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Empty Pleasures

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Empty Pleasures

Phyllis Leverich Evans

**Thesis submitted to the
College of Creative Arts
at West Virginia University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of**

**Master of Fine Art
in
Painting**

**Paul Krainak, Chair
Christopher Hocking
Janet Snyder
Sergio Soave**

**Morgantown, West Virginia
1999**

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Abstract

My work examines the ways we covet extravagant objects in Western society. I explore the vain and the humble veneration of status symbols, mementos, and personal icons. Through a satire of pompous display, I critique our society's fixation on materialism.

I use a digital process to mimic commercial eye-catching tactics in my ersatz copies of pre-Modern decorations. Although my work mocks the uncultivated tastes of mainstream America, its pursuit of formal harmony and sentiment is sincere. My objects are machine produced, but they act as icons to manifest poetic sentiment.

Playful as it appears, the work cynically reflects the distorted bourgeois values of post-industrial society. It speaks of a detached sense of entitlement that we feel when we consume. My work compares colonialism of the 19th century with the global economy of the 21st century and reminds the viewer of the vain and indulgent nature of our consumer habits.

To my husband, Lee Evans.

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Introduction

The universal desire to beautify surroundings, advertise identity, or express sentiment with decorative objects is a human behavior that spans all cultures.¹ Any object, regardless of its market value, may contain or convey meanings that are as transient and diverse as the individuals, cultures, or societies who behold it. In Western societies, a lavish object may be valued merely for the extravagance of materials and human labor that went into its production. Conversely, a humble object may be valued for the arbitrary meaning and sentiment it embodies. In either case, the manner in which its beholder perceives meaning and beauty determines the value of a non-utilitarian object. Marcel Duchamp taught us that we may regard any object as art, but Pop Art taught us that any object may embody meaning and aesthetic beauty.² An object valued for reasons other than its ability to perform a task is aestheticized and seen as a fetish by those who behold it.

My work examines the various ways we perceive and covet such objects in Western society. I explore both vain and humble veneration of ostentatious status symbols, sentimental mementos, and personal icons. Through a kitsch satire of pompous display, I critique our society's unhealthy fixation on materialism. At the same time I express my own tendency to covet visually decadent forms. I recognize the contradictory relationship between my passions and my convictions; consequently I attempt to reconcile this hypocrisy through the ironic element in my work. My re-presentations of elaborate ornaments acknowledge our societal need

¹Maurice Howard and Michael Snodin, *Ornament: A Social History Since 1450*, (London: Yale University Press, 1996), 9.

²Edward Lucie-Smith, "Pop Art." *Concepts of Modern Art: From Fauvism to Postmodernism* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1994), 227. In this essay, Lucie-Smith quotes Marcel Duchamp: 'This Neo-Dada, which they call New Realism, Pop Art, Assemblage, etc., is an easy way out, and lives on what Dada did. When I discovered ready-mades I thought to discourage aesthetics. In Neo-Dada they have taken my ready-mades and found aesthetic beauty in them. I threw the bottlerack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty.'

to beautify our surroundings with material expressions of extroverted display and introverted sentiment.

Personal History

I find the popularly held belief that an artist's work is the product of his or her formative environment particularly true in my own creative endeavors. I have no doubt that my aesthetic sensibilities and ideological convictions developed as a direct response to the cultural and aesthetic deprivation I experienced living for 30 years in the physically and sociologically coarse surroundings of the Texas Gulf Coast. This environment exposed me to the homogenized values of the white middle class, the materialistic pretensions of the nouveau riche, the moralism of the Bible Belt Protestants, the low-brow longings of the working class, and the dreams, struggles, and sentiments of the various ethnic groups trying to make their way in the white-dominated suburbs of Houston. The climate there is harsh, and the scenery is unattractive. I believe these settings contributed to my ability to aestheticize and thus lie to myself about the ugliness of my surroundings. This experience has taught me to search for beauty and meaning in the most unlikely places.

My earliest memories of my childhood home summon the sights, sounds, and smells of new construction overtaking the brambly cow pastures and oil fields that surround NASA's Johnson Space Center. Almost overnight, the barren landscape that separated downtown Houston from the Texas Gulf coast became a sprawling and unimaginative amalgamation of four bedroom houses, asphalt streets, concrete shopping centers, and small, evenly spaced trees. The flat landscape permitted a view of the distant chemical refineries silhouetted against the horizon in almost every direction. The rising and setting of the sun created eye-dazzling streaks of purple, rose, and orange in the polluted Gulf Coast sky. I respond to the formal beauty of this hideously utilitarian landscape in *Texas City Sunset* and *Refinery Urn*. Nostalgic recollections of dangerous beauty inform these two pieces as I refer to the mysterious elegance of chemical plant

architecture, the vivid colors that plant emissions produce, the fresh odors of springtime mingling with industrial stench, and the ecstasy of relief from the day's sunshine and asphalt induced heat. In such a harsh environment, one must take aesthetic pleasure wherever one can find it.

