Discarded to the Transcendent

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DISCARDED TO THE TRANSCENDENT

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

by
Robert James Brownlow
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Accepted by:
David Detrich, Committee Chair
Sydney Cross
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Todd McDonald
ABSTRACT

My current body of work strives to elevate the discarded to the transcendent, to take the unwanted and bring it to new life. I choose to transform materials in a way that challenges perceptions of space and material. The work also serves to create an experience for the viewer, an experience that may allow an escape from the mundane of every day life and journey, for a moment, to a world that embraces unexpected emotion.

With obsolescence in mind, I tend to use materials that are found throughout scrap yards, surplus warehouses, and anywhere else I may find underutilized materials that stir my curiosity. I enjoy how I am able to take something that has been discarded and reuse it in a manner unintended from its origin. Through this line of material usage, I wish to recalibrate the viewers understanding and value of the discarded. The reutilization of materials is a primary function of my work. It illuminates the understanding of the manner in which the discarded may be regarded as something of value and importance.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to credit the expertise and guidance of my committee members. Their direction through this journey has proved to be instrumental in my development as an artist. Particularly, I would like to mention Professor David Detrich. David has the foresight to understand my strengths and my weaknesses and the ability to create the method of teaching that I am able to relate to. When I first arrived, he removed my security blanket, which proved to be the right course of action for me. By doing so he enabled me to look at my work in a fresh new way, to understand materials and media like I had never done previously. He created the road I never imagined I would travel, but so fortunate and appreciative that I did. I would also like to thank Andrea Feeser for having the insight when none was to be had. Her vision saw through the barriers that the rest of us crashed upon. I am truly indebted to all four, for I would not have completed this endeavor without their encouragement and devotion to my success.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF PLATES</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISCARDED TO TRANSCENDENT</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF PLATES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My Space, Your Space, Our Space (view 1)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Space, Your Space, Our Space (view 2)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Space, Your Space, Our Space (view 3)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Space, Your Space, Our Space (view 4)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star Light Star Bright (view 1)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star Light Star Bright (view 2)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star Light Star Bright (view 3)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star Light Star Bright (view 4)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea of Blue (view 1)</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea of Blue (view 2)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea of Blue (view 3)</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holiday’s Inn (view 1)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holiday’s Inn (view 2)</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holiday’s Inn (view 3)</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

I am constantly perplexed by how we interact with our surroundings. As a result of our technological and mechanical advancements we generate objects that only serve us temporarily, and thus ultimately create waste. From day to day we struggle with the dilemma of what to do with the waste. Earth is only getting smaller as we expand our domain into uncharted realms. The more we produce and reproduce as a society the more we have to find ways of dealing with what has become detritus. Most of humanity is becoming acutely aware of this dilemma and has taken part in finding ways to relieve our lands and waters of this predicament.

I feel that as an artist I need to comprehend the effects of my discipline and create works that are more sensitive to issues of life here on Earth. My work is not about recycling directly but about reusing materials that have lost their original value. I create these works in the hope to jar people’s perspectives on the value of discarded materials. I enjoy using discarded materials and transforming them into works that allow us to transcend otherwise predictable levels of perception. It is important to create these works in a manner that jolts the experience of the viewer. The best way to impact life and bring about a heightened awareness of our impact is through experiences. Everything we perceive is essentially based on how we experience the environment around us.
DISCARDED TO TRANSCENDENT

My current body of work strives to elevate the discarded to the transcendent, to take the unwanted and bring it to new life. I choose to transform materials in a way that challenges perceptions of space and material. The work also serves to create an experience for the viewer, an experience that may allow an escape from the mundane of everyday life and journey, for a moment, to a world that embraces unexpected emotion. There are several artists who have worked and are working with the timelessness of perceptions. How some of these artists draw their inspiration is paralleled to mine.

I am fortunate to have served in the United States Navy for a period long enough to influence and change my perceptions about the world we live in. The Navy also provided me with experiences that exceeded all expectations. One of those experiences that I wish to share with the viewer is the awe and wonder of being out to sea. The actual aspect of being out to sea is not the point, the point is to convey that which has impacted and influenced my life. One impact is being removed from all that is held dear and seemingly important. Once an individual is removed from their familiar surroundings and placed into certain unfamiliar environments raises questions about an individual's place in existence. Try, for a moment, to understand your relative size and place in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. There is no one within thousands of miles; this isolation begins to raise emotions of fear, joy, anxiety, apprehension, love and many more – sometimes all at once. The day-to-day mundane feelings become secondary to the emotions revealed
through this experience of isolation. It is this shift from the ordinary to the extraordinary that allows for an escape. This becomes a point of reference.

