TECHNOLOGY, ONTOLOGY, AND POP

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This problem in lieu of thesis outlines a body of work that uses technology and pop elements to discover ways to understand what it means to be human. In doing so it expands the interpretation of technology, ontology, and pop, and allowed the artist to find an essential balance between the three. It details the understanding of these borrowed aesthetics and their connection to the creative process.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Proposal

My main objective in writing a problem in lieu of thesis was to explain how

I would produce, through my everyday experiences, a body of work that deals

with three things, a branch of modern philosophy known as ontology, a visual

landscape called pop, and a critique of contemporary technology classified as

techno-romanticism. Ontology seeks to define the nature of being. When

looking at art in an ontological sense, art can create the edification of what it

means to be human. To paraphrase philosopher Martin Heidegger, we are beings

creating beings not things creating things. Heidegger is stating that art should

not be the creation of things but beings creating objects in their own likeness

that should reflect on their human nature. Creating the art object should in

some way define us as individuals. Seen ontologically, art is the transformation

of human experience into form. For me the experience is based on living in a

highly technological age and being faced with a bombardment of popular images

in daily life.

I look to technology for its functionality, sense of power, and image of modernity. One layer of my work references techno-romanticism that I define as the glorification of the machine as an object in and of itself. The second layer, unlimited formal invention, introduces the element of human experience. On a formal level, the machine is a sum of parts that can be drawn from and constructed into beings of my own creation. My work is an interpretation of the experience of living in a mechanical age. Presented as an irreverent mocking of the role of technology, my forms devalue mechanical forms, by stripping them of their functional role for an aesthetic purpose. I take things and create beings by combining mechanical elements with organic forms that take on anthropomorphic characteristics.

The forms I create are founded on ontology and technology, but adding to this foundation I have attached the cultural experience that I associate with pop. When seen as the aesthetic condition of contemporary culture, pop derives from a myriad of sources. I define pop as a culmination of fashionable trends, an articulation of the now, or reinterpretation of the old as new again. The pop landscape is comprised of cyberspace, ad space, television, and marketing. It becomes the humdrum, and often superficial breaking up of space into readable, eye-catching, attention-grabbing surfaces so ubiquitous that they

lose all appeal. The pop surface, in my definition, is any space devoted to

attracting consumers' attention. As an art aesthetic, I appropriate pop's color,

surface, and sensibility, separating it from its original intent. Its sleek design,

non-offensive mass appeal, and visual simplicity provide the framework that I

see gives my work a simplicity, and approachability that I reinterpret from mass

culture and make completely my own.

Statement of Problem

In order to fully explore the connections, relationships, and interpretations

that can be established among these topics, I have created a body of work that

uses technology and pop elements to discover ways to understand what it

means to be human. Doing so has expanded my interpretation of technology,

ontology, and pop, and allowed me to find an essential balance between the

three. I have extended my understanding of these borrowed aesthetics and

their connection to the creative process. During this process I have also

explored the relationship between organic/geometric forms, and hand

drawn/hard edged stenciled lines, and their relationship to the ontological

experience. I also addressed a figure from art history that helped lead me to

the visual connections I now make in my work. Questions that were addressed while making this body of work are as follows:

1. How did my everyday experiences affect the work that I produced and how did this relate to the construction of ontology in my work?

2. How do these pieces reflect the pop landscape?

3. How does my work define techno-romanticism?

Methodology

I made seven sculptures in clay and kept a sketchbook detailing the creative processes primary to my work. This body of work presents my interpretation of the human experience as an artist who looks at technology and images of modern culture from an ontological point of view. Both journal and work will be displayed in a public exhibition.

CHAPTER II

Conceptual Process

Ontology is the study of what it means to be human, more specifically it asks what is it that makes us human? When creating this current body of work the assumption was made that we are a product of experience. Where one grew up, the schools attended, the places one has visited, these events factor into an understanding of oneself. Viewing the effects of experience in this way, ontology, in its most basic terms is experience. What it means to be human and our individual sense of who we are comes from experience. Art is the evidence of experience by literally taking personal experience and giving it physical form. As an artist whose work reflects a connection with technology, and being immersed in pop culture, I can trace these influences back to an early age.

