Abundance, Overload, and Excess

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ABUNDANCE, OVERLOAD, AND EXCESS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

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

by
Kristina Falotico
December 2011

Accepted by:
Sydney A. Cross, Committee Chair
Todd McDonald
Christina Hung
ABSTRACT

As a middle class American, I have become aware of my culture’s inclination and capability to accumulate goods. Through relocations, my life in recent years has been a transient one; relying mostly on possessions to constitute a home. At the same time these possessions begin to become a burden, weighing me down as they constantly get packed and unpacked. It is through these experiences that I’ve become more aware of what we surround ourselves with and which represent our lives. My prints explore the notion of everyday household goods and how much we have amassed as a culture. My observation is that the availability of things has become more important than the quality of the items themselves, which has led to an overabundance of stuff that far surpasses the requisite of comfortable living. My work critiques our consumerist condition by re-revealing our possessions, and displaying our cultures lack of control to acquiring goods and the apathetic regard toward them.

I fill the surface of my prints with a mixture of familiar objects, pattern, and perspectives, inviting the viewer to navigate the complex image and decipher what’s new, used, and discarded. By subverting the historical traditions of still life, where possessions were displayed to indicate wealth, my prints rather reflect how our environment is filled to the brim with too much stuff. The printed compositions are jammed packed and in a state of disarray in order to represent the cluttered mess our lives have become. A life
overflowing with things we never use anymore trapping and preventing us from moving forward.

Through woodcut and lithography I create a transformative experience with dense colorful complex displays of our lives that must be navigated through in order to comprehend them. Through my own aesthetic choices and academic background in art, I draw attention to everyday items in life, resulting in an unexpected experience of allure and elevation of the everyday. The space takes on its own characteristic’s as it confronts and pushes the viewer back. The larger than life scale of some of the work creates an alternate environment we are unable to enter because there is no more space left; rather the goods begin to spill out and invade our space. With no ground plane to anchor the viewer in most of the work, a sense of vertigo is undertaken as we become unable to comprehend and navigate the space of the compositions.

This alternate environment, different from our own lets us see our possessions in a way we wouldn’t have before. This spectacle of goods that flow out of control serve as a reminder of the obstacles we must navigate through as we lug these items around, despite the fact that they provide a sense of temporary satisfaction. As we contemplate this scenario I hope we begin to realize how much we own as a culture in order to shift the disposition of our contemporary consumer habits.
DEDICATED

I dedicate this thesis and body of work to my family and friends who have given me support and guidance, and who have inspired me throughout the creation of my work.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the faculty at Clemson University, especially those on my committee, Sydney Cross, Todd McDonald, and Christina Hung whose dedication has made this journey possible. Along with my family and friends whose support and encouragement has helped me complete this thesis and body of work.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I create work based on the everyday of my American culture; a culture that seems to be filled with an overabundance of goods that we have much apathy for. Through redisplaying everyday objects I provoke an understanding of life today. The compositions are densely layered and in a state of disarray in order to present a form of contemporary living that goes beyond our daily needs and sustainability. By recreating various domestic objects in the form of prints and putting them on public display, I aim to show how everyday objects occupy an unexpected presence in our lives. I want to show the things that we live with everyday but don’t necessarily see. We hide them away in drawers and closets, or are just so accustomed to seeing them set out that their presence doesn’t register with us anymore. In my prints I’m re-revealing our possessions and asking the viewer to navigate the piles of accumulation.

