Sweetness and Light

Stephanie Leach

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Rochester Institute of Technology

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The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy of the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Sweetness and Light
By Stephanie Leach
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Signature of Author: __________________________ Date: __________
To my family: Grandma, Mom, Dad, Rachel and Rocco,
Thank you for your support in all that I have done.
None of this would not be possible without you.
In loving memory of Greg.
Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

-Marianne Williamson
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I. **Introduction: From Light to Darkness and Back Again**

Being raised and growing up in a devout Catholic family has been the single most influential part of my life. The religious experiences with my faith, as a youth, have thus been the catalyst for the work of my adulthood. While some view art as a means of therapeutic self-expression, for me it is a deeper calling. One of the basic tenants of Catholicism is sharing the gifts that God has given one, thereby serving one’s fellow man. It is my personal belief that all things happen for a reason; God sends signs to point us in the direction He would have us go, if only we choose to recognize and act. Following are the experiences and signs that have led me to producing the faith informed, socially conscious work composing my thesis, “Sweetness and Light”.

Even as a very small child of five or six, I remember having a sense of quiet awe and reflection while in church, whether during mass time or when simply lingering there afterwards. The silent, warm light filtering through the stained glass windows produced a presence more real than anything else that I have ever known. This light, this presence, produced a feeling of rapture that I have carried with me to the present day.

As I grew up and went through the sacraments and rites of initiation of the Catholic Church there were both times of great faith and questioning. Special celebrations such as First Holy Communion and Confirmation were marked with gifts of bibles, statuary, and silver pendants. On the day of my First Communion I was dressed in white from head to toe. The dress was a beautiful white lace of my own choosing, tied with an exquisite ice blue satin bow. With my white shoes and pearl studded veil I looked just like a small bride. To commemorate that day, I was given a necklace with a pendant depicting a host raised over a chalice full of Leach 1.
wine, a symbolic representation of the body and blood of Christ. Signs and symbols would be a constantly recurring theme throughout my life.

Later, at the age of thirteen, I went through the rite of Confirmation, a sacrament by which Catholics enter into the church by their own free will, thereby making them an adult in the church. This was a time of great questioning for me. I was a teenager who had been through the very closed world of parochial schooling and was questioning everything that I saw unfolding in the world before me. Though unsure, I decided to cave to peer and community pressure, going through with the sacrament, and reasoning that I would have to sort it out for myself later. Around this time, my mother became pregnant with my little brother, an enormous surprise and adjustment for us all. Over the next two years there were many changes for the Leach family, both those of joy and devastation.

From the time of his birth, Greg had many health problems that would not be overcome. After a fourteen-month struggle his short life ended with a massive grand mal seizure. On the cold spring day that he died, there was so much silence. The quiet was broken with an image that to this day I cannot explain. A small red wagon was given to us to use in carrying Greg’s belongings from the hospital to our car. As my family and I were loading up the wagon I saw my brother sitting upright in the center of the wagon (a simple task which he never could accomplish), laughing, giggling, and playing, clapping his hands in anticipation of being pulled along. I yelled for everyone to stop loading the cart, Greg was sitting there.

That vision, letting me know that Greg was in a better place than anything he had ever known, got me through a great deal. Inevitably though, feelings of sadness and helplessness in regard to Greg’s death prevailed for a time. I tried to find escape in rejection of rules and authority and rebelled in almost any way that I could find. At that time I did not see any incentive to lead a good, clean,
respectable life; if the only profit for pure, sinless babies was torture, there was not much hope for me.

A turn back to light began when I was asked to assist with Sunday school for a Kindergarten class. Yet at this time, I was still running around with the wrong crowd. Hard change came within the next year. One Sunday while in church, praying with eyes closed, I had my second vision, that of myself in hell. Utter fear shot through my body as I looked down and saw myself in the pit of a vast canyon. At the same time I was in the canyon looking up into the glory that is heaven. Hell was not a place of fire, burning or imps, but rather, complete knowledge of my separation from the love of God for all eternity. As I snapped back into reality I was greatly shaken and knew that I had to make some changes, however, for a small time more I still held on tight to some of my unruly ways.

