Narrative whiskey flasks

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Master of Fine Arts

Narrative Whiskey Flasks

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September, 2000
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Introduction

The whiskey flask, as an object, holds charged images of masculine rituals. With this object, the owner joins a club of exclusion and ritual that still belongs to men today. Just as Morandi’s concern with the bottle extended beyond the still-life, my creations while possessing the potential for use, are a canvas to observe and define masculinity. It is important that my flasks do contain utilitarian properties so that they will exist somewhere between the utilitarian craft and sculptural art. A painter is restricted to a two-dimensional representation of life as their illusion. I have the ability within sculpture to confound the illusion by the fabrication of the object before adding imagery. The fact that the function is now ambiguous will draw more attention to the decoration and the imagery used on the surface of the vessel.

In this thesis, I will take you through the journey that lead me to select the whiskey flask, and the significance of it as my vehicle for the narrative. I will also analyze the aesthetic and importance of my chosen symbols. Above all, this thesis is an insight into the forces that have shaped me as an artist.
This thesis will explore and celebrate how men have lived, their different roles throughout history, and their future position in the world. I have chosen the whiskey flask as a metaphor for men. Each flask will be a symbolic representation of a selected individual taken from literature.

The flask becomes a central part of this thesis because of its universal link with men. To me, the whiskey flask as an object holds charged images of masculine rituals. With the flask, the owner joins a club of exclusion and rite. The flask is a utilitarian vessel that in this context transcends ordinary use, and becomes an element of ritual. The flask will have symbols and allusions to the individuals they represent. This is a personal exploration in hopes to celebrate men, the rite of masculinity, and the ritual of bravado.
Journey in Ceramics

A chef that enters a kitchen, has at his disposal an arsenal of ingredients. His unique aesthetic is formed by training, background, and personal taste. When used correctly in the right combinations, the ingredients and the chef's skills, create a story for the palate. Through the subtle combinations of color, envelopment of aroma, the layering of texture, and the complexities of taste, the chef creates a world to be enjoyed by others. As an artist, I must employ similar techniques when conveying my story to others.

Through experiences as a student, I believe that I now possess the necessary ingredients to produce a meaningful artistic voice. My education has mostly centered around learning the tools to produce utilitarian ceramics. These tools include producing plates in undergraduate school and a year apprenticesing in Japan. My previous training has infused my mind and soul with a vocabulary of the vessel through the creation of utilitarian ceramics.

My respect for utilitarian ceramics gripped my spirit while living in Japan. I am extremely fortunate to have been able to study with Mr. Jureomon Fujita, an eighth generation traditional master craftsman. Not only did he teach me the craft of ceramics, he and his family revealed a glimpse into an Asian aesthetic, to which I fell deeply in love.
In a picture of Mr. Fujita standing outside his studio in front of over five hundred small jars, I realized the definition of production. These jars, meant to be sold to local fisherman for less than a dollar a piece, shattered my notion that each pot must be special. On the other hand, Fujita, like many folk potters in Japan has benefited from a renewed interest and glorification in traditional crafts. Thus, a pot which sold for less than a dollar in the early seventies now commands hundreds of dollars. My instruction from Mr. Fujita was influenced by both the tradition of utility and a renewed fascination of the crafts. Repetition is a major tool for educating a craftsman in Japan. As an apprentice, I was expected to create specifically designed vessels from a blueprint, day after day. To my initial disappointment, I was not allowed to fire any of my work for the first five months. As I became accustomed to this form of training, my values of ceramics defined by the notion that I must create "art" and that each pot is unique, gradually dissolved. I began to fall in love with the process of creation, rather than the completed product. The ideas of Yanagi, who was a key figure in the rebirth of the Japanese folk art movement, were captured in my work at this time. A particular statement of his conveys his general attitude, "The great need of our time is for the artist/craftsman not only to produce his own good work but also to ally himself closely with the artisan so that eventually we can have beauty in
common things again (Yanagi, 106). This concept seemed to validate my new role as a functional potter. The process of building large scale vessels soon became a dance in which every step was an economy of movement. This dance taught my body to produce work, not my mind. For a craftsman in Asia, importance lies within knowledge acquired by the body, rather than thought of the mind. The purpose of this dance was to create relatively large, utilitarian vessels through a coil building technique. This process starts with a single slab of clay, used to create the base of the vessel. It is then pressed out into a circle and on a stump that is about a foot and a half tall. Next, a coil of clay about the size of a man’s wrist is added to the base. With a paddle, hand, and water, the coils are shaped revealing the profile of the vessel. As each layer hardens, this process is repeated until the vessel has emerged. The beauty of this technique is that in each step in the process, a potter walks backwards around the stump and vessel, becoming the “wheel”. The potter’s hand is registered in rhythmic impressions into the walls of the clay, thus adding to the tempo of the dance. By becoming part of this process, I am only as important as any successive step. I learned to respect and then to eventually love random marks and blemishes that were created beyond my conscious level. A defining element of these large vessels is the marks left by the woodfiring process. Although my pottery was not earmarked for Mr.
Fujita’s wood kiln, I assisted in the firing and loading of his ware. Wood firing is the ideal firing technique for Mr. Fujita’s work. This firing process is a marriage between chance and control. Finished work to the untrained eye may just be interesting shades of color, but to the trained eye, the finished vessel tells a story of its creation. Specific colors and sought after textures are all attained by skill and many years of practice. My year in Japan redefined my creative process from one of choice into one of discipline. The burden of the creative process was taken out of the equation, which allowed me to learn the craft of ceramics. I sought out subtle changes in shape and color that were allowed within strict tolerances. These variations were ultimately produced by the unconscious hand or by nature itself. Water, earth, and fire all play a beautiful part in Fujita’s craft, which is an example of the defining Japanese aesthetic.