Although my work does not address Houston architecture directly, the architectural landscape there has influenced my aesthetic and critical sensibilities. The land development that has continued non-stop ever since the late 1960s created an amalgamation of prefabricated communities. They are veritable clones of one another, sprawling in endlessly expanding concentric rings around downtown Houston's International Style skyline.³ The uninspired civic designs and middle-class demographics make these multitudinous communities architecturally, culturally, and civically indistinguishable. For me, suburban architecture and demographics symbolize the banality, conformity, and homogeneity of the American middle class.

Middle class banality and the "keep-up-with-the-Jones's" mentality are universal products of bourgeois upward mobility, but in the Texas suburbs these attitudes take on a peculiar regional flair. On the whole, middle class Texans -- white and blue collar alike -- may be classified as unusually extroverted. They have a particular need to advertise their economic status and demographic identity. In terms of material signifiers such as houses, vehicles, and decorations, Texans generally show off through excesses in color, surface decoration, or scale. I playfully acknowledge this stereotypical Texas-sized ostentation in my work. The oversized and over-decorated re-presentations of gaudy kitsch objects such as Neo-Rococo vases in my *Ornaments* series and gilt Victorian picture frames in my *Frames* series mock the low-brow tastes for which upwardly mobile Texans are notorious. While the work pokes fun by exaggerating the aesthetic impulses of my formative environment, it also acknowledges the humanistic necessity to aestheticize the severity of harsh and unattractive surroundings.

³ For information on the history, architectural styles, and expansive growth of Houston, see the foreword and text by Peter C. Papademetriou, AIA, and Stephen Fox, respectively, in the *Houston Architectural Guide* (Houston: The American Institute of Architects/Houston Chapter and Herring Press, 1990), 6-11 and 13-17.

In a setting where most structures are Modern and prefabricated, things that are “old” (i.e., built before 1960), ornamental, or one-of-a-kind take on an air of novelty. When I moved into a historical neighborhood near downtown Houston, the circa 1920s “oldness” of the area and the ornamental Victorian architecture had an ambiance that felt exotic in comparison to the static minimalism of my childhood surroundings. I developed an acute sensitivity to the abundant charms of this eclectic old neighborhood where I sought out the overlooked charms that were lurking in every sidewalk crack and backyard junk pile. Every week, I perused the junk shops, antique barns, and thrift stores in the area. Several years of scavenging through these meccas of popular history nurtured my taste for cheap antique bric-a-brac and 20th century kitsch. I developed a sharp eye for good “stuff” and began collecting objects that appealed to my personal sensibilities through their combination of formal, sentimental, and art historical meaning. My personal tastes for collectibles determine the appearance of my work. The gaudy vases and brass picture frames in my *Ornaments* and *Frames* series resemble the parlor decorations and old tourist's souvenirs that attracted my attention in second hand stores.

The roles sentiment and kitsch aesthetics play in my work have been largely derived from the ambiance that Latino cultures lent to my inner city Houston neighborhood. I cherished the sights, sounds, and smells that came from the homes of my Mexican and Central American neighbors. I romanticized the colorful liveliness of their weekend festivities while I enviously compared the idolatrous adornment of their surroundings with the iconoclastic Puritanism of my own background. I indulged my passion for kitsch by collecting the Latin decorative and religious items that many of the neighborhood stores sold. I found objects like the Latino prayer candles, decorated with their saint's portraits and colorful floral garlands irresistible for their crude, iconic charm. I coveted these objects out of context by perceiving them as visually beautiful expressions of the supernatural beliefs and deep cultural roots of the Latino community. In a reaction to the relative iconoclasm of Anglo culture, I began to incorporate the bright, celebratory colors and excessive ornamental motifs of my Latin neighbors' decorations into the form and content of my work.

Growing up in a physically unattractive, but demographically rich region, has influenced the unique aesthetic and philosophical sensibility that informs my art. In the severe environment of the Texas Gulf coast, I have learned that what we traditionally value as beautiful may lack depth of meaning; moreover what we regard as undesirable or ugly may turn beautiful when seen in better light.

Formal and Thematic Attributes

In his essay, “Art and Aesthetics: Late Modernism and the Formalist Debate” Howard Risatti argues that “the construction of meaning is *the* major issue of today’s art, culture, and society because it is an issue directly related to the individual’s development of consciousness and perceptions of reality”.⁴ My work addresses the artistic, cultural and societal meanings held within and signaled by non-utilitarian material objects. I appropriate images depicting such objects, selecting them for their ability to embody a particular aesthetic, symbolic, or art historical significance. I have attached a personal vocabulary of meanings to these images and to the manner in which I re-present them.