Within the next few months I had another unexplained experience. Again I was in church, praying after communion, when I had the sensation of that which is spirit or soul, lifting out of my physical body and floating up toward heaven. During this out of body experience I remember feeling utter peace, warmth, lightness of being and joy, such as that which occurs as a soul returns to its source. When my mind took over and I realized what I was experiencing was not in the realm of the possible, I felt as though my spirit quickly fell back into my body and I snapped again back into reality. It was now that I felt as if I had full understanding of both sides of the eternal spectrum, and could make an informed decision about my faith, embracing Catholicism for myself with evidence beyond all explanation.

Simultaneously, decisions had to be made about what college or university I would attend and what I would be studying. My senior year in high school I took an art class, the only one offered in all four years. I had always enjoyed artistic expression through activities such as acting in our school’s drama club
productions, yet I did not know that taking one broad based art class would change my world and all of my career plans.

My junior and senior years I had worked part time as a cashier at a local grocery store. As was common practice, one day I was required to watch a motivational training video at work, the speaker was Lou Holtz, the esteemed football coach who had been credited with turning Notre Dame into a fierce and winning team. The focus of the piece was in regard to finding one’s place in life, living up to full potential, and contributing to the larger society. After watching this video, an epiphany came about in the form of change from studying fashion merchandising at the University of Alabama, to Studio Art at the University of South Carolina. By going into the field of art, I felt as if I had a platform by which I could look at our American culture, show what I saw occurring, and simultaneously comment on it through the lens that is my faith.

I entered the University of South Carolina in the fall of 1997 as a Fine Art photography major. The love of and fascination with light that I first discovered as a child in church manifested itself in my photographic images and would later appear in graduate school translated through the medium of glass. Yet as I began taking undergraduate elective classes in ceramics and sculpture I discovered a love and affinity for both which inevitably would convert me into a ceramic sculptor.

As I look back into my childhood I can see that it was predestined for me to move clay. My first meeting with the material was at the age of ten, on a visit with my family to Sesquicentennial State Park in Columbia, SC. Walking under the pine trees I looked at the ground and saw a bright red-orange damp substance with striations of grey and white- this I had never before seen. I put my foot on it first to see how it felt; it was slick and my shoe sailed right through it. Once I saw this result I deemed it safe to touch, and dug up a bit squishing it in my small
hands. I was so taken with the material and proud of my discovery that I quickly dug up a lump and ran over to show my parents, asking if we could please take it home to play with. Once home I shared the small wonder with my sister, enlisting her to roll coils with me for a birds nest pot which we later baked in the sun at mom’s insisting. Somehow this pot has survived to the present day as a record of my early ceramic fascination.

Throughout my time working in clay at the University of South Carolina, I sought to bring the light of my faith, which I had continuously been discovering, into my work. By the time of my BFA show I had developed a clay vocabulary that ranged from simple hand building to three dimensional mosaics, wall installations and slip casting. The work was predominant produced in a very loose folk art manor and sought to update narrative stories from the Bible. After graduating I continued to work as a special student at the university, building up my portfolio. Two and a half years after graduating I was accepted into the MFA graduate program at the School for American Crafts at RIT. Here I would continue to make work centering on my faith, however with new eyes and more informed hands.
II. "Sweetness & Light" Thesis Proposal

My thesis body of work will employ the use of the still-life format, interpreted through the medium of ceramic sculpture, and will incorporate the use of Christian symbolism. This work is based in reflection on purity and corruption, light and darkness, and the hidden and revealed. It is my intention to use these concepts as a basis to provide revelations of both personal and societal truths as filtered through my Catholic faith.

Culturally recognized symbols of gluttonous excess, such as chocolate, in the form of cakes and candies, are used to emote feelings of desire and longing by their formation into tempting treats. Corresponding Christian symbols of licentiousness are placed within these exterior candy shells. Comparative displays of abundance in pure cane sugar are used to create a contrasting feeling of longing for higher ideals, Christian symbols of which are also found nestled within these shells. This body of work seeks to explore and illustrate differences between abundance and excess, and longing that derives from desire or necessity. In my work I continually seek to bring new light to traditional Christian ideas and cultural norms within a classical format.
III. Still Life as Seen in a Historical Context

The history of still life, a term coined from the Dutch meaning "immobile nature," is a deep and rich tradition which began in the days of Pompeii, although the classification of the still life format would not be made until the mid-seventeenth century. One of the earliest recognized still lifes can be found in the Heracleitus mosaic entitled "The Unswept Floor" (Figure 1). This work depicts bones and other organic material littering a floor along with a mouse that is feeding on the accumulations. The artist/craftsmen’s intention is seemingly to capture a moment out of chaotic yet ordinary everyday life.

