was my professor at UCLA in the early 1980's. I developed a real appreciation for the California funk aesthetic that he brought with him, from his Northern California past in the 1960's. An unprecedented melding of ideas and techniques, high and low art, popular culture and political commentary came out of that time and place. This aesthetic is etched into my unconscious and finds ways into the style and form of my work.

My use of the word "reassurance" comes from a connection with Disney and my previous life (11 years spent) as a designer for Disney theme parks. Disney architects and designers create environments that have a particular agenda in mind—a desire to create a kind of nostalgic emotional response, replicating for adults and instilling in children the pure joy of being a child. Some criticize Disney's intentions as being much more about crass consumer culture, purely profit driven. The truth is somewhere in between, and people experience the theme parks in individual ways. Some are obsessed fans; some are disgusted by the sanitized nature of it all. The architecture of Disneyland, according to art historian Erika Doss, "fused post-war enthusiasms for imagination, horror, hallucination, and magic with deep-felt desires for safety, security, restraint, and direction."
Neil Harris, in "Designing Disney's Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance," explores expositions, going back as far as London's Vauxhall Gardens in 1660. "The great fairs," he says," are now worshipped as revelatory texts, keys to open the lock box of national values and prejudices." Walt Disney's own father, Elias, helped build the World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893. The Chicago exposition "spawned a revolution in American urban design that would influence the appearance of the Lincoln Memorial and National Mall, and of cities across the country." Pierre Charles L'Enfant's designs for Washington sat mostly untouched until the year 1900, when a group of leaders from the World's Columbian Exposition, sponsored by the American Institute of Architects, came to the City of Washington and formed the McMillan Commission. This group is responsible for the execution of L'Enfant's 1791 designs for the National Mall. They decided as well to adapt his work to encompass the entire District of Columbia.

The designs of Andre LeNotre for landscaping at the Palace of Versailles in the 1660's, were an important inspiration for L'Enfant as he designed and planned the National Mall in Washington D.C. The thread can be sewn that connects the designs at Versailles, produced for royalty, to L'Enfant's designs, produced for government. The works of both men successfully display and express power through the layout of space, and the
alignment of axis between monuments and buildings. They carefully control the ways that people move through spaces, instilling in people who experience their work a sense of awe and grandeur.

Karal Ann Marling, in her essay "Imagineering the Disney Theme Parks" addresses some of the "how" behind the production of illusion through use of scale and layout of space.

Main Street was a slightly-larger-than-normal model train layout. 'It's not apparent at a casual glance that this street is only a scale model,' confessed Walt, who told the press that he had worked out the dimensions of Main Street by the simple expedient of 'blowing up' his backyard engine five times in size for Disneyland and scaling the buildings around it accordingly. So, in theory, every brick and shingle and gas lamp on street level was to be made at five-eighths true size. 'This costs more, but made the street a toy,' Walt said, 'and the imagination can play more freely with a toy.'

This kind of manipulation of the familiar in order to perpetuate a proscribed point of view is something that makes me uncomfortable on a gut level, even when used in the name of pure entertainment. My work is the means that I use to push back with a response, to impose my
perceptions with commensurate force. I believe contemporary society has lost touch with authentic experiences. All the information around us has become predigested. Spun by government, media, and purveyors of entertainment, particular points of view are attractively packaged and served up. The work of Utopian visionaries, even when created with the noblest of intentions, repeatedly falls short.

Jean Baudrillard, in “Simulations,” argues that “Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation.” I spent much of my life in Los Angeles, and there I experienced and played a first hand role in the creation of artifice.

In the time line of my own life, my experience of the world had been shaped by large events. I was born in 1961. Nine months and a day before I was born, Dwight D. Eisenhower gave his farewell address to the Nation, his final act as president. In it he sounds a warning—ominous now, 46 years later.

In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-
industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.

We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.11

Having grown up in the shadow of this warning, I have come awake now to its implications. My outrage has come to the surface during the present Bush administration, as civil liberties are eroded, as soldiers and civilians are killed in the name of "freedom" and as American society at this point in time is alarmingly complacent. I want to believe that humankind is basically good, that we are more creative than destructive by nature. I have a relentless desire to remain optimistic, but my faith wavers. The society we live in today is fiercely divided. Achieving clarity and consensus is a difficult proposition. Conflicting motivations collide in political discourse. I believe in seeking peaceful solutions to conflict. I abhor the way the Bush administration has gone on the offensive,
creating even more conflict. I abhor the way that private firms like Halliburton benefit from such choices.