An interest in the historical evolution of ornament throughout the 19th and 20th centuries underlies my formal and thematic focus on objects coveted in Western society. My digital appropriation of pre-Modern decorative images reflects my Western social and cultural heritage. In addition, it emphasizes the evolutions of both popular and elite attitudes towards representation, decoration, and kitsch over the past 150 years. Formal and thematic motifs in my work address the high art/low art debate that began with London’s Great Exhibition of 1851⁵; the motifs further

⁴ Howard Risatti, “Art and Aesthetics: Late Modernism and the Formalist Debate,” *Postmodern Perspectives: Issues in Contemporary Art* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1990), 10.

⁵ For more information on the impact industrialization and the Great Exhibition of 1851 had on object production and popular taste, see Jenefer Peter, *Collecting Victoriana* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1968), 15-18, and Harriet Bridgeman and Elizabeth Drury (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Victoriana* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975), 13-19.

explore the impact that industrialization has had on popular and elite tastes throughout Victorian Revivalism, Modernist Formalism, Pop Art, and Postmodernism. This art historical examination of the Western bourgeois regard for objects addresses underlying themes of individual vanity, cultural entitlement, and arbitrary constructions of meaning.

Victoriana: Industrialization and the Middle Class

As an artist, I take an interest in the hideously offensive and overly elaborate decorative objects produced during the 19th century. The technological and industrial advances of this era brought shifts in the patronage and production of ornamental goods by contributing to both the rise of middle class materialism and the decline of design quality in aesthetic goods. Mass produced domestic items such as the brassy gilt picture frames, gaudy ceramic bric-a-brac, and tawdry woven goods I reference in my work burst with the "more is more" design philosophy characteristic of this era's ornamental eclecticism. The economic benefits of mass production and the uncultivated tastes of the bourgeoisie combined to bring about what most aestheticians regard as a bombastic deterioration in popular taste.⁶ My playful revival of Victorian domestic decoration invokes the horror and amazement with which Victoriana is currently regarded by its lovers and haters alike.⁷

The elaborate motifs we associate with Victoriana were favored for two reasons: first, that industrial mechanization encouraged design elaboration and technical novelty merely for their own sakes; and second, that such excessive elaboration reflected the societal belief that the value and beauty of an object could be measured by the number of man-hours it appeared to take to

⁶ In what she describes as the disruptive Victorian attitude to ornamentation, Juri Gabriel explains that for Victorians "design came to be equated more and more with ornament. Despite the efforts of critics like Pugin, the trend continued with increasing emphasis on elaboration for its own sake until, toward the latter part of the 19th century, the quest for prestige ended in mere bombast." Juri Gabriel, *Victorian Furniture and Furnishings* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1971), 7.

⁷ Peter, 15.

produce.⁸ Everything produced for the Victorian consumer was decorated to look as showy and costly as possible, but common materials and machine production replaced expensive materials and hand artisanship. Then as now, only the economically privileged could afford to possess finely made, hand-crafted objects, but the mass produced imitations which abounded decreased in quality of materials and design as they moved downward in production cost. Like their successors in today's upwardly mobile middle class, the Victorian bourgeoisie was ambitious and remarkably concerned with appearances. Lacking imagination and creativity when it came to displays of status and wealth, they tended to imitate the class above them. This desire at every level of society to "ape one's betters" was an important factor of Victorian design that continues in the production of fashionable goods today.⁹ I recognize in today's society the continuation of many social patterns established by the middle classes during the industrial revolution. Digital photographic references to overstated Victorian parlor objects refer to the glut of faux finery produced during the 19th and 20th centuries, and comment on both pre-Modern and contemporary displays of status and taste. The heavy, traditional wallpaper patterns, horrifically elaborate picture frames, and trophy-like golden urns in my work recall the air of bourgeois entitlement that filled the Victorian salon or drawing room. My aesthetic decisions, such as the use of garish process colors and glossy surfaces to embellish the already excessive

⁸ Gabriel, 88. The author elaborates on the salon tradition in which "the beauty of an object was still measured in terms of the amount of man-hours put into the making of it. Today we might consider this direct purchase of another man's life macabre." Jenefer Peter spells out some of the ghastly effects industry had on design shortly after the Great Exhibition of 1851: "Ingenuity and fertility of invention outran disciplined design. Elaboration and novelty for its own sake came into favor. The invention of aniline dyes produced colours of a sharpness to set one's teeth on edge - Prussian blue, malachite green, and a strong chrome yellow were typical...These new and savage colours.....shouted for attention." *Collecting Victoriana*, 24.