Painter Giotto di Bondone brought focus to the still life format and more specifically to the start of trompe l’oeil techniques in the 1300’s. Giotto and other artist of the time were producing illusionist paintings of windows or niches, not on canvases, but directly on palace or church interior walls. For a time, The Still Life went into quiet wait until its revival in the 1500’s, reaching its height by the 1600’s, and finally declining for the most part in the early 1800’s. Although still life would enjoy a brief revival by the Impressionists at the end of the nineteenth century, this was its last major collective manifestation as an en vogue genre.

By the mid-seventeenth century categories of still life were differentiated. The first actually appearing at the beginning of the sixteenth century as: market scenarios, butcher’s shop scenes, and allegories of fertility. These very beginnings of "dead nature" were a type of social commentary, marking the change from feudal to capitalist society. As a product of the increased wealth of commoners there was greater availability of food that now extended into the masses of the population, this being reflected in the market scenarios. In the butcher’s shop scenes, religious undertones could be found relating to ‘weakness of the flesh’.

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At the turn of the seventeenth century the popularity of market scenarios were fading and being replaced by kitchen scenes. Abundance and availability of food were still celebrated, but moreover now, it was preparation that was being examined. These scenes too were fertile ground to discuss either images of piety through care and concern for the poor, or carnal licentiousness through immorality or deprave acts. With its ties to social commentary, the still life format thus felt like a natural devise for me to adopt in the visual manifestation of my ideas.

Throughout the heyday of still life, depictions of the five senses became another area of fascination to explore. Luscious displays of delightful visions, smells, tastes, sounds and touches were depicted by flowers, musical instruments, fine foods, paintings, beautiful women, sculptures and coinage. This theme fed directly into the development of the vanitas category, which was interested literally in human vanity. It was in researching this particular area of still life that I believe it first unconsciously dawned on me to affect not only the senses of sight and touch with my thesis work, but also the sense of smell.

Initially, fruit, floral and music still lifes were all separate categories, which were used for humanistic enjoyment. Eventually the subcategories of fruit and flower still life were combined for use in Religious still lifes as a reflection of the glory and splendor of God. These scenarios would often feature the Madonna and Child or the Holy Eucharist at the center of the work, with beautifully illuminated fruits and flowers forming boarders surrounding the focal point. The flowers or fruits are not illuminated from without, but radiate as a result of an internal light or glow (Schneider, 151).

As early as the fifteenth century artists began experimenting with painting human skulls on the back of canvases. Patrons would commission a portrait and on the reverse the skull as a reminder of the fleetingness of things and of human
existence. Eventually the vanitas scene was developed as a separate entity (Figure 2). These scenarios would contain other symbols of worldly pleasure and power such as: coinage and moneybags, dice, armor, shields, kingly and papal crowns, globes and jewelry (Schneider, 80-82). Elements such as pocket watches and hourglasses were used to show the passage of time, candles, the light of both mental and spiritual illumination. The element of duality present in early portrait/vanitas scenarios, and the use of this symbol language was something that I felt could be applied directly to the contemporary ideas with which I was working.

Dessert and confectionary still life was established as a category in the seventeenth century. This advent marked the integration of cane sugar as a sweetener, thereby replacing honey. At its inception sugar was thought to be a wonderful discovery, and was used as a symbol of purity. It was not until later when it was found to be a highly addictive substance. “Christian Hofmann von Hofmannswaldau therefore felt that sugar was similar to lust (“Lust continues to be the sugar of our time.”)” (Schneider, 90).

Considered one of the most accomplished painters at the forefront of the confectionary still life style, George Flegel, seems to walk a line between using sugar as a thing of purity, which is to be celebrated, and then contrasting it as a symbol of evil and deterioration. In one work a bowl of sugar-covered fruits is pictured with a butterfly poised on top of the mound thereby representing the sweetness of the resurrection (Figure 3). However, when a mouse is shown beside silver coins, sniffing at candies spilled on a tabletop, this is a warning against immorality (Figure 4). A combination of the aforementioned vanitas and confectionary still life scenarios would prove to be the appropriate manifestation for the ideas of societal corruption and Godly purity that I wanted to convey.