Documentary filmmaker Eugene Jarecki in his 2005 project “Why We Fight” makes comparisons between ancient Rome and our present day imperialistic agenda known as American foreign policy. When asked why he made the film, Jarecki said,

> Americans [today] have a visceral sense that something is rotten, but no-one can seem to connect the dots.... I wanted to make this film because we need what Eisenhower called an ‘alert and knowledgeable citizenry’ to compel change, to improve the public’s ability to monitor those in power.12

I am making work that speaks to the inconsistencies between appearance and reality, delving into the nature of manipulation, using elements from American cultural life as my building blocks. As a maker I cannot separate myself from the society in which I live. Instead I use my activity of making to engage in that relationship, in order to both communicate with those around me and to gain understanding. I want to believe in the possibility of creating a Utopian society. Instead I see,
throughout history, the failures of singular, restrictive points of view when imposed on the masses of humanity in the name of a better way of life.

The process by which monuments are built is highly politicized. I have chosen to create scaled pseudo-monuments because of the way that public spaces and monuments are designed typically to "encapsulate an official version of events." My intent is to poke at such "official versions" of events in order to uncover the motivation and influence hidden beneath. Judith DuPre, in "Monuments: America's History in Art and Memory," speaks of the process of making public monuments in this way:

Whether or not one agrees with the aesthetics of the commemoration, the vast majority will accept the monument narrative as 'the way things were.' Over time, the monument fades into the fabric of the landscape, until one day it disappears and no one sees it anymore. You might say that what is finally built is only a marker of the soul-searching process that brought it into being.

What is selected to be preserved tells us everything about what is valued by the majority of the population at a given moment in history. Achieving such consensus is becoming increasingly difficult
as the prerequisite for public memorialization—a shared set of values—no longer exists.  

What follows is a piece-by-piece analysis of this thesis exhibition.
The most intuitive and immediate piece I have produced for this exhibition, “Spent” is my gut level reaction, a kind of visual summation, addressing the costs of war. It is intended as a symbolic representation of expenditures, ready to be quantified, totaled, and documented. The physical nature of the receipt spike suggests violence, while the cost-accounting it represents is completely dispassionate and purely fact-driven. Military losses pile up, represented by the hats of generals. I feel a power in the disconnect between the conflicting emotional states represented in this work.

The use of a real, functional object in conjunction with a consciously molded, arranged form (the stack of military hats) points to how intentions and reality do not always match up, creating unintended consequences. I use the look and feel of the vintage metal object to inform the look of the glass, giving it a kind of patina so that it feels worn down by time, tying it visually to the literal wear and tear that is evident on the receipt spike. The pieces function metaphorically, representing of the ravages of time and experience combined with military action. I frequent antique shops and thrift stores, digging through the archeology of our culture to find objects that resonate with me. For this piece I found a small bust of a 5 star general. I molded his hat in rubber, then replicated it in wax. The lost wax process allows me to create final forms for casting.
The reduced scale of the modeled hats gives them a toy-like quality. They feel almost like game-board pieces, removed from the realities of war and its consequences. I think about the Bush Administration and how Bush's primary advisors (Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Karl Rove) all lack first hand military experience. I picture these politicians at a giant game-board, moving small pieces around, losing touch with the personal stories of the soldiers whose fates they hold in their hands. Unintended consequences have piled up and up and up.

COLLATERAL
I embrace multiple meanings in the title of this work. The military term, “collateral damage,” describes unintentional damage caused by events during a military operation, parallel to or alongside the intended action. The word collateral also refers to printed marketing materials produced for advertising campaigns for the selling of goods. This piece addresses the nature of selling messages for the promotion of particular agendas. It also speaks to a kind of collision of intentions—messages of paternalistic protection can reasonably be viewed as suspect. Motivations behind messages should not, in my view, be blindly accepted. I value my right to question the sweetened information being fed to me.