⁹ Bridgeman and Drury, 13. "The vast industrial and mercantile expansion in England during the first part of the century, and in the United States in the latter part, placed the growing middle class firmly in power in a manner hitherto unknown, and to this can be traced so much of the design ethos of the Victorian period. The middle classes are generally not creative. They are ambitious and imitative, and for these reasons so many Victorian designs have a strong feeling of 'aping their betters'. Acquisition of possessions, concern with outward display, insistence on solid quality, are all middle-class characteristics, while the confusion between elaboration and worth, the insistence that cheap materials should imitate costly ones, the preference for re-interpreted, old-established forms rather than new ones, all express the dilemmas of a changing social structure, the uncertain participants of which require reassurance."

formalism of the appropriated image, connect the Victorian propensity towards display with contemporary spectacle by applying modern eye-catching tactics to traditional pomp. I print my images onto oversized stickers that I then mount onto silhouette-shaped plastic sheets to suggest the cheap, degraded, imitative quality of the kitsch decoration found in a discount or souvenir store. The ersatz re-presentation of Victorian extravagance in my work comments on the universality of aesthetic desire. As social classes of today continue to "ape their betters," industrialization becomes a social equalizer by providing fashionable objects to all classes, even the poor and unsophisticated.

Vanity and Conspicuous Display

My re-presentations of elaborate Victorian objects facetiously mock the self-conscious vanities of the American middle class. The cultural significance of flaunted objects and conspicuous displays points not only to the pressures which industrial and post-industrial societies place on individuals to succeed, but also to the fact that these societies measure success in material terms. Sadly, for the thoughtless, uncreative majority of people in our society, material wealth is the simplest measure of an individual's success. Like their Victorian predecessors, the upwardly mobile of today use their purchasing power to signal professional accomplishment, social rank, individual identity, and discriminating taste. I regard this narrow-minded likening of individual worth with net worth as flawed. Similarly, I view the act of coveting an object only for the status it signifies as a foolish act of vanity that empties the object of any true meaning.

In my *Ornaments* and *Frames* series, I make a number of references to the folly and emptiness of such vain displays. Both series address vanity through their own status as non-functional objects. The conspicuously two-dimensional manner which the Rococo and Neo-Classical vessels are represented confirms their non-utilitarian roles as objects meant only for display. Although all the images imply the function of containing a consumable substance, it is

doubtful that these objects were ever meant for any purpose other than display. My flattened representation of these forms proves that their existence is literally in vain because I have removed from them any possibility of utility.

Narrative constructions in the *Ornaments* series take this critique of vanity and ostentation further. Two works titled *Sundae* and *Memento Mori* depict elaborate Rococo vases with portions cut away to reveal behind their lavish exteriors mysterious inner worlds that evoke emptiness and ruin. In *Memento Mori*, the sparse remains of an architectural structure rot behind the cheerful facade of the porcelain vase. A medley of Victorian luxury objects such as a golden chandelier, upholstery scraps, and several gilt-framed mirrors appear strewn about the decaying ground. A mischievous fairy tops the vase, holding a hand mirror to the viewer that reflects nothing but an empty void. The environment beneath the sugary facade of *Sundae* suggests a similar scenario. In this space, there is a cell-like room that is barren except for a few gilt-framed mirrors and an accumulation of oversized golden spoons. The haggard form of an emaciated man appears in the corner, collapsed from starvation despite the over-consumption implied by the abundant spoons. He holds up a gilt-framed mirror which also reflects empty space. *Sundae* and *Memento Mori* express the superficiality of ostentatious display by revealing the empty and ruined interiors that lurk behind the thin veils of their showy facades. Their flat, anti-utilitarian status combines with symbolic narrative to address the transience and meaninglessness of objects coveted for vanity.

First World Entitlement and Cultural Reductivism

The conspicuous displays and vain material impulses of the American middle class connect to an arrogant belief that as members of a First World society, we are unequivocally entitled to the relatively comfortable existences we enjoy. An underlying aspect of my work focuses on our culture's perceptions of the Third World and their perceptions of us. I am interested in the cultural stereotyping that influences relations between First and Third countries both on

American soil and abroad. A subtext of my work deals with some of the lingering by-products of Western colonialism such as cross-cultural stereotyping and arrogant Western assumptions of entitlement to the relative comforts in which we live.

The figurative imagery that I have digitally “woven” into the background upholstery and “reflected” from golden urns in the *Frames* series subtly addresses some of these issues. These anonymous individuals are Latin American and Asian garment workers, agricultural laborers, and domestic servants. In works such as *Domestic*, *Fish Market*, and *Seamstress*, the juxtaposition of their nearly invisible images with lavish signifiers of wealth refers to our tendency to forget these individuals as we consume the goods they produce for a pittance.