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IV. Trompe l’Oeil as Seen in a Historical Context

The start of the trompe l’oeil style can be found within the history of still life, the two largely overlapping each other. This term from the French meaning, “to fool the eye” was coined in the 1700’s; however, Giotto di Bondone is credited with producing some of the first trompes as early as the fourteenth century. Giotto incorporated small tricks into works by painting highly realistic flies on the surface of a few of his paintings. Yet it is not until the period between 1500-1800 that the major impact of trompe l’oeil is felt. Artists painted everything from false windows and niches to paintings of paintings.

Although trompe l’oeil largely died out during the early 1800’s, it did enjoy some use in the decorative arts. Surfaces such as marble and costly wood grain were produced at much lower prices by painting on less expensive materials. By the early 1900’s artists such as Rene Magritte and the Surrealists had brought back the tradition of using trompes in painting, however, the use of the trompe had morphed. In early trompe l’oeil the main focus was recreation or copying the original; the new focus had become a questioning of the reality and materiality of the subject matter (Floyd, 1-5).
V. Contemporary Still Life Influences

At the beginning of my unwitting journey through the format of still life, I came across the art of painter Wayne Thiebaud while visiting the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. This had been my first encounter with Thiebaud’s work. I stood transfixed in front of his sugary sweet cakes, slices of pie and candied apples (Figure 5). The intensity of swirling colors, with seemingly neon glowing outlines, and over the top sloppy paint thickness, everything about these paintings was candied overindulgence and I wanted to be the first to take a bite. The summer before my thesis year I felt drawn to revisit these early Thiebaud works, pulling books out of the library to explore his use of the still life format and to investigate the potential of cakes as an iconic symbol.

Moving into the world of sculpture, from the time of my introductory undergraduate sculpture classes, the works of Jasper Johns and Claes Oldenburg had always fascinated me; I wanted desperately to associate my work with their wonderful sensibilities of color and form. Johns’ “Ballantine Ale” cast bronze beer cans were inspiration for me in 2001 to create “Ode to the Colonel,” a bronze chicken bucket painted in acrylics and decaled to reproduce a Kentucky Fried Chicken tub, filled with slip cast fried chicken (Figure 6). This piece and other food inspired works were early indicators of my interest in the still life format, in the trompe l’oeil style. References to food and glorification of the everyday in the work of Oldenburg were an immediate connection for me. However, in search for work with more layers of intent, it was the work of Robert Arneson that caught my attention. Although vastly different pieces, “Smorgi-Bob, the Cook” (Figure 7) and “General Nuke” (Figure 8) were both, in my mind, endlessly fascinating. “Smorgi-Bob,” a self-portrait of Arneson as a culinary artist with a laid banquet table full of every food delight imaginable. “General Nuke,” a terrifying

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commentary on possible nuclear holocaust. Arneson’s work proves most striking for his use of a delicate balance between humor and dead seriousness. It is now that I realize that an initial light-hearted sense could be used as a powerful hook for entry into my own work.
VI. Contemporary Trompe l’Oeil Influences

Sculptors Richard Shaw, Marilyn Levine, and Victor Spinski have been at the forefront of the contemporary trompe l’oeil movement in ceramics from its inception. Although Shaw produces some works that could most accurately be classified as realism with a fanciful twist, it is his reflections of the everyday for which he is best know. A house of cards composed of paper-thin clay, decorated with decals, has become iconic Shaw. The first time that I experienced one of these pieces in the Allan Chasanoff collection I stood in utter shock, examining the piece, not knowing for certain if this was really clay or simply a clever prank.

More recently I was able to view a newer work at the 2005 National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts conference in Baltimore, Maryland. This piece contrasted slices of wedding cake on dessert plates. A bride and groom were placed standing apart from and facing each other on two separate slices on the first plate, and a decapitated groom was on a single slice on the other (Figure 9). The texture of the spongy cake interior coupled with the satin icing and the plastic-like texture of the figurines were all present. No matter what Shaw is recreating in clay, the precision that is so critical to trompe l’oeil is always found in his work. Shaw therefore is a reference that I continually revisit.

