

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

COOKIES FOR THE KIDS, BOURBON FOR THE GROWN-UPS,
AND SWEET TEA FOR EVERYBODY

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Studio Art

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ABSTRACT

COOKIES FOR THE KIDS, BOURBON FOR THE GROWN-UPS
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My body of work deals with nostalgia for a bucolic upbringing by melding a fusion of past aesthetics and present experiences and techniques. Life is an adventurous journey that I am constantly amazed with and this work shows my pure inspiration for this ongoing and astounding experience.

BACKGROUND INTRODUCTION

I come from an upbringing in the bucolic milieu of north central Florida where I spent the majority of my childhood running wild in the abundant nature of the area. Old jaloopies of barns dot the rolling hills and vast flat vistas. My adventures lead me to explore these old structures and make forts and temporary dwellings in them. There is something magical about them and the way they are natural elements of the landscape as they transitioned from structures of use and commerce.

Along with the physical there is also a strong atmosphere of tradition and history of the South that is apparent in my artwork. After five years away from the nurturing nest of family and home, I explore the various aspects of nostalgia I have for my place of upbringing. In addition, I have a childlike sense of awe and wonderment at my journey across the country as I have physically and metaphorically headed to the West to manifest my destiny. Although there is contemporarily less mystery about what lies west of the Mississippi it is still a grand adventure for a young man to strike out upon. This time of exploration has also coincided with my own transition from late childhood into early adulthood. In order to move forward in my own evolution I have made sense of my past to explore my adulthood.

I am a proverbial “chip off the old block” as it relates to the artistic tradition in my family. It has become apparent to me that my interest in architectural forms comes from my grandfather’s aesthetic as an architect. The simple figures I use to represent myself in my narratives are very much like the welded figures my grandmother portrayed in her art. I have created a body of work that draws on my acknowledgement of the past while, showing my childlike sense of exuberance for the adventure of life as I tell my story. There is a balance between my background as a farmer living with the land and the transformative properties that my new geographic location offers. I have created a series of functional pots that I use as canvases to expound on my narrative. The inherently cylindrical nature of the wheel-thrown pot lends itself to storytelling.

FORMS

The forms of the pots I make reference my rustic upbringing while the functions talk about aspects of the South: Southern hospitality, service, down home liven', rustic simplicity and strength. As mentioned, my interest in barns, porches, and simple architectural forms of the south are clearly derived from an architectural aesthetic in my bloodline. This interest has engendered a series of forms that loosely reference that aesthetic. The vertical walls of my whisky jugs (figure 2) and the angled pitch of the transition or "roof" of the form which creates a house-like structure from which I can launch my narrative.

Southern hospitality is an accurate description of a sometimes -welcoming cultural style that one may encounter in the South. There can be a strong sense of community and sharing when one arrives at the dwelling of a friend or acquaintance. The bare minimum is the offering of a cold drink in the summer or a nip of whiskey to nurse around the table to fuel post dinner conversation. It is with this in mind that I selected the forms I used to elucidate my narratives.

The "Sweet Tea Pitcher and cup set" (figure 4) is an example of this decision to make my forms service and communally oriented. Although it seems like a stretch folks in the south like their tea sweet! The simple serving and sharing of a beverage with conversation is a fundamental basis for communal interactions.

A more mature and communal offering is that of a whiskey. The form of the Whiskey Jug has history in the tradition of the South. The jug has been a staple form in the tradition of handmade ceramics in the south especially. Although it is a grown up drink, I still chose to include it in the series of forms as they relate to southern hospitality. I choose to contrast the formal nature of the adulthood of the drink and tradition with jug, ice bucket and cups that have playful imagery. This juxtaposition reiterates the benevolent nature of my conversation with the tradition.

The "Coffee Set" (figure 6) again balances tradition and functionality. Each cup can be customized as its poured. "Do you take cream sugar?...Sugar? It is this sense of hospitality that I like to convey with my work. The array of forms I have created have appropriate relevance to my past and the existence which engendered my aesthetic.

PROCESS

Although I have created a series of historical forms as canvases, the surface treatment on my pots is what really gives a voice to and reinforces my narratives. The physical process of treating the surface involves reductive relief carving process that is informed by the relief carving from printmaking traditions of linoleum and woodblock cuts. I am enamored by the way a freshly carved linoleum block comes to life the first time you roll ink on it. The physical carving of the surface of the pots makes reference to wood carving which was my primary medium before I discovered clay. After carving the surface of the pots, I roll an under glaze with a printmaking brayer which makes the surface carving pop just like a freshly carved and inked linoleum block. As a functional potter I seek ways to spend more time with each piece beyond handling or trimming. I have an obvious attachment to the functionality of my work. A splendid benefit of the carved texture is that the horizontal reductive lines and those of the actual designs themselves elevate the functionality of the forms because of the tactile nature of the grip. Balancing the function and the aesthetic is a victory for me as an artist.