The readily available items I explore like car keys, hangers, numerous plastic bottles, and computer wires and cords are subjects that capture an essence of what surrounds us. I then manipulate these mundane objects, and transform them into a more symbolic display of contemporary living; one that is filled with fast paced change, and goods in a constant state of flux. The heightened color can at times be unsettling, the compositions unstable, while at the same time everything is smashed together and pushed right up in front of the viewer acting as a reminder of our consumerist condition.
While the main focus of my work is centered on overabundance, my work also overlaps into issues of consumerist waste. The chronic purchasing of new goods and services, with little attention to their true need and durability, leads to wasteful use of this material as it will soon become an environmental consequence. The *Lure of the Local* states “stuff is being used up the way the land once was: consumerism has taken the place of expansionism.” Much like our past imperialistic take over of the land, we continue to take, buy, and accumulate whatever we want without regard of the consequences. In our era of excess our possessions hold very little value and end up being worthless and disposable, yet our standard of living presents them as necessary. We soon run out of room in our homes to store the things we buy. We fill storage units, donate things, and try to resell unwanted stuff, yet the burden of these things still trap us from being free. It seems that in this American society we exert no power to change our habits and accept the reality of our physical space. Ultimately, because of the nature of production and our abundant need to possess unsustainable things, everything we own will at some point become trash.

I execute my work through the medium of printmaking, in which I utilize two different techniques, Lithography and Woodcut, which in a sense has created two different bodies of work. The Woodcuts take on a larger scale creating brightly colored alternate environments that defy logic with massive accumulations of stuff. With no space for the objects or viewer to move, the woodcuts display how we get trapped in our possessions, and environment. Whereas the lithographs are black and white, they are treated with much more delicacy and focus on the individual object. The generic
scenarios created relate more to my nomadic life, and illustrate the constant presence of stuff.

BACKGROUND

Since 2005 I’ve lived a nomadic lifestyle, having lived in 8 different places. I had a completely stable environment growing up in the same house my whole life until I made my first move to college. My first move only lasted about 2 weeks, resulting in pattern of moving into a new space every year. The stability that once was in my life has vanished, resulting in a transient life. In the past years I have become highly aware of the amount of possessions I own, and the clutter they create, as I constantly pack and unpack my life. By leaving things behind and acquiring new purchases every time I move, I’m aware of the fact that each dwelling is never permanent, and keep a collection of empty boxes and storage tubs ready to be filled again. Although most of the same items get boxed up and moved, each residence has taken on a completely different look and feel. My lack of connection to the home has made my everyday generic fragmenting of possessions begin to constitute home, and make meaning of everyday living.

This constant alteration of space and goods forced me to examine what it is we really need to live with or without. The value of objects has ceased to exist with the cheap quality and availability of products. I begin to question why we have so many things for the same purpose, and why products are designed to fail and be trashed for new ones. By remaking our domestic collections for public display, my work evokes its inhabitants
through their very absence illustrating how our possessions become a representation of oneself.

In the course of trying to downsize my life and keep only the things I need, I realize how much I truly own. By examining my possessions, and those of others, I feel that the sense of comfort they once provided ultimately traps us in the end. While having the freedom to move year after year, it eventually becomes tiresome and much less like freedom. Our things have physical weight, bogging us down and make us immobile, which is depicted compositionally in my work. The space is shallow but dense, and the viewer becomes unable to enter the piece and move around freely. They must navigate through the work and visually try to free themselves from the heavy weight of the dense compositions.
CHAPTER TWO

STYLISTIC INFLUENCES

As my work addresses contemporary living, I look toward a variety of different artist such as Rachel Whiteread, Sarah Sze, and Mark Fox in conjunction with the development of my work.

Rachel Whiteread, an artist who has called “recording” the central theme within her work explores the inner life of things and objects. I look toward Whiteread’s portrayal of the object and how she captures the silences of them by portraying the negative spaces under chairs, beds, and the insides of cupboards. She speaks about her work as “they are the kind of banal, household thing we use or move about everyday—so normal and ordinary that they melt into the background and seem unlikely raw material for an artist. Yet they have an intimate bond with our private lives.” Using everyday objects to reveal traces of the human presence, and blending the private and public is what I admire about her work, and use within my own.

