

Abstract

Thinking through our contemporary culture's language and symbols, my recent work explores our culture's deep desire to label, define, and categorize everything. The objects and ideas that at first seem to be clearly defined, mutually exclusive, or somewhat contradictory become my inspiration. Can a work of art be a mass-produced, readymade, as well as a unique, handmade object? Why do we separate art and design, but yet both are housed within the same department on campus? Where does one begin to understand an object when it has multiple and equally valuable descriptions or when multiple words describe essentially the same idea? These areas of multiple meanings have been the subjects of my research here at Millersville University.

Multiple Meanings: A Deconstruction of Definitions

My exploration into our culture's use of language and symbols, specifically ideas and objects that have the possibility to be described or thought about in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways, began through the use of found objects within my art process. "The term 'found object' is a literal translation from the French *objet trouvé*, meaning objects or products with non-art functions that are placed into an art context and made part of an artwork; what we now call 'the readymade' is an updated version of that idea" (Wallace, 2014). The inclusion of these found objects, some which I actually found while others were purchased at thrift stores, began to emerge as a larger element in my artwork. From there, I began to formulate why this transition occurred in my artwork. I began researching artists and artwork from the past that incorporated found objects and reflecting on why and how they were using these elements in their artwork.

Creative Commentary

Drawing from my interests in education and art, my recent explorations have focused on language and symbols. If seen on its most basic level, education is one method in which indoctrination happens. Often, the word indoctrinate is used negatively, but "when this verb first appeared in English in the 17th century, it simply meant, "to teach" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Letters and symbols are just that. They are visual elements that we have learned or been taught that mean a specific something or someone. However, when one becomes self-aware of these letters and symbols, they cease to be understood universally. They become merely a visual, a picture. Drawing from post-modernism and contemporary art practices, this self-awareness has occurred through the deconstruction of these visuals. In the context of art, "Deconstruction is a form of criticism first used by French philosopher Jacques Derrida in the 1970s which asserts that there is not one single intrinsic meaning to be found in a work, but rather many, and often these can be conflicting" (Tate, n.d.). Deconstruction, then, becomes the inspiration to this body of work, language and symbols the subject matter, and reconstruction and the creation of my own personal work the response.

This way of working brings to mind a specific idiom: *A picture is worth a thousand words*. This phrase describes how a picture often tells a story just as well as, if not better than, a lot of written words. If we use this as a way of understanding this process, we realize that this

prioritizes the visual over the written word. But, if all those words can describe that one picture, and those words are merely pictures themselves, endless possibilities can occur through the deconstruction of those descriptions and definitions that have been used to describe and define the original. Those thousand words further complicate the original symbol, the picture. Thinking about the reverse of this phrase can then be used as a parallel to this process and exploration.

Specifically, my work is mostly three-dimensional with ceramics being the primary material used. There have been some two-dimensional works of art that have been related, but this exploration has been primarily three-dimensional. The plasticity and nearly endless possibilities of ceramics has helped explore this area of research, while also providing a strong historical framework for which to put my work in support of or against. I am still currently working on this body of work, therefore the size and number of pieces within this series is expanding. Although there is variety within this body of work, the inclusion of found objects is constant. In some pieces, I have used a found object as a conceptual inspiration, others it becomes a reference point, and still others I actually have used the original found object in the completed artwork. In some instances, the found objects have been used in a way that meshes the handmade with the readymade; other pieces emphasize the contrast between the two. These methods of found object inclusion reference and reflect my own relationship and response to the use of ceramic objects within everyday life, as well as the over production of consumed ceramic objects in contemporary culture.

Conclusion

Language and symbols are largely addressed in the subject matter of the pieces, using constructed dualities as jumping off points. For example, concepts and themes that I have addressed previously have been the contrasts between sculptural and functional ceramics, art and design, and handmade and readymade. Included within this display of my recent research are some of the artist statements that have been used to help viewers understand the artist's thoughts and background given to the artwork.

This fall, I plan to complete and present some further evidence of this exploration of research here at Millersville University during a solo art exhibition with an accompanying exhibition catalog detailing and describing my work and process more in-depth. Both of these projects are currently untitled with locations, dates, and times not yet finalized.

References

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