These images also address the way poorer countries perceive us. In a land where the streets have been rumored to be paved in gold, unattractive stereotypes abound regarding our comparatively indulgent and wasteful lifestyles.¹⁰ The daily influx of immigrants is evidence that the Third World sees the United States as a land of abundance. I address this issue in *Texas City Sunset* by placing three images of immigrant farm laborers inside its oversized trophy-like vases. The vases symbolize the “brass ring” or American dream of guaranteed rewards for a lifetime of hard work. Perceptions of what this means vary between the “haves” of the First World and the “have-nots” of the Third World. For the privileged white middle class, the ultimate goal is often a lifetime of extravagance and excess. For the less privileged, however, the ultimate desire is simply the basic right to live with dignity. As we revere symbols of excess in the West, inhabitants of the Third World covet the everyday comforts that we take for granted.

A close look at the decorative motifs of many kitsch and pre-Modern decorations makes the colonialist tendency to reduce non-Western cultures to stereotypical characteristics apparent. Pre-Modern signifiers of status, such as the Neo-Rococo designs favored by makers of Victoriana and much 20th century kitsch, tend towards indiscriminate appropriations of exotic and historical

¹⁰ For some excellent insight into intercultural relations between Third World and white Americans, see the Esmeralda Santiago’s two autobiographical accounts, *When I Was Puerto Rican* (New York, First Vintage Books, 1994), and *Almost a Woman* (Massachusetts, Perseus Books, 1998), and her novel, *America’s Dream* (New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 1996).

styles. In the true spirit of Western supremacy, decorative motifs have been decontextualized and recontextualized in blatant acts of cultural reductivism. Although I find the flowery Neo-Rococo debasement of these forms delightfully eccentric and charming, I regard their decontextualized appropriations as sad reminders of the disregard for cultural dignity that impairs our society to this day. By re-appropriating these culturally debased forms, I hope to remind the viewer of the outdatedness of attitudes connoting First World superiority.

Many references in my work symbolize the entitlement assumed by conquering civilizations and the Social Darwinism that a privileged few use to justify their well-being at the expense of entire societies. Although we generally do not regard ourselves as colonialists today, I believe that the First World corporate practice of paying substandard wages to laborers in impoverished countries is a late 20th century form of colonialism. A piece from the *Frames* series titled *Headdress* re-presents a gilt picture frame into which the head and feathered headdress of a pre-Columbian deity or American Indian has been carved. The portrait of this “noble savage” evokes notions of the colonialist attitudes, First World entitlement, and Western superiority to which our contemporary society is heir.¹¹

Kitsch and Pop Art

My interests in the relationships between the First and the Third Worlds, the haves and the have-nots, the elite and the popular, inform my playful but critical use of kitsch imagery. In his 1939 essay, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, Clement Greenberg pointed to kitsch as “another product of Western industrialism (that has) gone on a triumphal world tour, crowding out and effacing native cultures in one colonial country after another so that it is now...the first universal

¹¹ The supposedly utopian Significant Form theories of early Modernist critics like Roger Fry and Clive Bell did little to reverse the debasement of non-Western aesthetic meaning. Although formalism provided Westerners with a universal way to appreciate and evaluate these outside arts by ignoring ethnic content and flavor it did nothing to enlighten the viewer on the subject, meaning, or purpose of the object. See the preface and introduction to section one in Howard Risatti’s *Postmodern Perspectives*, xi - xv and 1 -10.

culture ever beheld.”¹² Greenberg accurately criticized kitsch as a factor in the Western neutralization of non-Western cultures, but his own theories of Modernist formalism were just as liable for ignoring ethnic content in art in favor of universal form.¹³ Furthermore, his dominating theories on formal painting that called for the transcendence of artwork over society and the dissolution of content so completely that an artwork could refer to nothing but itself. He denied any sense of cultural relevance to the avant-garde. This, he believed, was the only way to save high art from debasement at the hands of popular culture.

Greenberg’s contemptuous position on kitsch has been under scrutiny for over 30 years; nevertheless, I maintain that many of his observations are accurate and applicable to discourse on today’s counterpart to his Western Bourgeois Society. As a Postmodernist, however, I reject his formalist theories that call for a transcendent and autonomous art that is separate from everyday life. In this regard, my use of kitsch to simultaneously critique the unsophisticated, kitsch-loving popular culture and the high Modernist culture leaves me standing on both sides of the high art/low art debate.

