

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: TASTE AND THE OBJECT IN THE POST-INDUSTRIAL LANDSCAPE.

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I appropriate discarded objects seen by the roadside to create monuments to post-industrial America. The selection process is focused on man-made objects and structures such as: dilapidated houses, roadside memorials, tattered billboards, and other discarded materials. Each object is reinterpreted and presented as an artifact or a natural history museum model of something pulled from the contemporary landscape.

The purpose is to evoke a sense of wonder from the byproducts of American industrial history. Instead of merely pushing these man-made items into the peripheral of our everyday routine, I recreate the curiosities that happen when they depart from contact with people to move, decay, and harbor with other items to create monuments to cultural disaffection.

TASTE AND THE OBJECT IN THE POST-INDUSTRIAL LANDSCAPE.

By

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Dedication

To My Parents

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my peers

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Chapter 1: Flint Michigan's Post Industrial Landscape

My work focuses on the landscape that fascinated me during my adolescence and is one that is of growing importance in today's economic climate. I am writing of the landscape of Flint, Michigan, a failed automotive city like many others in the mid-west of America. This landscape consists of dilapidated buildings, unused spaces and cracked surfaces that have gone untouched for decades. The city's veneer is full of raw, sinewy, and rich textures. It appears on the sides of buildings, empty parking lots, and the objects that lay scattered about them.

My fascination with the aesthetic of the city began when I moved to Flint in my early teens from Vero Beach, Florida. Vero Beach is the aesthetic opposite of Flint. It is a place that is rigorously pruned, cleaned, and renovated. The buildings there are absent of the character and visual history that comes from neglect. The differences between each city affected me right at the time that I began to form the aesthetic opinions that would later inform my work. By comparison, the surface of buildings, roads, and discarded materials that make up Flint's landscape was loaded with intrigue. Age and wear covered nearly everything in the city that was my new home.

As someone who was beginning to piece together the details of how Flint became a city of such disrepair, every worn out building and untouched pile of randomly discarded objects by the side of the road was full of mystery: How did these things get here, and why? What got them to this state of being so neglected? It wasn't the economic or cultural connotations inherent to Flint's state of being that interested

me at that age. Instead, my interest was purely visual. The landscape provided me with strange new things to explore.



Figure 1 Photograph of a Dilapidated Service Station in Flint, 2010.

As I learned more of the social ramifications of Flint's economic despair caused by the ever-growing failure of the automotive industry that the city was built upon, the empty shells of buildings and factories became symbols and monuments to Flint's cultural inheritance. They began to represent the belief system of the people that lived there. Every unused factory that stood in the wake of abandonment stood for nostalgia and hard-nosed pride. Though cynical at times (for good reason), the people of Flint defend their home; whether that means recalling the once steady community model, or focusing on the city's unique aspects that have survived through its hardest times. People and place seem unified. Past failures evident in the landscape were the results of the resident's actions. There is a sense of ownership

over the landscape of Flint that Vero Beach can never share. Almost everyone who lives in Florida has lived somewhere else first.

The mid-west landscape helped to define the value that I assign to objects, one that values age, wear, and history over sharpness, cleanliness and decadence. When I began to focus on making art I did not want to be someone who made decadent objects that represented the new and the progressive, unconcerned with the waste is left in production's wake. The making of things that look new in art is a machine that will happen with or without my contribution. Instead I wanted to create monuments to the forgotten byproducts that represented past progress and the natural curiosities that can occur when we discard these objects and places.

Chapter 2: Collection, Simulation and Process

The work that I have made over the last five years is heavily reliant on found objects, structures, and imagery inherent to the landscape of Flint and cities like it. My focus is specifically on the places that are in public view, but are typically off limits to the average citizen: the medians of state highways, caged in parking lots and bank-owned abandoned houses. These areas are selected because of their general uselessness to the average person and their unrecognized contribution to a person's understanding of his or her visual landscape. They are not seen as productive entities, so they are pushed into the periphery of our attention, but subconsciously they inform us. They affect our understanding of a place that we collectively own as it's citizens.

It is especially important that the things that I find be the byproducts of industrial production: objects and structures that were made for a purpose that no longer exists for them. What these objects possess now is a history and a nostalgia that is not found in new items. They are artifacts from a not too distant past, one that represents a culture of perseverance in the face of degeneration. I am interested in the richness of a surface on an object that is created by natural wear, as William C. Seitz discussed in a conversation with John Driver on assemblage and the incorporation of found materials: "When paper is soiled or lacerated, when cloth is worn, stained, or torn, when wood is split, weathered, or patterned with peeling coats of paint, when metal is bent or rusted, they gain connotations which unmarked materials lack. More specific associations are denoted when an object can be identified as the sleeve of a shirt, a dinner fork, the leg of a rococo chair, a doll's eye or hand, an automobile

bumper, or a social security card.” (Bair, 84) The connotations that each item presents helps to build upon the pathos that I inject into my work by reinterpreting and combining these items.

To gather the material I begin by seeking out places to collect objects and to take photographs for research. The photographs are used only to identify common motifs. The material that is taken from them is later fragmented, distorted and recreated. For the piece titled *Where, Wear, Ware* (2010), the subject matter was inspired by tattered billboards. I used this theme to make an image by mimicking the way billboards age, revealing layers of paper as they tear and shred under the circumstances provided by the elements they are in. I set out to make a painting that revealed hidden images that hint towards a past. The billboards that I had photographed served as my guide to the process. The imagery on each panel is all hand made, but the motifs are all borrowed from different found images. The found images were then fragmented to remove anything that would assign it to a specific place, advertisement, or sign. The result is something akin to the art of Mark Bradford and Rudolf Stingel. I wanted to make a simulated history, one that looked like it might have been taken from billboards or the side of buildings that existed somewhere with a purpose, but had been pushed to a point just beyond natural capability, and placed in a gallery setting for observation.