An additional point of reference is the enthrallment with the phenomenon of light and space, which was reinforced through my time in the service. My interest in light and how it really affects perception stems from my childhood and my fascination with the night sky. I have always found myself looking outward and upward to find serenity and meditation. There is a sense of getting lost through imagining the vastness of space. The colors of space create euphoric senses, and the shapes created allow for an exploration of the imagination. When I joined the Navy, I was given an unexpected opportunity to see things like I had never seen before. Being out to sea in the middle of the ocean with no intrusion from other light sources, I was able to see the night sky with purity and clarity. I was also introduced to lightlessness, as there were light traps that prevented any light from escaping the ship during nighttime evolutions. I had never experienced the total absence of visible light until this. This experience only solidified my fascination with light with respect to its presence and its absence.

Taking the subordinate and elevating it to a degree of sublimity is very important to me as I reflect upon my experiences while out to sea. It was very disturbing to see what was thrown over the side of the ship and what was considered obsolete. With this notion of obsolescence in mind, I tend to use materials that are found in scrap yards, surplus warehouses, and anywhere else I may find underutilized materials that stir the my curiosity. I enjoy how I am able to take something that has been discarded and reuse it in a manner unintended from its original intended use. Through this line of material usage,
I wish to recalibrate the viewers understanding and value of the discarded. The reutilization and ultimate repurposing of materials is a primary function of my work. It illuminates the understanding of the manner in which the discarded may be regarded as something of value and importance. The materials are chosen resolutely.

In *My Space, Your Space, Our Space* the resolve is determinate. This piece is designed with cosmolgy in mind. It is based on what it represents versus what it is made of. The plastic handles are designed to represent something to reach for, but the encasement in glass makes them elusive. This piece is in part contingent on elusiveness, having something that is reachable yet restrictive in how it is accessed. Humanity has been able, for some time, to reach for the stars using the naked eye, with ground based telescopes and now, because of the advancements of technology, the Hubble telescope. Unfortunately humanity has yet to be able to access these stars within a familiar shared space. In this piece, the glass represents fragility that surrounds and permeates the environment, which contrasts our perceptions of invincibility within our own personal universe. This feeling stems from my experience of watching all the trash in the middle of the ocean. The light emanating from the center of the work is designed to raise the question of where the viewer defines his or her personal space. Control is another aspect of this work that is designed to recalibrate certain aspects of the viewer. There is only one-way in and out which relates directly to our fragile journey through existence. This work contrasts the idea of a single road through existence by recontextualizing the detritus. The placement of the cubes represents navigational stars used by seamen throughout the world.
The discarded continues to be a contingent term in *Sea of Blue*. This piece is designed to create an awe-inspiring experience for the viewer. The stainless steel pipes are reclaimed from the scrap yard and allow for florescent lights to be inserted into the tubes, creating a flood of blue light within a light tight space. The arrangement is specific and relates a shift in spatial perception. The light tubes create a skew in floor to ground relationship. This change in perspective relates to a loss of horizon found when the sky and sea become illusionary. The flood of light emanating from the tubes is a metaphor for the vastness of oceans abroad. With these aspects in mind the work strives to make this recalibration of perspective on materials and their value.

In the piece *Holidays’ Inn* I use various colors of light and several spaces to create a work that changes continuously. With this continual change, the viewer is able to visit each space more than once. A space may be flooded with red light one minute then blue the next. It is this shift that causes the viewer to reevaluate their perceptions of that singular space. There are a total of eight spaces that the viewer can experience. Each space is void of objects allowing the viewer to conjure their own from their interaction with the work. The video of the original work is then projected into discarded card catalogues that have been transformed to resemble the original site. By this I am transforming the scale and the perspective of the original work and allowing a new set of viewers to experience the piece in a totally different context. The content remains the same, taking the discarded and elevating it to the transcendent. The original site is a hotel slated for demolition to make room for new condominiums. The light fixtures and card
catalogues were discarded yet are able to maintain their functionality in these different contexts.

There are a few artists that I feel have similarities to how I am scripting my current line of work, one being Olafur Eliasson. Jonathan Crary writes about *Your colour memory*, an earlier body of work from Eliasson that is based on a kind of ‘radical empiricism’ like that of the American philosopher William James. Like James, Eliasson is deeply committed to expanding the range of phenomena that could be included in any description of experience…Not only for James but for philosophers such as Nietzsche, John Dewey, and Henri Bergson, the richer and more variegated the field of our possible experience, the easier it can be to escape the numbing claims of habit and routine. For Eliasson as well, the disruption of habit is one of the conditions of individual and collective freedom. (Crary)

This parallels my work in how I choose to remove the viewer from the mundane, the routine and allow for an escape, if only for a moment. The escape permits this feeling of freedom.