Leather goods such as shoes, jackets, satchels and purses make up the subject matter with which ceramic artist Marilyn Levine is concerned. Her attention to complete replication of all the details of texture, coloration, and use provide results so realistic that one can almost smell the aged leather. It is for all of these reasons that Marilyn Levine has earned herself the designation as one of ceramic’s foremost trompe l’oeil artists. Levine’s work, more than any other artist of this style, makes the viewer question seriously what they perceive. While on a recent visit to the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York, I stood...
puzzling before one of Levine’s satchels for countless minutes in absolute disbelief that the zipper was indeed made of clay (Figure 10). It seemed a cruel joke that my senses could be so deceived, my eyes making such a false account. This element of consummate deception makes the style of trompe l’oeil a perfect fit for issues that I am analyzing with my work, that of social corruption and moral depravity.

While Shaw’s work walks the line between realism and trompe l’oeil, and Levin’s steps over the boundaries from early trompe tricks to complete deception, Victor Spinski travels between direct representation and work that has a social consciousness. Work for which he is probably best known is comprised of empty paint cans, and wooden or cardboard boxes filled with apples, tools or the remnants from a dinner (Figure 11). However it is the work that is less well known with which I am most concerned. During a recent slide lecture by Spinski at the School for American Crafts, he showed a work comprised of a silver lustered trashcan that was overflowing with condoms. He joked that he took this slide to a similar talk for a Catholic high school from which he was promptly asked to leave. Although I gather Victor’s intention was to poke fun at the Catholic church’s stance against use of prophylactics, I saw this as a show of the over abundance of sexual promiscuity in the United States today. In trompe l’oeil pieces just such as this, because the objects are easily recognizable, it creates an easy pathway for almost anyone to enter into the piece, and a golden opportunity to speak about serious issues without the viewer getting bogged down in decoding forms.

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VII. The Making of Sweetness & Light

Although the production for "Sweetness & Light" did not start until early December 2005, the journey from surrealism to realism and eventually to trompe l’oeil began in September of that year. By early September I had defined the content of my thesis show, that which is captured in my aforementioned thesis proposal. I would produce both chocolate and wedding cakes, which would act as foils for each other, showing the contrast between earthly, corrupt, overindulgence and otherworldly pure abundance. These cakes would have Christian, Catholic, symbols corresponding to the cakes with glass candied ornamentation.

I began hand building chocolate cakes with swirled and raked frosting textures at about double the size of real cakes. Early versions were cut in half and hinged to produce a ceramic box, which would be opened to reveal the symbol contents such as dice. The box form proved too abstract and hard edged. Similar results were found in the production of a square wedding cake, the top layer hinged open to reveal a dove perched in the bottom cake layer. A softer rounded cake with a slice removed and symbols pouring out of the open space was the next trial step. Although a better solution, the cake and symbol proportions were still not working. At the last critique of the quarter it was decided that I needed to produce hyper realistic work in order to drive the content home, thus began my crash course in trompe l’oeil.

In December I began taking molds of all the objects that I wanted to slip cast; these were the symbols that would become the metaphorical filling for my confections. As it turned out, I needed the entire month to produce all of the molds, a few turned out to be far outside of my previous experience of three part molds. Through trial and error I produced a seven-part mold of a

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human skull and a fourteen-part mold for the dice I would cast. Much time also went into trial versions of the moneybags, which I was hand sewing and filling with quarters to get a more realistic sense of volume and weight.

Construction of the cakes went fairly quickly since I had worked out most of the kinks earlier. Incorporation of the dice into the cherry cake, so as to create a realistic outpouring proved a little more challenging. I opted to cut, slip and score each individual die into place, more than two hundred in all. The nut cake texture was another quick solution due to past mosaic experience. Very thin tiles were made, glaze fired and crushed into tiny nut-like chips and pressed into the wet surface of the cake’s sides. Frosting texture was then piped onto the cake’s top using stiff slip applied with cake decorating tools. Finally, quarters were attached into the cut out section of the cake in much the same way as the dice in the cherry cake.

Major set backs came when the glazing began. From September through December I tested slips and glazes for both cakes and objects, settling on a small palate before the final cake production in January had begun. Yet when the actual cake glazing started, I came across many time issues. In the case of the chocolate cakes, many of them required layered slips, underglazes and glazes, some requiring up to five firings.

In the end three of the four cakes had to go through two versions each. The bunt cake became over-fired after the fifth firing and the slips started to come away from the surface. Likewise, the decision to attach dice into the cherry cake was a decision that I regretted upon discovery that the satin glaze I had chosen filled the impressions in the dice. No part of this cake could be salvaged resulting in a lost of at least two weeks work. In a similar turn of events the top two layers of the wedding cake were lost due to warping of the separator plate which supported the bottom layer. Because both layers were
attached to the each other and to the plate this portion of the piece had to be reproduced as well. Although a hard lesson, it has definitely been impressed upon me to make all parts separately and attached them post firing.