In his essay, Greenberg laments the philistinism of the popular culture in his day:

...the peasant soon finds the necessity of working hard all day for his living and the rude, uncomfortable circumstances in which he lives do not allow him enough leisure, energy and comfort to train for the enjoyment of Picasso. This needs after all, a considerable amount of “conditioning”. Superior culture is one of the most artificial of all human creations, and the peasant finds no “natural” urgency within himself that will drive him toward Picasso in spite of all difficulties. In the end the peasant will go back to kitsch when he feels like looking at pictures, for he can enjoy kitsch without effort.¹⁴

¹² “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”. *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, John O’Brian, ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1986), 13-14.

¹³ In his introductory essay, Risatti explains that formalism “provided Westerners -- who knew relatively little of the subject matter and intended meaning/purpose of the medieval, ‘primitive’, and non-Western arts increasingly coming before the public in the early 20th century -- a way to evaluate and appreciate these arts,” *Postmodern Perspectives*, 2. He goes on to tell us “it has recently been suggested that formalist theory, by ignoring individual ethnic content in art in favor of what has been called universal form, was consonant with European colonialism in effecting domination through cultural neutralization,” 11.

¹⁴ Greenberg, 16.

By substituting the word “layperson” for Greenberg’s “peasant”, and “Postmodern art” for “Picasso,” this passage is as true today as it was 60 years ago. Although I do not share Greenberg’s disdain for kitsch objects, I do feel frustrated with the philistinism of mainstream America. Employing the Pop tactic of elevated kitsch, I echo his sentiments that kitsch is “mass produced culture fit for the consumption of the (middle class)...designed for those insensitive to the values of genuine culture.”¹⁵ The slick, plastic presentation of kitsch imagery gives my work a commercial look and provides the immediate impact and quick read that is compulsory to popular imagery. Greenberg asserts that kitsch is “vicarious experience and faked sensations demanding nothing of its customers except their money...not even their time.”¹⁶ The sugary aesthetics of the *Ornaments* series reflect Greenberg’s point of view. In the piece from this series titled *Sundae*, I have digitally transformed a pre-Modern vessel into a cherry-topped confection. The color scheme, reminiscent of the sugary flowers on a decorated cake, gives the work an eye catching, glimmering appeal. At first glance it passes itself off as an easy to consume treat that requires little from the viewer. It suggests the contemporary layperson who, exhausted after a long day of monotonous, identity-robbing work, “will go back to kitsch when he feels like looking at pictures, for he can enjoy kitsch without effort.”¹⁷ Formalist painting, Greenberg’s answer to the cultural debasement of high art, failed to accomplish its utopian goal of providing cultural enlightenment for the elite and lay-population alike. In a society such as ours, where state and education systems do little to encourage aesthetic appreciation, the uncultivated layperson is unlikely to take the initiative to become an educated and responsible patron of the arts. Until public education institutions reform their programs to generate a popular appreciation for high art, kitsch will remain the culture of the masses.

Kitsch is regarded by Postmodernists as the antithesis of Modernism and has been employed, since Rauschenberg’s time, as a form of anti-Modernism. Pop art broke down barriers

¹⁵ Ibid., 12.

¹⁶ Ibid., 12.

¹⁷ Ibid., 16.

between high art and low art, elevating kitsch and low art to “display the trappings of high art without challenging received ideas of taste.”¹⁸ Occasionally, pre-Modern imagery is employed as anti-Modern which is, in effect, Postmodern. My oversized plastic references to Victoriana combine kitsch, Pop, and pre-Modernism in a continuation of the Postmodern theme. In his essay, “Pop Art”, Edward Lucie-Smith describes Pop’s ability to depict the consumer environment and its mentality. Through the elevation of the consumer item, he tells us, ugliness becomes beauty.¹⁹ Like Greenberg, Lucie-Smith believes that kitsch and Pop are results of the industrial revolution:

...like everything else in our society, pop culture is the product of the Industrial Revolution, and of the series of technological revolutions which succeeded it. Bring together fashion, democracy, and the machine and pop culture is a part of what results.²⁰

By emulating cheap and homely kitsch decorations, I critique high art and low art, Modernist elitism, and popular taste. Like the Pop artist, I bring real life into art and turn ugliness into beauty.

Arbitrary Meaning and Sentiment

In its pursuit of relevance, Postmodernism has questioned the autonomy of universal form at the expense of the narratives, iconography, and iconology that are part of everyday human experience.²¹ With this in mind, I find a peculiar charm, aesthetic or otherwise, in the lowly discount store or souvenir stand decorative items whose style I emulate in my work. While we may

¹⁸ Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era: from the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1996), 3.

¹⁹ Lucie-Smith, 226.

²⁰ Ibid., 232.