Emerged in the rhetoric of Yanagi and my recent training as a utilitarian potter, I entered RIT to the harsh reality of aesthetics and the expectation to create art. As the reality hit, I knew deep inside me that everything up until that moment had been preparation for a drastic change that was ahead. My fundamental shift in aesthetics continues to shock me everyday.
One of the first lessons was learning and accepting the definitions between: the vessel, sculpture, and utilitarian ceramics. I also quickly realized that my world was much different from the lives of my Asian brethren, who continue to rejoice and become inspired by the temples and craftsmanship that will always be relevant in their lives. This dose of reality meant that McDonalds and local strip malls are doing more to shape my aesthetics, than an 800 hundred year old temple with the right shade of green moss growing on its steps. I soon realized that my knowledge of making large rice jars would never make me become an individual artist in this land. In my world, reality is harshly distant to the rice fields and strict discipline, where my work was inspired. My next lesson was the realization that while my professor, Rick Hirsch was making objects that have Asian roots, he would never give up his own American identity. His soul, unlike many artists who have fallen in love with the Asian aesthetic, was still his own. The addition of Julia Galloway into my education, taught me that ceramics with a history other than Asia can have a beauty of their own. My dilemma to produce meaningful work drove me to the need for resolution.

The ultimate choice of a whiskey flask came from one of those seemingly arbitrary decisions that in retrospect, change your life forever. These first flasks were created for a newly finished wood kiln, that was built
at school. I stumbled on the flasks because I needed something relatively small that could be produced quickly in time for the first firing. These flasks were made out of slabs and roughly shaped into bottle forms. I used slips and powdered clay for decoration that I knew would be enhanced by the flames of the wood kiln. I placed about five flasks throughout the kiln to see what would happen.

I was first drawn the flasks that were marked by fire, reminding me of the subtle Japanese aesthetic to which I was familiar. Upon further reflection, I realized the most interesting flasks to me after the firing were the ones that looked as if they were old and worn with age. It was as if the owner of the flask was revealed in the surface of the clay. At this moment, came a breakthrough in my work. The story of the owner was beginning to emerge as a symbol in my work. I next started to develop stamps that were used to make impressions in the clay. This breakthrough forced me to take more responsibility in the decoration of the finished ware, as I had previously allowed "nature" to ornate the finished product. This also started my new journey from that of the Asian aesthetic to becoming an American artist. As a consequence of my ever increasing desire to decorate the exterior of the flasks, the importance that this new object was a vessel became less and less important. My desire to depict the owner's soul and identity escalated. My
exploration in surface decoration drove me to abandon familiar red, iron bearing clay that tends to obscure surface glaze in favor of a white, neutral clay that would not interfere with the investigation of ornamentation. Along with the use of stamps, came explorations of silk screening and decals. During this time, I discovered the work of the painter Giorgio Morandi, who spent most of his career depicting still lives of bottles. I also became keenly aware of the work of Nancy Selvin, who also evokes the mood of Morandi’s still lives through sculpture. Another influence is the ceramic artist Ron Nagle, who creates cups that are both distorted and enhanced with the use of color and texture. Michael McTwigan described Ron Nagle’s work as, “That which is not the cup activates the cup, contains it, frames it, and separates it from the outside world (McTwigan, 6)”.