Figure 2 installation shot, *Where, Wear, Ware*. Acrylic and paper on panel.

The idea of creating a simulated history was something that I pursued in the sculptures that followed. I became very interested in the process of layering. I began to think of strata and the artifacts that are found within them. I wanted to recreate this process. But, instead of using antiquities and relics from the distant past, I wanted to use objects that were more contemporary. This idea lead me to make two rectilinear pillar-like pieces that went untitled (but I refer to them as pillar 1 and 2) that resemble core samples from a place that doesn't exist.

The pillars were made by first building a box out of wood that served as a mold. Then I began pouring cement, concrete, asphalt, plaster and mixtures of fiberglass resin with various substances: sand, soil, and pigment. Each layer was poured anywhere between one to eight inches deep and left to dry overnight. The

layers are carefully considered so as not to make sense in a realistic setting. Layers of resin, cement, dirt and sand jostle between themselves in what looks like an arbitrary pattern. Scattered throughout the layers are a collection of found objects that were picked from the roadside or bought in dollar and thrift stores. The objects are placed in such a way so that the layers that are poured over them obscure each one. This adds more mystery to the already curious strata formation.



Figure 3 (left) installation shot, *Untitled*. Fiberglass resin, cement, asphalt and found objects.
Figure 4 (right) installation shot, *Untitled*. Fiberglass resin, cement, plaster and found objects.

Chapter 3: The Use of the Object

The idea of contemporary excavation is one that is commonly used by artists like Richard Hughes, Mark Bradford, Edward Burtynsky, and Rudolf Stingel. Of Mr. Hughes for instance, Alex Farquharson writes, “Hughes is part of a lineage of simulationist sculptors that harks back to the beginnings of Pop (Claes Oldenberg especially) but whose most emblematic exponent is Robert Gober, an artist who typically focuses on the ubiquitous (newspapers, kitchen and bathroom ware, candles, etc.) the better to maximize the uncanniness of his feats of desublimation. Hughes shares Gober’s taste for the everyday, his own repertoire consisting of refuse sacks, sleeping bags, duvets, armchairs, bicycle tires, matches, bottles and such like, but in his hands these utensils have a specificity Gober intentionally lacks.” (Farquharson)

For artists like Hughes and Gober, the objects that are left by the wayside are very important to the making of their work. Gober uses these items as symbols of cultural and political themes as well as personal diatribes. “This seems appropriate for an artist who excavates all manner of Americana, old and new, cherished and cheap [...] Mr. Gober stands at the forefront of a generation that emerged in the 1980s and devised new ways to fuse the personal and the political, the accessible and the mysterious. His art is a sometimes subtle, sometimes furious protest against what might be called delusions of normalcy.” (Smith) It is these delusions of normalcy that I seek out and recreate. I wish to reawaken the senses to them and to push them ever so slightly to the brink of fantasy.

For the piece titled *Harbor*, I wanted to create a sculptural composition using the common occurrence of plastic bags that have been blown into trees. Though *Harbor* can be seen as a critique about pollution, my intention was to highlight the lasting quality of these objects and the pathos created by what happens to them when they are discarded. I share the sentiment of Edward Burtynsky as quoted by Hamza Walker in *Cream 3*: “I’m not using my art to browbeat the corporations for the rack and ruin of our landscape. One can look at these images as making political statements about the environment, but they also celebrate the achievements of engineering or the wonders of geology ... The industrial landscape speaks to our times.” (Walker 96) The compositions that were made by chance represent moments of wonder that happen when the things that were once touched by bodies leave our control and naturally form something that is unique. *Harbor* was made as if to be the king of all plastic trees. To hark back to the feeling of childhood discoveries of insignificant occurrences that seem larger than life.



Figure 4 Detail View, *Harbor*. 2010, plastic bags, tree branch, tire.

Hundreds of bags were stripped and strewn throughout a dead tree that I had found and mounted to a base. The bags were carefully placed, putting an emphasis on the traditional compositional issues of balance and color. I thought about action painting to compose the placement of the bags. The bags themselves look like three-dimensional strokes of acrylic paint. I thought about the piece as though it was the action painting of nature when it is given human byproducts. Under the tree lays a tire that I had found by the roadside. The placement of the tire was both to ground the composition and to serve as another human element to remind the viewer that these occurrences happen not far from where we travel.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

My contribution to the practice of “simulationism” is unique to how I use the objects that I find. Unlike the work of Gober and Hughes, who make the objects that they use themselves, I want to recycle the objects that I discover in the urban landscape. This is a process that has been employed since Fluxus and Marcel Duchamp, and up through Robert Rauschenberg, John Chamberlain and others to the contemporary practices of Marc Bradford and Rudolf Stingel.

I act as a contemporary archeologist, searching for artifacts that exist on, or just below the surface of the present landscape. My work resembles that of natural history museum model or diorama. And as production of new things continues to grow, and those things fall to the sidelines of our everyday lives, I will seek them out and repackage them. I will present them as something with new value. A value that doesn't rely on usefulness, but relies instead on connotation, mystery, and fantasy.

Every action that I take in the creation of a work is considered for its formal qualities. Formal decisions of color, balance, and emphasis learned from years of traditional education are used to ground my work and provide it with a familiarity. The choices that I make are apparent in the work. It is my hand that guides the formation of my drawings, paintings collages and sculptures. And it is that hand that is influenced by the landscape that I grew up in and the education that I received.

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