²¹ Risatti, 1.

covet certain pricey objects as signifiers of the identities we wish to project, if these objects lack personal, iconographic, or sentimental significance, their true meanings remain empty.

My position on the sentimental reverence of fetish objects contradicts my conviction that coveting for the sake of vanity is empty and meaningless. I do believe an object can possess an abundance of meaning, but this is not determined by its market value or its ability to announce the social position of its possessor. Instead, the true value of any coveted object is in the arbitrary meaning assigned to it by the viewer. I perceive the kitsch object as an enchanting signifier of the time, place, society, or experience from which it came. I delight in the object's ability to encapsulate the idiosyncrasies of the environment that produced it, and I can indulge, without guilt, in its reductivist sentimentality and sugary aesthetics. It is a memento or keepsake, which documents unexplainable memories and maps a lifetime of meaningful experiences. A facilitator for storytelling, its acquisition connects to a string of verbal histories that can be told repeatedly, growing more distorted and exaggerated over time.

As a lover of aimless travel, I believe that every place on earth has the potential to possess a special quality worth remembering or telling about. I regard my daily life as an ongoing pilgrimage through which a certain amount of mementos must be amassed. Memento-gathering is an important aspect of my every day experience, but takes on even greater significance if I am visiting a new place, having an unusual experience, or enjoying the company of an interesting person. Collecting mementos is about commemorating an experience, but it is also about the object itself. Occasionally, I privilege the object over the experience it signifies, or the experience begins to exist solely for the acquisition of an aesthetic object. Any postcard, snapshot, or other small token becomes a fetish or an icon that acts as the aesthetic embodiment of both formal beauty and the person, place, or experience it signifies.

My work emphasizes my enjoyment of souvenirs by mimicking them or actually becoming them. *Texas City Sunset* takes on the horizontal proportions, the white border and the idealistic landscape to connote an oversized postcard. In one sense, this is ironic, for the industrial landscape and air pollution that lends the rosy glow to the evening sky are anything but

the paradise implied by the composition. However, the viewer should also interpret this work as a nostalgic commemoration of a place that, while not always beautiful, can embody a unique and peculiar aesthetic charm if caught at the right time. Another piece that relates to the sentiment of keepsakes and souvenirs is *Memento*. I have placed the small images onto soft magnetized vinyl so that they can adhere to a refrigerator or any other metal object. I intend for visitors to the gallery to feel free to take a magnet with them as a keepsake of the experience. Perhaps this will encourage them to add meaningful sentimentalized objects to their own eclectic collections.

Conclusion

The conflicting images and ideas in my work create a state of irony that provokes the viewer to respond on two distinct levels. For most viewers, an immediate emotional reaction to its kitsch-like appearance is followed by a cerebral consideration of the subtle details that allude to its deeper layers of meaning. My use of commercial visual tactics to create ersatz copies of pre-Modern decorations seduces some viewers and repels others, but it catches the eye of all. Viewers who do not immediately dismiss the work for its gaudiness and apparent superficiality often become enchanted by its humorous vulgarity and eccentric charm. Having conceded their own tastes for tawdry baubles, they then notice the subtle layers of detail and allow themselves to look for the content that peeks from behind the facade.

Although the pared-down tenets of Modernist design have conditioned us to regard decorated form as degraded and vulgar, I maintain that bright colors, baroque filigree, and faux gilding hold a visual lure that few can resist. I share this belief with commodity artist Jeff Koons who denies that the kitsch objects he appropriates lack beauty and taste. Commenting on his 1988 *Banality* series, Koons says, "I see (the kitsch object) as beautiful and respond to it. I truly love the sentimentality in the work. I love the finish." Koons believed that most other people did too, but were ashamed to admit it; therefore he declared he was on a mission to persuade the public to accept its superficial habits and tastes. "I was trying to remove the guilt and shame of

the bourgeois class (to) things that they respond to in...an aesthetic manner, (and to induce them) to listen to their environment and find beauty in the most simple of things.”²²

The apparent tackiness of my designs is deceptive because, like Koons, I believe that aesthetic beauty, meaning, and true sentiment may be found in a kitsch object. My work mocks the uncultivated tastes of mainstream America, but it also pursues meaning and formal harmony with sincere intent. I am highly conscientious of form; I strive to achieve a harmonious arrangement of shapes, textures, and colors in each piece of work. I balance bold shapes and patterns with subtle surface variations and choose colors carefully so that the work will display a visually pleasing unity of design. The loving attention I give to formal aesthetics endows each piece with a personalized sensibility not commonly associated with digital imagery. My machine-produced objects become iconic manifestations of poetic meaning, as sentimental as the hand-crafted folk art, ethnic fetishes, and trivial keepsakes they seek to invoke.