I choose to reference the work of American graphic designer Lester Beall (1903 - 1969) in these prints, adding an ironic spin to the kind of pieces he produced. Beall is most widely known for his work for the Department of Agriculture’s “Rural Electrification Administration” in the late 1930’s. He created several series of posters to communicate the benefits of technological progress to people in very rural areas. His posters borrowed heavily from the Russian Constructivists, utilizing a vernacular style established 20 years earlier and already associated with communicating Utopian visions of a better life. Notable, influential figures were Gustav Klutsis, Valentina Kulagina, Aleksandr Rodchenko and El Lissitzky. Klutsis (1895-1938,) was born in Latvia. He became prominent in the Soviet
Avant Garde art and design movement. He admired Lenin and conceived of a poster project to introduce Lenin's plan to electrify the entire country. The American federal agency that hired Beall was tasked to convince the rural populace that their lives could be improved by taking advantage of the spread of electricity, running water, radio waves, home heating, etc.

Current government leaders in the US have tasked themselves to sell the populace on the idea of "homeland security" and the need to instigate aggressive military action across the globe. The costs are downplayed, and our attention is actively steered in a particular, proscribed direction.

For this piece I photographed sweets, brought them into Adobe Photoshop and rendered them with a de-saturated, high contrast look. The resulting image was then brought into Adobe Illustrator and combined with representations of stealth aircraft and American flag-style stripes. I use bright, happy, candy-like colors in combination with red, white, and blue, American imagery, in order to attract the viewer to the messages conveyed.

SWEET DISTRACTION
This is my three-dimensional take on the redirection of the attention of the public with seductive visuals. Embracing an excessive, sugar-laden sensibility, this piece infuses some humor into the idea of manipulation, pointing to the absurd lengths taken to keep people from really exploring deeper truths hidden behind information as presented. There is a primary, central mass and two secondary, flanking forms. The symmetrical layout and hierarchy of size and placement of objects speaks about power and conveys an almost religious sense of awe. The scale of the sweets as well as the quantity of them play an important role here, representing extremes to which some will go in their quest to distort the truth.
I consider the lighting and shadows to be an important aspect of this piece as well. The translucent “Jell-O” portions glow seductively while the mass of the forms cast shadows that threaten to dominate the tiny figures looking up at them.

The use of molded processes for the production of the parts adds to the conceptual content, speaking to the molding of opinion, the proscribing of a very particular point of view. The elaborate urban landscape lifts up the monumental glass forms, elevating them for the small people viewing the scene, punctuating the fact that they are meant to be impressed, diverted, and directed. The large, surrounding, square plaza forces the small figures to approach the monument slowly, imposing a kind of reverent attitude upon them. The pristine white color of the plaza is marred in places. An unnamed force threatens the perfection of the scene.

I reference the work of LeNotre, L’Enfant, Le Corbusier, and Speer and their approaches to the design of spaces. The manipulation and control of public space pervades our lives more than most realize. Many years ago, I was employed by a developer of shopping malls. Developers of this type use not only design skills but psychology as well in order to control the way people move through the environments that
they create. People are forced to take long, indirect paths in order to get from one end of a mall to the other. The indirect path offers the developer (who doubles often as the lease holder of retail space) more “face time” with the consumer, more chance that they will see something that they “need” to purchase. People are manipulated in the name of commerce, in the name of politics, in the name of “progress,” in the name of religion. I remain constant in my need to be “an alert and knowledgeable” citizen, tuned in to the forces at work around me.

APPARITION
This piece follows a very similar theme as "Sweet Distraction." The length of lollipop road leading up to the clear glass monument is intended to express the impact of monumentality on the individual in a given environment. The lollipops read like the flags of Nations, creating a processional space. Symmetry is an important aspect of this piece as well, emphasizing an imposition of control, of order. The small figure is presented with an exaggerated pathway on which to travel, reminiscent of the fantasy world of Willy Wonka in his chocolate factory (from the book written by Roald Dahl.) In both this piece and "Sweet Distraction," I present an over-the top explosion of sugary sweets, then add one element of something just a bit wrong. In this case I use barbed wire to
surround the monument at the end of the road, in the other there is murky, seeping sludge creeping up through cracks in the pavement.

The clear glass tower lacks the visual punch of the bright lollipops and the astro- turf. This is due to its complete lack of color. It has a resulting ghost-like presence that looms over the scene. Bright color leads the small figure in a forward motion, but lack of color at the end of the road calls into question the nature of the destination, and the reasons for moving toward it or not.