Manufacturing clay "fabric" was the last major element for my still life scenarios. To my clay body I added a large mass of nylon fibers to produce the strongest, most flexible material possible. Clay was hand rolled into huge sheets about 1/16" thick and then manipulated and finished with teal velvet underglaze and lime oil glazing. Color choices of brilliant red, blue, and green were made to capture the look of rich velvet fabrics, those that appear in early Flemish religious paintings of the fifteenth century, thereby making a strong connection to the work of Robert Campin (Figure 12), Jan Van Eyck (Figure 13), and Rogier Van Der Weyden (Figure 14).

After the work production had been completed, display was the final consideration. Through the set up of the pieces, my ideas would be realized and conveyed or fall flat. Simple wooden tables of varying heights were designed and produced for each of the four scenarios. The desired effect was to reference the period from which the still life tradition had come, yet establish a firm foothold in the present. Ash wood with dark walnut stain was chosen for the tables on which chocolate cakes would be placed, creating a rich surface for display. In contrast, considering that it would be painted pure white, poplar wood was chosen for the table on which the wedding cake would be placed.

The initial conception for the installation had been to create a room within the group gallery space, effectively making my own world in which ideas could be expressed without distraction. The space was rectangular, with floor dimensions approximately sixteen by twelve feet, with only one four-foot opening centered on the front sixteen-foot wall. The lowest table was placed
just inside of the entryway to the room and centered. Displayed on this table was “Corruption Scenario I” comprised of the nut encrusted cake (filled with quarters), a piece of blue swaged fabric, and a small pile of moneybags. When approaching from the entryway, the cake appeared as a tempting treat, however, when one faced the cake from the other direction, it appeared as if a slice had been removed and quarters were spilling out.

Directly behind “Corruption Scenario I”, centered on the back wall of the space, was “Purity Scenario I”, a comparative display of a wedding cake with a pitcher and basin placed beside it. Although this piece too had a slice removed, the empty space was visible upon any approach, the placement a deliberate choice to be forthright, thus supporting the content of virtue. The basin and pitcher, symbolic representations of cleanliness and continence, were placed directly in line with the removed slice as a metaphorical filling for the cake. Due to this use of white on white, I reasoned a bridal fabric such as satin would be appropriate to break up the white walled area directly behind the piece. A double layering of taupe silk-like material and sheer silver organza overlay was chosen.

To the left of the entry was “Corruption Scenario II”, a black forest cake, beside it a slice of the same cake on a dessert plate, and a slew of poker chips paving the tabletop surrounding both. As in the case of “Corruption Scenario I” a seemingly normal cake faced the viewer when approaching from the front, yet the back reveled dice that poured forth from the cake and oozed out of the slice. Through the use of American currency in “Corruption Scenario I”, I had hoped to establish that these were not only contemporary still life scenarios, but that they dealt with distinctly American icons. In “Corruption Scenario II” through the integration of patriotic red, white, and blue poker chips, no mistake about whom the work referenced could be made.

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The last scenario in the show, located to the right of the entry, “Corruption Scenario III” was perhaps the most quiet and direct. Its display was sparer than the two former corruption scenarios, and referred more to the vanitas still life tradition. A bunt cake with chocolate icing dripping off the sides was set in comparison with a human skull, the table covered in a beautiful lime cloth. Cast silver flies were placed on the interior of the bunt in such a manor that they could only be viewed from the side. When perceived, these flies appeared as if eating away the cake. This piece did not reference specifically American symbols of vice, but rather human frailty. I wanted to show immorality for what it truly is, the road to rot and decay.
VIII. Conclusions

Having some time and distance since the production of the thesis work, I have been given the opportunity to view it in a new light. During my oral defense two major questions were raised, one was of clarity and contemporizing of symbols. While I believe that most of the symbols used in my thesis were fairly direct and clear, I also believe that many were tied to precedents set in the beginnings of the still life tradition, perhaps appearing outdated today. Going forward I would like to use icons specific to contemporary American culture, in order to draw attention to particular issues that I would like to analyze, such as consumerism and sexuality.