While adding to the functionality of the forms and giving voice to the images that make up the visual vocabulary of the stories I am telling, the linoleum cut texture also makes a wonderful contrast to the rich colors I have chosen to line my pots with (figure 3). These color choices represent a departure for me from my previous subtle naturally rustic palette and now simply weave themselves smoothly and richly into the conceptual fabric of my work. These sky blues, new grass shoot yellow-greens and marigold oranges allow me to show my childlike exuberance for the process of playful positive storytelling. The colors physically and metaphorically embody a transition between childhood and adulthood, the past and the present by their juxtaposition with the carved designs. They offer a vibrant contrast to the black relief images on the outside of the pots and physically link the colorful new playful world with the rustic ol' timey treatment of the surface story.

STORYTELLING

The visual vocabulary I created to tell my story is full of playfully poignant images that represent my view of my own personal literal and figurative journey from East to West and from childhood to adulthood. Because my emphasis is placed on expression vs. precision and I have not had a tendency towards a photorealistic style, my imagery is simple yet has intent. It is a personal Renaissance; a melding of traditions. It combines bard-like storytelling with a technical understanding of age-old traditions in printmaking and ceramics, and a personal twist on a historical journey. This playful and loose rendering has undertones of archetypal quests and the personal edification and learning process of the sojourner.

The foundation of the imagery is the architectural form of the barn-like wood structure that references home, family, security and the past. After leaving the home the sojourner has two vehicles for the journey of self-exploration; the boat and the covered wagon. The wagon is symbolic of the literal land journey from East to West. The boat shows the journey from a water-based perspective and signifies the lessons I have learned from my interaction with the ocean. Clay is the intersection of water and earth, is the canvas I use to talk about the lessons learned from the earth of my past and the water of my present. This is the intersection that I have been lead to in my adventure by the flying ukulele which thematically reoccurs flying in front of or guiding the boat or covered wagon while symbolizing creativity, inspiration, motivation, and intuition. I substitute various elements of the journey such as a covered wagon drawn by a giraffe instead of a horse or placing a cactus on an island where one would traditionally see a palm tree. These out of place images evoke a sense of the whimsical and free world a child lives in.

PRESENTATION/ DISPLAY

The way I display my pots helps to accentuate the message and feeling I intend to communicate with this body of work. I presented this body of work on vertically oriented pedestal forms made of recycled wood (figure 1). The work itself sat in simple “sandboxes” made of wood. This sand box pedestal is minimally constructed as to not distract from the detail in the work. With my display I directly address: choice of materials, height, and appropriate playfulness of the sandbox as a segue between my work and the surface it is sitting on. By using recycled wood, the history and use of it’s texture enriches the rustic nature of the narrative. There is enough of information added by the juxtaposition of materials while not distracting from the story being told. The sandbox pedestals are intentionally made tall to give the viewer a sense of what a child’s perspective would be to regularly scaled pedestals. This height functions to put the pots closer to the viewer’s eye level to facilitate observation of the details in the narratives of the pots. The reference to the sandbox is inherently playful while supporting other conceptual details of the body of work. Clay in many ways is the synthesis and intersection of the elements of earth and water, the beach also embodies this natural intersection. A lighthearted recycled and appropriately sized pedestal that mixes references of water and earth reinforces how the narratives on the pots tell stories of both land and water journeys.

CONCLUSION

It is said that we are the sum of our experiences. I agree with that and allow my work to illustrate my experiences while casting a benevolent mood in their interpretation. I have learned that perception is the key determining our existence and therefore I choose to present my story in a pragmatically positive light. With that in mind, my current body of work focuses on my personal evolution from the southern farm boy childhood to the real world of city slicking adulthood. The forms I chose to work with are selected because of their relevance to the physical, historical, and cultural landscapes of my upbringing. The reductive carving process I use is derived from an understanding of relief carving in printmaking and previous interest in wood-carving. The storytelling I do on my pots is comprised of a series of simple yet intentional images. This work accurately embodies my personality while exploring the integrated juxtaposition of aesthetic and functional elements.

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IMAGES



Figure 1 - *Sandbox pedestals*, recycled wood, sand, 2011



Figure 2 - *Bourbon Service Set*, (jug 11"x3 1/2", (Ice Bucket) 10"x6", (Sippers) 4"x3", High fire clay, glaze and underglaze, 2011



Figure 3 - *Bourbon Service Set* detail, 2011



Figure 4 - *Sweet Tea Pitcher and Cup Set*, (Pitcher) 11"x 7" (Tumblers) 8"x3 1/2", High fire clay, glaze and underglaze, 2011



Figure 5 - *Tumbler* detail, 2011



Figure 6 - *Coffee Service Set*, 5"x3 1/2", High fire clay, glaze and underglaze, 2011



Figure 7 - *Coffee Cup and Filter* detail, 2011