THE HUMAN OBJECT:
EXPLORATIONS OF THE
FIGURATIVE TOY
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Problem in Lieu of Thesis Prepared for the Degree of
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This Problem in Lieu of Thesis documents the thought processes that led to the completion of a series of five interactive sculptures. Each piece incorporates a part of the human body taken from its normal context and placed into the context of children's playground equipment.
Introduction

The human figure has been featured in art since the beginnings of civilization. The fascination with this miraculous machine is never more evident than in three-dimensional art and its ever-changing relationship to its environment and audience. Classical Greek funereal Kouroi, Henry Moore's larger-than-life abstracts, and the Keinholz's disturbing conceptual visions portraying the dehumanization of individuals in ordinary settings are just a few of the treatments that the human form has undergone over time.

My own figurative work has also undergone many transformations in its evolution to its present form. The majority of my work to date has been directly affected by my Greek heritage, with trips to my father's homeland ensuring my familiarity with the ancient marble and bronze figures that portray the ideals of humanity. These images of beautiful and ideally proportioned bodies have combined with my interest in the human figure and its movements in order to bring about my very Hellenistic style of art: the perfection of form combined with the realities of less than ideal contexts. Over time and through experimentation, however, my work has changed. A "Pop Art" mentality, far removed from my Neoclassical background, now shows in my imagery and processes. The incorporation of found and manipulated media and modern imagery is new to my work, and yet these materials and considerations have affected the direction in which my work is heading.
Statement of the Problem

The focus of my work is the undeniable and often times ironic objectification of the human form as it is seen through a variety of images and contexts. This series of sculptures addresses the relationship between an individual piece of the body and its context. My objective was to make a series of five pieces that are seen as interactive toys, surreally integrating the familiar bits and pieces of a human body into the unfamiliar context of children's playground equipment. The interactive element to these pieces draws viewers into the experience of human objectification and expands their perception of the body through ironic twists of context and the whimsical combinations of forms. With this series of work, I have answered the following questions:

1- In what way does an unfamiliar context affect how parts such as hands, mouths, and eyes are seen and interpreted?

2- How can the viewer be visually invited to physically interact with and manipulate the human toy?

3- How does the surrealistic objectification and manipulation of the body and its parts affect the impact of a sculpture on its audience?

Considerations

While exploring possible topics for my Proposal for the Problem in Lieu of Thesis, I studied my work from the past few years to see exactly how it has changed and how it has stayed the same. In doing so, I focused on five main criteria that make the art
that I create my own. First and foremost in all of my work is the idea of the human
figure. Even though the figure may not always be easily recognizable, nearly all of my
work contains elements of the human form. A second commonality to my work is the
decorative quality of the surface. Patience is a virtue that I have only when it pertains to
my artwork, as can be seen from the tiny details that I love to add, such as individually
formed ceramic objects and carefully glued bits and pieces of decoration. Surface
decoration is meant not only as an element of visual interest, but also to incorporate
delightful and interesting textures that invite the viewer to look closer, and sometimes to
sneak a feel while no one is looking. Humor is important to me, as well as irony, and a
fun-house sense of surrealism has begun integrate itself into my work. This is usually
seen in subtle form in the titles, or more obviously in the visual aspects of the works
themselves. A new theme in my work is the interactive element to this series. Toys, and
playground equipment in particular, are by their very nature interactive objects, yet "art"
has always been a "look-but-don't-touch" subject. The irony in objects that are obviously
meant to be played with and manipulated, yet have been displayed on pedestals in a
gallery, forces a tempting decision onto viewers who have been trained to refrain from
physical interaction with art. Ideally, temptation will overcome training, and playing with
the art will become a part of the audiences' experience of my work. In addition to
physical interaction, the use of mirrors on and inside surfaces forces viewers to see
themselves inside the piece, and frequently, causes a deeper level of interaction. Finally,
the most important aspect to my work is the self-exploratory nature of what I am making
and the internal impact it has upon the viewer. I am a firm believer that art is in the eye
of the beholder, and each piece that I create is an image of something that is important, or meaningful, to me. However, I also believe that there is no single correct meaning to anything, and I hope that everyone who sees my work brings their own experience and beliefs into their view of my art. The addition of trinkets and objects that can be seen as symbols allows the audience to individually place personal thoughts to each piece.

From the elements I had decided were most important and indicative of my work, I was able to consolidate my thoughts and propose a topic of interest to me. As I began to design the works themselves, I already had in mind the criteria that the each piece in this series should address.

**Description of the Work**

"I" is the first piece in this collection. This whimsical swing balances on three delicate legs made of steel wire that has been manipulated into curvilinear forms. The framework has been liberally decorated with hundreds of shiny plastic jewels that form a continuous blinking line of shiny eyecatchers in green, violet, blue, and white. Hanging from the frame are small chains that also are embellished with dewdrops of color and light. Suspended by a delicate chain from the central point of the frame is a large ceramic eyeball: the seat of the swing. The eye, painted with a green iris, contains a mirror in place of the pupil. As the ultimate point of interest, the eye draws the viewer into the piece, begging for a push.