These influences encouraged me to focus on the bottle, chiefly the whiskey flask for the remainder of my time at RIT. My departure from Morandi and Selvan’s themes, began to emerge as I associated my product more with men, masculinity, and bravado. These ideas are embodied in the whiskey flask.

My next awkward flasks attempted to pinpoint masculine ideas without any specific reference. For example, I took the brutally familiar “lady” symbol that appears on the mud flaps of the majority of “eighteen wheeler” trucks, and strategically arranged this “lady” symbol to represent a naive,
sense of masculine exploitation of women. Upon the suggestion of Rick Hirsch, I began to explore the idea that the flask could be an autobiographical representation of a single man. Thus, moving my flasks from the random, ambiguous idea of masculinity into a more strategic, concrete world that would allow me to begin to utilize and explore the ideas of the narrative. As the end of graduate school was in sight, I suddenly realized with urgency that my aesthetic had totally changed. I attended a workshop at Peters Valley with Richard Notkin involving the nature of the narrative, hoping to resolve many central problems with the objects I was creating. During the week in isolation and an unfamiliar environment, I finally was able to shed the notion that each of my works were not about functional pottery, or even the vessel. Just as Monet used the haystack, only as a stage for the dance of light and color; I became inspired to concentrate solely upon the narrative of masculinity, rather than the utility of a flask. This shift allowed my work to change from a vessel concerned with containment to an object embodying a story. During the week at Peter’s Valley, Notkin referred to his teapots as a “hook” to draw the viewer into the symbolism of his work. With this statement, I realized that I was using my medium, the whiskey flask to capture my audience.
I decided that my work needs to create and tell a story. I finally began to understand that all of my pottery “vocabulary”, was to be combined and used to make up the essential ingredients to allow the creation of this new frame of mind for my work. Just like that chef in the kitchen, my skills were like spices at my disposal. I had the tools and the canvas, without even realizing it, to explore a whole new idea of the role of my work.

An old adage that is often told to writers is to “write what you know”. In this equation, clay, the vessel, and aspects from utilitarian pottery would be encompassed in my work.

The vessels in my thesis show are representations of individuals taken from literature. In my exploration of understanding and celebrating masculinity, I felt that individuals taken from literature would represent “literal” man more successfully than a living individual. As an artist, I am intrigued by further abstracting an image of man, based on the author’s canvas. Each flask highlights important aspects of the man’s character contained within the confines of the novel.
Exploring the Work

Analysis of “Huck Finn # 1”

Tom’s most well, now and got his bullet around his neck on a watch-guard for a watch, and is always seeing what time it is, and so there ain’t nothing more to write about, and I’m rotten glad of it because if I’d a knowed what a trouble it was to write a book I wouldn’t have tackled it and I ain’t agoing to no more, but I reckon I get to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can’t stand it I been there before. Huck Finn

This work, a representation of a dueling gun case, contains three major elements. The first element, a wooden dovetailed box constructed from maple and stained dark brown is lined with red velvet fabric. The box has a hinged lid and is presented open, as to display its contents. The other two elements are the flasks that represent a wooden river raft lashed together by rope. Each flask has two individual sides. The first side, represents the general form and shape of a curved, hip flask while revealing a textured, woodlike appearance. Rotation of the flask 180 degrees, yields the opposing side of each flask that has a flattened texture, that is also woodlike in
appearance with the addition of crossbeams that complete the visual image of an actual wooden raft. The color scheme for the flasks was chosen to further simulate the look and feel of a wooden surface. These three objects together create an illusion of a ceremonial dueling set.

The symbolic replacement of the whiskey flasks for the guns fulfills two purposes. First, it adds an unexpected twist to the contents of a traditional dueling set. Secondly, it allows for the addition of a raft, the most enduring image throughout the story of Huck Finn.

There are many reasons that a dueling set makes the perfect representation of Huck’s struggles with society. This set also showcases his continual reluctance to be assimilated into the mainstream society of his time. The strength of this work; however, attests to its ability to reach beyond the parameters of the book, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Man’s struggle to retain his dignity and uphold his honor resides in a universal, symbolic, and ritualized ceremony of dueling. Men, as do Huck, must decide how far they are willing to extend themselves into the ludicrous, before they actually step back to see the ramifications of their actions.
Analysis of “Don Pablo # 1”

The bottle used to represent Don Pablo in the novel For Whom the Bell Tolls, stands boldly with a glossy, blue surface flanked on the sides by white. This bottle formed to be rectangular in shape, has many angular panels. The sides of the bottle are smaller, more exaggerated rectangles that are covered with a brick-laid pattern of nipples. The bottle rests on a recessed foot that holds shadow, promoting a light floating appearance. The neck of the bottle follows the contour of the rest of the vessel, while tapering into a round lip. The stopper, also blue acts as cap that is contrasted by a white liner.