Pamela Lee wrote an essay about Eliasson’s work and describes it as “a body of work that variously engages questions of subject-object relations, exploring the ways in which the subject’s encounter with his or her surroundings prompt larger revelations about the nature of perception itself. He takes recourse to a diverse array of media to dramatize these claims.” (Lee 34) Through a type of subject-object analysis, I am creating works that operate with the same suggestions about perceptions. The perceptions
I wish to recalibrate are about how we juxtapose our values with our environment. Humanity tends to adjust these values depending on need. Once the need is gone so is the apparent value, which then ends up as refuse in the environment. We paradoxically value the environment and its convenience as long as it suits our needs of supply and disposal. The materials I choose come from a state that has deemed them obsolete and therefore valueless. I do this to prompt an awareness of what alternate purpose the discarded can serve. Similar to what Eliasson does in his work, I strive to expand my content through using a diversity of materials. I look to these numerous materials for their aesthetic qualities and how they are able to function as frameworks for taking the discarded and elevating it to the transcendent.

Lee also writes about how Eliasson’s work is received. She brings up the critical debate about the “way in which he deliberately exposes the mechanisms producing his effects” (Lee 35-36). This is an integral part of how my work operates. I look to reveal the nature of the materials that are being recontextualized. The viewer is given access to these materials without pretense. It may be difficult to comprehend the previous obsolescence of these materials, but the understanding that the materials are discarded raises a complex appreciation for what other service they may provide. Marianne Krogh Jenson wrote an article titled With Inadvertent Reliance where she talks about the critique of modernism’s conception of space and humanity. In one section she writes “There is a focusing on a subject, which is in constant movement and always on the way to being something else, always in the process of changing into something else in the constant meeting and the inevitable interchange with the surrounding environment.” (Krogh-
Jensen) I draw close comparisons with this quote and how I understand the materials I choose to work with. Each material is on its way to becoming something else, I am giving it a new context that becomes that “else,” which consequently provides an additional point of reference. Humanity parallels this idea in how we start as nothing then become many things as we develop, and then deteriorate, even then becoming something else.

Alyson Shotz is another artist dealing with similar issues. In a recent conversation with Anja Chavez, Shotz talks about the importance of craftsmanship. She states “Craftsmanship is important to me. I like things to be made well. I appreciate craftsmanship in all kinds of things, so I would like to give that back to the viewer in my work.”(Chavez 26) In my work craftsmanship is very important. I feel it is contingent in conveying my ideas instead of distracting from them. If my work was not well crafted then I feel it would not be able to convey a sense of awe. The viewer has to be drawn in like a moth to a flame. Once there, the viewer is free to experience a sense of sublimity. Like Shotz, I create works that use spatial volume instead of mass. I look to both positive and negative space to create the illusion of mass, which opposes sculptural concepts of the past where large forms of metal, stone or other materials are used to emphasize space. Shotz and I both have the same awareness about the spectator in our work. She says, “The spectator is involved in making my art what it is. Viewers become participants and even change the way the work looks when they are in front of it.”(Chavez 28) She also states “it is more an optical experience in which I want the viewer to participate – though that optical experience is only achieved through movement in and around the work.”(Chavez 28) My work is very contingent on how the viewer participates with it.
They become positive aspects moving through transparent space creating new complex integers that help to conclude the sum of the work.
CONCLUSION

Through my sculpture, I use materials that are discarded in an effort to recalibrate the viewers understanding of perception, space, and material. I capitalize upon my experiences in the Navy to accentuate the phenomenological aspect of the work in order to have a greater impact on the viewer’s perception. Perception becomes the foundation for experience. This work makes a statement about our understanding of the valued and underutilized by re-contextualizing materials and from their original purpose. My hope is to illuminate the importance of respecting our environment and living harmoniously within it is able to make an impact. If I am able to connect with just a few individuals then, for me, the work was well worth it.
1.1 My Space, Your Space, Our Space
1.2 My Space, Your Space, Our Space
1.3 My Space, Your Space, Our Space
1.4 My Space, Your Space, Our Space
2.1 Star Light Star Bright
2.2 Star Light Star Bright
2.3 Star Light Star Bright
2.4 Star Light Star Bright
3.1 Sea of Blue
3.2 Sea of Blue
3.3 Sea of Blue
4.1 Holiday’s Inn
4.2 Holiday’s Inn
4.3 Holiday’s Inn
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