Next comes "Digging Within." Made to resemble a gaping mouth with blood red lips, this tabletop sized sandbox is filled with individually formed ceramic teeth rather
than the more traditional sand. Replacing the familiar shovel form are three red tongues that fold over the lips to extend their handles toward viewers. Glistening with a coat of shiny medium, the undulating tongues repel even as they invite a touch with a surreptitious finger. Partially concealed by the teeth are small objects and symbols that find their individual meanings in the viewer's mind. Symbols such as rings, skulls, lips, and stars, as well as trinkets like beads and mother of pearl carvings, peek out and provoke curiosity in viewers.

For "Weighing In," a pair of hands are joined to form a miniature seesaw. The hands are my own, cast in clear acrylic resin and joined above the wrists with steel rods and wire mesh. The stand, a simple construction of steel wire and mesh, is a visual continuation of the arm that lies on top of it. The mechanical aspects of this piece are countered by the frivolous addition of colorful decorations and extravagantly long fingernails. Because a seesaw, besides being a toy for children, is also a simple version of scales, this piece is accompanied and surrounded by an assortment of objects, which are meant to be placed into the cupped hands and weighed against one another.

The fourth piece in the series is "Telling Tales," a miniature slide. A ladder leads up to the back of an open-mouthed ceramic mask that seems to hang in mid-air. The back of the face is a mosaic of broken bits of mirror, reflecting a kaleidoscopic image of background and face back to the viewer. The face of the mask is painted in shades of lavender, and attention is drawn to the deep purple and green that surrounds the mirrored eyes and open lips. Protruding from the gaping mouth is a large tongue that slopes down and forms the slide and the basin in which sliding objects come to rest. The tongue itself,
made of cast acrylic resin, is a shiny and bright red and it contains more shards of broken mirror that reflect broken views of the surroundings bathed in a crimson glow. A simple small glass marble rests in the bowl of the tongue, and is meant to be placed at the top of the slide and allowed to roll its way down.

The final work in the series is "Way to Go," a double-decker merry-go-round with bells to provide musical accompaniment to the motion. The structure, covered in richly textured black velvet, was constructed so that each level will rotate independent of the other. Ornate bronze D-ring handles are evenly spaced along the edges as temptation for the interaction between object and audience, and for the viewer's convenience. Rather than the traditional animal figures, this merry-go-round is covered in a rainbow of colored fingers. Cast from my own in acrylic resin, the pudgy childlike fingers gently bob on and among a variety of springs as the structure rotates. The fingers seem to be pointing in every direction, and at everything around, including the audience.

Response to Posed Questions

The first question posed in my proposal for my Problem in Lieu of Thesis concerned the placement of figurative elements of the human form, and how interpreting such an image would be affected by context. As the work demonstrates, surrealistic placement of body parts does not particularly affect how the parts themselves are seen. Instead, I chose to relate the part to the object it forms, creating relationships between unlikely objects. The most fragile and least protected organ of the human body, the eye, has the distinction of becoming the most substantial part of a delicate swing, and indeed,
is designated as the very place upon which, had I made a life-scale version of this piece, a viewer would sit. Speech is dependent on the tongue, and an open mouth creates the flow of verbal language that expresses the individuality of the self. Strong and dependable tools that enable humans to create, the hands become the seat in which we place and weigh the symbols that have meaning to us, while the individual fingers become graceful entities that, despite being separate from the hand, are no less capable and sturdy.

The next question asked in what ways the audience could be drawn in to physically manipulate, and indeed play with, the toys I have created. On each piece, I chose to utilize different methods of enticement in order to invite viewer interaction without resorting to a sign that gives step-by-step instructions. The swing, "I," is simply a pretty object that could conceivably be given a tap, in order to see if the eye actually moves. For "Telling Tales" I simply added a single piece that has the role of being present for the sole purpose of sliding down the tongue and coming to rest in the bowl. "Digging Within" employs the obvious temptation of digging for buried treasure, though the "shovels" that are provided are not readily recognizable. The easy to find handles on "Way to Go" almost demand attention, and therefore a push to see that the object does indeed turn. Also, the addition of the dangling bells and swaying fingers on springs invites a poke of a finger. Finally, the addition of interchangeable objects for "Weighing In" allows viewers to weigh their choices, and indeed their priorities.

The final question concerns the impact that these pieces have on the audience. As with all visual arts, interest is in the eye of the beholder. The surrealistic placement of recognizable pieces of the human body into the familiar configurations of playground
equipment is something that not all viewers will appreciate. Should a single viewer see these objects for what they are and get enjoyment out of them, I will consider them to be successful.

Conclusion

I chose to create these toys in order to blur the lines that exist between the ideas of art, object, and toy. My idea was to foster the notion that art is not inaccessible, and that indeed, it is meant to be enjoyed at close quarters. For viewers who are familiar with my understanding that these objects are toys to be played with and manipulated, this series of work is a fun, hands-on experience. Most audience members, however, are still too tied to the fundamental theory of the museum setting and prefer to label any objects displayed on pedestals and in a gallery as "art."