The design for this sculpture alludes to poison bottles that were developed between the eighteen fifties the early nineteen twenties. These bottles, designed to hold poison, were colored and textured uniquely to warn people of their dangerous contents. A raised quilted pattern or diamonds were typically selected as the universal signal to the society. Ironically, by the nineteen thirties, it was discovered that the unusual color and shapes used to ornament poison bottles, did more harm by actually enticing and attracting children, rather than warn the society of the contents.

For Don Pablo # 1, the exterior was transformed from a quilted surface into molded nipples. These nipples mask the dangerous contents of the vessel, or rather the questionable nature of Don Pablo. Robert Jordan must
decide whether or not he can trust Don Pablo, whose actions ultimately facilitate the demise of Jordan. This bottle gives a false of its intent, for the nipples and glossy blue surface are seductive and lure the viewer closer to its deadly contents.

Analysis of “Jeckyl and Hyde”

This work from *The Strange Case of Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde* consists of two flasks that sit opposed to each other. The first, tall and compressed, while the second is short and squatty. The profile shape for both flasks were adapted from Italian maiolica pharmaceutical jars (albraelli). The color scheme and decoration for each flask is indicative to maiolica ware with a white background with a colorful pastel decoration on top. The tall compressed flask, representing Dr. Jeckyl is inscribed with the word *Compesor*, meaning restraint. Mr. Hyde’s flask is inscribed with *Demens*, which in Latin means wild and unabandon. Both bottles are decorated with a cherub; however, Mr. Hyde’s cherub is blindfolded which historically alludes to mischievous acts.

These flasks together are a representation of one’s soul; therefore, the dynamic use of two items that are clearly decorated and handled with the same fidelity becomes important. Of all the works in the show, the addition
of a clear plexi-glass box, rendering its encaptured volume, clearly connects the two pieces together.

**Conclusion**

My varied interests as an artist should confound me daily. It would seem ridiculous to have taken my path to end up with this show. I believe that eventually I will be able to reconcile my deep love for process with the new desire of telling stories. My only regret at this time is the short amount of time I left myself in the final completion of the thesis work. Because of the learning curve of technical difficulties, some of the final pieces did not get the full attention that they deserved resulting in poor craftsmanship, and lack of resolution. As I have mentioned before, I believe with more time these problems will work themselves out. I hope to never be completely comfortable with my work in that the current flaws will be transformed into new challenges. In my opinion, an artist completely confident in their work has nothing left to say. Thank you.
Figure 1, “Huck Finn #1”.
Representing the aspect of “becoming a man,” the character Huck Finn is chosen to reflect on the conflict of fulfilling obligations to society. He is sometimes faced with ludicrous situations in which he must choose to be a gentleman.
Figure 2, “Huck Finn # 2”. *Black & White*

As a character, Huck Finn had to face the struggle with race in society, as well as good versus evil in everyday life. Although, the flasks are black and white, the correct choices for men are sometimes difficult and unclear.
Figure 3, “Don Pablo #1”. (For Whom the Bell Tolls)

Faced with the reality of the horror of life and war, the character "becomes poisonous," as he struggles through experiences. This form, with typically raised edges or raised diamonds, is an adaptation of 19th century bottles to signify that the contents inside are poisonous.
Figure 4, “Don Pablo #2”. (For Whom the Bell Tolls)

The form itself is an adaptation of the “poison,” as the body of the character indicates the contents.
Figure 5, "Jeckyl & Hyde". Adapted from European drug jars (albraelli), the characters represent the aspect of the conflict between good vs. evil, as portrayed through the struggle between moral obligations for accountability versus the freedom of anonymity.
Figure 6, “Jay Gatsby #1”. (The Great Gatsby)

As another aspect of “becoming a man,” this interpretation of elements represents Jay Gatsby’s futile attempts to recapture the past.
Figure 7, “Jay Gatsby #2”. (The Great Gatsby)

Jay Gatsby’s character reflects on the familiar theme of the fleeting past and the hope of recreating it in the present times.
References


Literature Influences


Hemmingway, Ernest. *For Whom the Bell Tolls.*

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