PRIDE, POMP, AND CIRCUMSTANCE
This work is the result of my desire to represent the arrogance of power. The name comes from a line out of Shakespeare's "Othello." The words refer to Othello's reminiscence (in Act 3, scene 3) about the glory and stature he achieved on the battlefield. He leaves this world behind with regret. He bids farewell to marital bliss, mistakenly believing that his wife has been unfaithful. He also says good-bye to his occupation, his well-worn identity as a noble warrior. Here I explore deception and the representation of power, and refer to something ominous at work.

In this piece I set out with the specific intention to recreate the look of fine white marble. Since Antiquity, marble has been, so often, the material of choice for makers of public monuments. It is a material that represents luxury, delineates class stratification, and implies a sense of respectability. Viewers of public monuments are meant to be wowed by the feeling that the people who are immortalized and placed on view in this way are better than the average person on the street, that their actions mean more than those of everyone else.

There is a hybrid of unlikely parts – dice, bullets, licorice, wafer cookies, Grecian busts and tartlets combine in the piece, unified visually by the white "marble" look produced by the use of glass powder. These white
pieces are also unified by their arrangement in the space, elevated on a semi-circle of steps, raised significantly above the small figures, representative of the public. The small figures are dwarfed by the imposing presence of the monuments in the plaza. They are meant to feel the power of their own insignificance. In this piece I reference the extreme in the making of public monuments.

The monument built by Mussolini for Victor Emmanuel II comes to mind for its extremes of scale and use of white marble. When Mussolini came to power in Italy, he tore down many existing buildings in order to create this massive display of power. Il Duce lived here until the end of WW II and made many speeches from the balcony that looks out onto the Piazza Venezia.

REFLECTION
This piece, more than the others, is a kind of study of the physical nature of political theater, referencing the mall in Washington DC. In 1901 the
McMillan Commission was created for the purpose of transforming the design and master plan of Washington DC by connecting the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Memorial with a 2,029 foot long reflecting pool. "With the Reflecting Pool, the plan articulated a perfected, symbolic universe with a long view of the nation's aspirations."14

While making this piece my thoughts were focused on the kind of political, theatrical spectacle created by a wide range of politicians, architects, & designers. Sometimes persuasive display and spectacle is orchestrated by someone who can be called all of these things. Someone like Albert Speer, architect and designer for Adolph Hitler, comes to mind. It was his vision that created the indelible images of power, unity, and confidence that characterized Nazi rallies at Nuremberg as the Nazi party rose to prominence and captured the imagination of the German people. In Joachim Fest's book, "Speer: The Final Verdict," he describes particular details of Speer's designs for Nuremberg as instrumental in creating an atmosphere of magic, mystery, and exaltation. Many guests at Nuremberg rallies, including foreign ones, were so impressed by the spectacle that they were prepared to overlook some of the regime's more repulsive features.15
Guy Debord (1931-1994,) French writer, filmmaker, and founder of the magazine called "Situationiste Internationale," writes the following in "The Society of the Spectacle":

What hides under the spectacular oppositions is a 'unity of misery.'

Behind the masks of total choice, different forms of the same alienation confront each other, all of them built on real contradictions which are repressed. The spectacle exists in a concentrated or a diffuse form depending on the necessities of the particular stage of misery which it denies and supports. In both cases, the spectacle is nothing more than an image of happy unification surrounded by desolation and fear at the tranquil center of misery.16

It is a certainty that Hitler, with the significant assistance of Speer, capitalized on the economic miseries of his time. Hitler methodically shaped a story about the state of things, created scapegoats, creating simplified solutions to complex problems. He paraded this story out for public consumption quite successfully by the creation and use of spectacle.
Here I am looking at the question of how one person might attain power above others. How much is up to chance, how much is circumstance, how much is consciously planned? Is there a predetermined plan to life or is it as cliché as a roll of dice?

Maybe, for me, this is really a question of whether a kind of spiritual belief in an externally imposed order holds up against the notion that we have the power to map out our own individual destinies. I chafe at the idea of
submitting to the will of some form of higher power. I question that power—question who defines it—how it comes into being—and why it should affect me.

On an idealized, bright green lawn, the clustered, faceless figures gather like groupies around the “rock star” that is the bust of a faceless five star general. He has been sculpted, molded, cast and elevated up over their heads, placed in a class by himself. The bronze used represents the importance of the man, made with the intent that his image should outlive them all, remaining when all of these average people have passed on and a new generation takes their place. The people looking on are all in white, almost ghost-like. They have been made abstract, their faces replaced with dice, randomly rolled into position on their necks. They will fade, while the general will continue, memorialized for all time.