As a child I can remember being fascinated with the power of machines, watching the shuttle launch on TV, tractors moving earth, and the Ames, Iowa power plant spewing steam. I would observe with total fascination, fill my sketchbook with drawings, then build my own vehicle or building out of blocks, cardboard, or anything I could get away with taking apart. The need to be more

than a passive viewer of technology comes from my innate desire to understand the objects of my fascination. The construction process became a tactile way of understanding the world around me. That child-like fascination and process is not very far removed from the process I still use today.

Although witnessing the conflicting values in the role of technology, I see it now not with fascination, but as a fact of life in the 21st century. Taking in the components that I see around me; cars, highway over passes, architecture, and removing them from their functional context becomes a process, as observed by professor Ed Blackburn, of "dumbing down" complex engineering to produce forms that work as "smart" visual statements.

Playing off the popular phenomenon of mechanization, I transform individual elements into something new. In my forms, the references to steel, industrial pipe, and antenna are obvious, yet this sum of parts recreates a greater whole that becomes its own curiosity. This is how my work can be seen as techno-romantic, because it is the glorification of technology in and of itself. I rely on this appropriation so that the viewer is presented with familiar parts from technology constructed in an unfamiliar configuration that encourages speculation of the art object's function.

What I take from pop culture is its license to freely impact the senses with color, its attempt to appeal to a mass audience, and relentless formal invention. My most direct source of influence from pop culture comes in the form of billboards that overrun the drive between Denton and Dallas, and television ads that whirl color purely for visual impact. What the pop landscape contributes to my work is its bright sense of color, visual simplicity, and a demand for attention. Many of the advertisements that I am drawn to allow colors to have their fullest impact by limiting their palette to one or two colors combined with neutral hues. This influence is seen in my current body of work.

One area of my work that has combined both pop culture and technology directly is in surface treatment. My work has become the amalgamation of traditional materials aided by untraditional polymers and plastic. The traditional clay body is the foundation of my three-dimensional work, but the surface is a composite of automotive stickers and paint. The computer has become a tool that helps me to quickly explore visual possibilities of surface. The computer can lead me to discover configurations accidentally, that I would not have come to on my own. Digital applications help focus ideas before a ceramic object is started in the studio with more precision than pencil and paper. The hard-edged line heavily used in pop culture can easily be achieved using digital technology.

Digital images become templates for creating custom vinyl stickers, used in the automotive and sign industry, that are applied to my three-dimensional ceramic forms. Examples of this surface process are seen in *Coop-er* and *Chuck*. It is this clean edge that reference machined precision and the bright flat colors that I connect to pop imagery.

   Philip Guston is an artist whose historical antecedent has made a significant influence on my work. In the thick of abstract expressionism, Guston made the bold move to take abstraction and make it figurative and cartoon like. This shift sent a surge of awakening throughout the art world. Before Guston, abstraction refused to move beyond the standard parlance of line and drip. Guston took the familiarity of a comic book, combined with the sensibilities of an abstract painting, and developed a wholly new expression in painting. From the experience of viewing his work, what I gained from Guston's lead was that it is permissible to break from my own tradition of wood fired ceramics, yet keep the medium of clay, and give it a different interpretation. Equally impactful was how his choice of everyday common objects combined with a comic vernacular could produce an image expressing such a range of human emotion and experience.

Chapter III

Summary

I strive to create work that is imaginative, impulsive, and slightly odd which appeals to both art audiences and non-art audiences. To achieve this goal I rely on familiar everyday forms from pop culture and technology and bind them together with a figurative reference. By anthropomorphizing everyday elements, my forms become caricatures of humans and mimic human tendencies to break up space into pop or mechanical surfaces. Ontologically my work is based on the experience of living in the modern age and being continually bombarded by technology and pop culture. They are not only a constant resource for ideas and images but become a common language combined with my interpretation of what it is like to be human in the modern age. My continuing goal is to create work that not only reflects my own experiences on a daily basis, but to create objects that form new experiences for the viewer, in much the same way Philip Guston's work has had an influence on me. If ceramics is to continue having an impact on me I need to keep finding ways that connect it to the fundamental question of what it means to be

human, my surroundings, and interests. It must in some way raise questions

that help me figure out who I am, along with how I fit into my environment.