A cynical reflection of our society's distorted bourgeois values contradicts the poetic sentimentality in my work. Although my imagery playfully celebrates the products of twentieth century industrialization onto which we impose personal, symbolic value, it also critiques the sadly detached manner with which we regard production and consumption. The empty vessels and gilt mirror frames produce an image that is at once an iconic and bourgeois reflection of a society that is economically rich but culturally poor. Since the world became fully industrialized in the 20th century, few of the items we acquire and consume are crafted by our own hands or those of a proud and happy artisan. Production of nearly everything from the bread we eat to the decorations we place in our homes usually takes place in some begrudging relationship between an underpaid laborer and a machine, often under unimaginable circumstances. Once we are freed from taking part in the production of our own possessions because they come from "somewhere else," the act of production has no practical meaning to us and consequently, the act of consumption loses meaning as well. As Americans, we tend to take what we consume for

²² Sandler, 497-500.

granted, and we feel entitled to do so. A cash economy abstracts this situation further and often makes the act of purchasing an object more meaningful to us than the object itself, for this act represents the percentage of our income that we could spare for the object's acquisition. The abstract simplicity of this act frees us from considering of the hours of faceless labor that produced the object and the thousands of others exactly like it, but the pleasure this brings is often fleeting. As the colonialism of the 19th century morphs into the global economy of the 21st century, the act of consumption becomes little more than a vain and indulgent activity that we forget almost as quickly as we begin, like a sweet taste that lingers momentarily on our tongues and then disappears forever.

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Education

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1996 MA, Drawing, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX
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1990 BA, Visual Art and Applied Design, University of Houston at Clear Lake,
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1984 AA, Commercial Art, Texas State Technical Institute, Waco, TX

Related Work Experience

1998-99 Graduate Drawing Instructor, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV
1997-98 Graduate Art History Assistant, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV
1995-96 Graduate Drawing and Basic Design Instructor, Sam Houston State
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1991 Educator Assistant, Children's Museum of Houston, Houston, TX
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Exhibitions

1999 *Empty Pleasures*: MFA Thesis Exhibition. Laura Mesaros Gallery, West
Virginia University, Morgantown, WV
1999 *Fresh Air*. Annex Galleries and Studios, Charleston, WV
1998 *Formal Tease*: MFA Candidate Exhibition, Laura Mesaros Gallery, West
Virginia University, Morgantown, WV
1997 *Recent Drawings*: Solo Exhibition. Summer Street Studios, Houston, TX
1996 MA Exhibition. SOFA Gallery, Sam Houston State University,
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1996 Faculty Exhibition. Gaddis Geeslin Gallery, Sam Houston State University,
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1994 First Place, *Masquerade Internationale*: Juried Alumni Exhibition. University of
Houston at Clear Lake, Houston, TX
1994 Solo Exhibition. Magic Bus Alternative Art Space, Houston, TX
1994 *Kuntz-Nelson Memorial Art Scholarship/Endowment Exhibition*. Lowman
Student Center Gallery, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX

Slide Identification

1. ***Texas City Sunset***; 1999; inkjet print and plastic; 60" x 144"
2. ***Refinery Urn***; 1998; inkjet print, plastic, and decorative rope; 60" x 34" x 2"
3. ***Sundae***; 1998; inkjet print, plastic, and decorative rope; 60" x 34"
4. (detail) ***Sundae***; 1998; digital image
5. ***Memento Mori***; 1998; inkjet print, plastic, and decorative rope; 60" x 34" x 2"
6. (detail) ***Memento Mori***; 1998; digital image
7. ***Domestic***; 1999; inkjet print, plastic, and decorative rope; 36" x 24" x 2"
8. (detail) ***Domestic***; 1999; digital image
9. ***Fish Market***; 1999; inkjet print, plastic, and decorative rope; 36" x 12" x 2"
10. (detail) ***Fish Market***; 1999; digital image
11. ***Seamstress***; 1999; inkjet print, plastic, and decorative rope; 36" x 28" x 2"
12. (detail) ***Seamstress***; 1999; digital image
13. ***Headdress***; 1999; inkjet print, plastic, and decorative rope; 36" x 28" x 2"
14. (detail) ***Headdress***; 1999; digital image
15. ***Memento***; 1999; galvanized steel, picture frame, inkjet prints, plastic, and magnets

1. Texas City Sunset

2. Refinery Urn

3. Sundae

4. Sundae (detail)

5. *Memento Mori*

6. *Memento Mori (detail)*

7. *Domestic*

8. *Domestic (detail)*

9. *Fish Market*

10. *Fish Market (detail)*

11. Seamstress

12. Seamstress (detail)

13. Headdress

14. Headdress (detail)

15. Memento