SINK OR SWIM
This is the only work in the exhibition made during my first year as a graduate student here at RIT. In it I use "apple pie" ideals against Lady Liberty herself, questioning the effect of so much American consumer culture on the nature of liberty, freedom, and self-determination.

Her patinaed bronze façade fades and disappears, swallowed up by the golden (actually gold-leafed) pies, meant to represent all the promise of clichéd American idealism. "Baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, and Chevrolet, they go together in the good ole USA," according to a car commercial that aired from 1974-1978, (music composed by Ed Labunski, lyrics by Jim Hartzell.) The spot was created for Chevrolet by the Campbell-Ewald advertising agency.
In 2006, the spot was recreated, nostalgically looking back to the old ad. In a fact sheet written by Deutsch Los Angeles (the ad agency producing the new spot) the new ad is described as “the ideal choice to cue Chevy’s Americana heritage, and at the same time reflecting the brand’s 21st century outlook.”

I could hear this jingle ringing in my head as I put the piece together, and I think about it still as a backdrop to the war we are engaged in now in Iraq. Our country came bursting into Iraq, guns blazing, rearranging definitions of torture and liberty at Abu Ghraib prison to suit our own prejudices, driving gas-guzzling vehicles and demanding our rights to maintain a wasteful, consumer driven lifestyle. Susan Sontag, in an article originally written for the New York Times (and now much circulated on the internet,) "Regarding the Torture of Others," has this to say:

Shock and awe were what our military promised the Iraqis. And shock and the awful are what these photographs announce to the world that the Americans have delivered: a pattern of criminal behavior in open contempt of international humanitarian conventions. Soldiers now pose, thumbs up, before the atrocities they commit, and send off the pictures to their buddies. Secrets of
private life that, formerly, you would have given nearly anything to conceal, you now clamour to be invited on a television show to reveal. What is illustrated... is as much the culture of shamelessness as the reigning admiration for unapologetic brutality.18

I feel a tremendous sense of shame about the choices our president and his administration have made. The true meaning of liberty has gotten lost; it sinks as we speak, as our nation imposes one set of rules on Iraqi citizens, and another on ourselves.

As I researched source material to flesh out this entire body of work, I found much common ground in the ideas espoused by Vladimir Tatlin. Nikolai Nikolaevich Punin, a contemporary of Tatlin, wrote extensively and had much to do with the promotion of V.E. Tatlin’s work. In 1921 he wrote a paper on the Monument to the Third International, Tatlins’ most famous work. In it he states that:

A monument should share the social and public life of the city and the city should live in it. It must be indispensable and dynamic in order to be contemporary. The forms of contemporary propaganda in plastic art lie on the other side of depicting man as a unit. These forms are discovered by an artist who has not been crippled by the feudal-
bourgeois Renaissance tradition but also has been working as a laborer on the three units of contemporary plastic consciousness: material, construction, and volume. When working with material construction and volume Tatlin produced a new form in the world of monumental art. Such is the form of the Monument to the Third International.19

Tatlin, through the proposal of this monument, expressed his rather romantic notion that he could design a dynamic place that would become symbolic of a superior way of life. The Russian Constructivist movement has been described as "a philosophy predominantly concerned with the function of architecture as a social catalyst." 20 Tatlin envisioned his monument during a time of extreme economic hardship in Soviet society. He believed in the necessity and achievability of his Utopian goals. The monument he conceived was never actually built.

Formal Concerns

My work consists primarily of kiln-cast glass and crystal. My interest has been in molding, combining, and transforming real objects into something other, to create an idiosyncratic visual language for the expression of
ideas. Through my labor these ideas have taken shape. For quite some time I have harbored the desire to learn the techniques of mold-making and casting. While I have been here as a graduate student, the process of developing new skills has lead me to the subject matter of the work. It was not pre-conceived, instead it evolved in a progressive way, step by step. My subject matter has come into focus as I have been more and more able to harness these abilities.

I chose lead crystal for the "Jell-O pieces" due to its visual clarity and it's ability to sell the look of the pieces, as though made of real Jell-O. It added to my appreciation of the absurd to use a material associated with luxurious consumption for the purpose of making 1950's era, middle-American comfort food. For "Spent" and "Pride, Pomp, and Circumstance," I was able to approximate the look of marble with the use of clear glass powder. It is important to me that the nature of the materials used adds depth to the conceptual basis of the work.