The second major question raised in my oral defense was that of color choices, both in the thesis work and in work from the previous year. More specifically it was asked for me to define the difference between symbol and stereotype. The possibility of perception of stereotyping in my work was thus raised. While I have used dark colors (black or brown) to represent a negative presence, that such as corruption, and white to represent purity, these are color parallels that I have drawn from historic color symbology of the Catholic Church. I do not seek therefore to perpetuate stereotypes, but rather use the language of symbolism to analyze societal ills.

More recently, the question has been posed to me, whether I feel part of both the still life and trompe l’œil traditions. While I have always been an object maker interested in arranging elements into a single composition, my methods of production have never been trompe l’œil until recently. My inborn love of food and easily recognizable objects, combine with interest in social commentary has led me to the realm of trompe l’œil. Presently this method of making is the clear fit to speak about contemporary social issues in

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a language that is accessible for most viewers. I can foresee using the trompe l’oeil still life format for some time to come as it creates a clear connection to ideas of deception with which I continually find myself fascinated.

The materiality of my work and its importance is often called into question as I work predominantly in ceramics, yet incorporate mixed media such as glass, metal, wood or fibers as supporting elements. If I believe that the use of another material will support the reality that I am seeking to create then I use it. Likewise, if it supports the embodiment of an idea such as glass as light, this feels to me a more appropriate choice than simply using ceramics if only for consistency of materials. Ultimately, I seek only to give the work what it needs to be a clear conduit.
Fig. #1: Heracleitus, *The Unswept Floor*, 2nd century B.C., Tile Mosaic.

Fig. #2: Antonio de Pereda, *The Allegory of Transience*, 1640, Oil on Wood.

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Fig. #3: George Flegel, *Still Life with Bread and Confectionary*, undated, Oil on Wood.

Fig. #4: George Flegel, *Dessert Still Life*, undated, Oil on Wood.

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Fig. #5: Wayne Thiebaud, *Bakery Counter*, 1962, Oil on Canvas.

Fig #6: Jasper Johns, *Ballantine Ale*, 1960, Painted Bronze.

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Fig. #8: Robert Arneson, *General Nuke*, 1984, Clay.

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Fig. #9: Richard Shaw, 2005, Clay.

Fig. #10: Marilyn Levine, *Commission for Pacific Enterprises*, 1989, Clay.
Fig. #11: Victor Spinski, *Tool Box*, 2001, Clay.

Fig. #12: Robert Campin, *The Merode Triptych*, c.1425, Oil on Panel.

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Fig. #13: Jan Van Eyck, *Ghent Altarpiece*, c.1425-33, Oil on Panel.
Fig. #14: Rogier Van Der Weyden, *Descent from the Cross*, c.1430-35, Oil on Panel.
Bibliography


**Sweetness and Light Image Identification List:**

1. Corruption Scenario I (America the Beautiful), March 2006. 39.5” x 36” x 24”. Ceramic sculpture on wooden table.

2. Corruption Scenario I (America the Beautiful), reverse side, March 2006. 39.5” x 36” x24”. Ceramic sculpture on wooden table.


4. Corruption Scenario II (America the Beautiful), March 2006. 47” x 36” x 24”. Ceramic sculpture on wooden table.


7. Corruption Scenario III (America the Beautiful), March 2006. 41” x 36” x 24”. Ceramic sculpture on wooden table.


Stephanie Leach, Corruption Scenario I (America the Beautiful), 2006.
39.5"x36"x24" Ceramic sculpture on wooden table.

Stephanie Leach, Corruption Scenario II, (America the Beautiful), 2006.
47"x36"x24" Ceramic sculpture on wooden table.

Stephanie Leach, Corruption Scenario III, 2006.
41"x36"x24" Ceramic sculpture on wooden table.

Stephanie Leach, Purity Scenario I, 2006.
55"x42"x30", Ceramic sculpture on wooden table.

(Detail) 9.5"x14"x14", Cake on plate. Ceramic sculpture.

(Detail) 4.5"x3"x2.25", Rags. Slip cast Ceramics.

4.5"x3"x2.25", Ceramic sculpture on wooden table.

13"x7.5"x7.5", Poker chips. Slip cast ceramics.

(Detail) 5.5"x10"x10", Slice on plate. Slip casting and ceramic sculpture.

(Detail) 8"x14"x14", Cake on plate. Ceramic sculpture.

(Detail) 8"x14"x14", Cake on plate. Ceramic sculpture.