Artist Sylvia Levinson describes the glass medium as:

not a neutral material, but a very powerful medium of communication. I see it as a metaphor for transparency, for feeling and revealing emotions.21
When I look to the work of other artists for inspiration, I find that many that attract me are not glass artists. Levinson is one of the few who use the medium of glass in a way that speaks to my process of working. She starts with a strong concept, a powerful idea to be expressed, then develops the approach for making with deep roots in that concept. Her grandmother and father emigrated to Argentina from Russia. Born in Buenos Aires, she fled the military dictatorship of Gen. Jorge Rafael Videla, moving to Italy in 1981. She uses her work to address issues of power and vulnerability as she has experienced them in her own life.

Robert Arneson has been a source of much inspiration as well. "Arneson relentlessly poked fun at both himself and others while pushing modern sculpture in new stylistic directions. For more than thirty years, he lampooned the pomposity and prejudices of individuals and institutions alike through boisterous, punning, superbly crafted, but jarringly funky sculptures that personify the no-holds-barred tradition of Northern California ceramics." 22

I also admire the work of Ed and Nancy Reddin Kienholz, whose full-scale visions of raw humanity don't hold back in their desire to express powerful ideas and emotions. "In an excessively fragmented world the great Kienholz achievement may be the way he (they) absorbed the literature
of the American Myth from Paul Bunyan to Sam Clemens and grafted them to the European Theater of the Absurd....Kienholz predicted today's use of art as a tool of social and political expression and remains ahead of the curve in favoring humanistic humor and compassion over demagogic cant." 23

In "Sweet Reassurance" I have developed an idiosyncratic body of work to express my ideas about the world around me at this moment in time. There is an obsessive quality to the production of the work, to the formation of the language I have chosen to use in the making. There is also an eclectic quality indicative of my desire to mine the archeology of my country, culture, and time as the source material for inspiration. I look everywhere, to high and low art, to architecture and design, to political discourse, to advertising, to the Utopian and Dystopian visions of those who have come before me. I have built a personal language out of combinations of parts that represent chance, determination, sweetness, seriousness, power, and vulnerability.

All of this melds together, tossed with irony, technique, material, and form, and is made manifest as solid, physical, tangible objects. The work is sculpted, molded, cast and arranged to function as a metaphoric representations of conceptual material. My attention toward form comes
after I’ve stirred up a soup filled with content. I strive for a happy marriage of technique and ideas. As in all good marriages, each half must support the other, with a layering and a depth that expands each time it is explored.

Notes:

1) Buckminster Fuller’s dome was unusual in the fact that it was built from 1 small drawing of the single module that was the basis of its form. Habitat was innovative in its development of modular, mass production homes at low cost.

2) Tatlin, edited by Larissa Alekseevna Zhadova, page 345

3) Le Corbusier, “Towards a New Architecture,” page 289

4) Sigfried Giedion, “Space, Time, and Architecture,” pg 543

5) Adele Weder, January/February 2008 issue of the Walrus Magazine
6) Expo '67 Official Guide, page 1


10) Jean Baudrillard, Simulations, pg 25

11) Eisenhower's Farewell address to the Nation, January 17, 1961

12) from a Q & A with Eugene Jarecki, Sony Pictures Classics website for the film "Why We Fight"
13) J. DuPre, “Monuments,” page 89

14) J. DuPre, “Monuments,” page 89

15) “Speer: The Final Verdict,” by Joachim Fest, page 53

16) Guy Debord, “The Society of the Spectacle,” paragraph 63

17) from an article dated July 11, 2006 by the Auto advertising and Marketing editor at www.theautochannel.com


19) Tatlin, edited by Larissa Alekseevna Zhadova, page 345

20) Russian Avant Garde Art and Architecture, edited by Catherine Cooke, pg. 34

21) Sylvia Levinson’s artist statement for the 19th Rakow Commission, 2004, from the Corning Museum of Glass
22) Arneson and Politics, A Commemorative Exhibition, June 2 through August 15 1993, show catalogue, M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, Steven A. Nash, Associate Director/Chief Curator, page 9

23) Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz: The Hoerengracht, exhibition catalogue, essay by William Wilson, pg 16

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Adele Weder

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