One of Whiteread’s primary mediums is casting in clear, often tinted resin. This use of transparency is something that I explore in pieces like Radiant Tumble and Gateway to give the objects more of a temporal quality. Radiant Tumble is a lithograph printed on transparent vellum that contains cut-out pieces falling from within the picture plane. Along with being able to see through the surface of the vellum, the physical
drawing plays with the idea of transparency as it moves between fully rendered dimensional objects to blank items only defined by outlines. At the same time, parts begin to fall out of the bottom left corner liberating themselves from the unstable static frame. Gateway is relief woodblock printed on soft translucent white chiffon. The image of altered space and goods is printed in an off white ink barely visible on the chiffon. The work becomes a delicate ghostly representation of the things that once were. They are no longer part of us, they have faded and become a reminisce of past clutter and confusion.

In Sarah Sze’s work I pull formal and visual cues in how to represent the overwhelming nature of things. Sze creates elaborate systems made from contemporary materials, such as brightly colored plastics and household objects. Her work allows the manufactured objects of our everyday reality to transcend their intended context and create whimsical assemblages that defy gravity. Influenced by architecture Sze succeeds in commenting on the complex networks that define contemporary living. Her dizzying sculptural compositions express an overwhelming sense, much like that of the multi-layered densely packed spaces I create.

Much like Sze I find that in order to convey the notion of our overwhelming modern-day life, the compositions should be flashy and over the top. In my series of large woodcuts, I play up the whimsical by adding patterns and unusual scale to confuse us more. The work seems puzzling just like that of the complex networks in life. I share a common thread with Sze when it comes to the outcome of the work, which forces us to confront the disorder in the world in which we live.
Artist Mark Fox best known for his delicate wall mounted assemblages and works on paper, explores the realm of our culture’s boundless accumulation. The majority of his imagery is grouped using a collage-like sensibility where subtle spatial relationships are formed. His paper cutouts take on the form of lace, while at the same time convey a grand and overwhelming presence. One piece in particular by Fox titled *Dust* shares the same principals of my work, commenting on the burden of possessions by documenting the items around us. As Fox began to feel burdened by the possessions that crowded his studio, he embarked on what he described as a “meditation on ownership.” Using black ink on white paper he drew each of his belongings at full size or larger creating the installation *Dust*. As he meticulously cut out each object, he sometimes wondered if he owned them or they owned him. Since then, he has installed *Dust* twice, each time using a different configuration and selection of drawings.

*Dust* much like my own installation *Whirl Wind* displays an array of cut out domestic objects that takes on the form of a chaotic tornado of stuff. *My Excavation* displays my own burden, much like Fox did with his studio, as it is made up of numerous disordered arrangements throughout my house. *My Excavation* takes on the form of a jumbled closet spilling out into the viewer’s space, while remaining chic and stylish with elegant pattern and appealing pink and green colors. Fox’s drawings and paper cutouts hold the most affiliation with my work as I display the overabundant transient nature of things, as well as present a lifestyle full of stuff we have little regard for.
PLACE IN ART HISTORY

Because of how I compose representational everyday objects my work intersects with the tradition of still life. My work mirrors contemporary living much like that of the Dutch Still Life artists who painted articles of luxury at the time. The depictions of wealth and beauty were often jumbled on top one another, showing the overabundance of goods and consumer trading. Whereas the seventieth century Dutch painters used abundance as a sign to boast about wealth, the abundance I depict reveals a lack of control in our culture and critique of a disposable society.

This unlikely ideal of traditional still life seems to be the most effective medium to portray my critique of the American middle-class way of life, and the advert of readily available consumer goods that come in infinite numbers and reduced quality. However, while remaining in the realm of still life I do deviate from the traditions quite a bit by distorting the amount of objects portrayed, the lack of a set ground plane, and the conventions of scale.

Traditionally Dutch still life paintings would contain imported fruit, wines, and tapestries, along with rare collectables set out and evenly positioned on a table to be admired. I take that language and mutate it by adding hundreds of objects we wouldn’t view as luxury, like an old reclining chair that’s been stuck in the garage, or storage boxes stacked on top one another. The objects I choose are distinct to issues of my time. For instance in almost every piece there are tangled wires, or computer equipment speaking to the role technology plays in life. Empty cartons, bottles, and bags show our
waste, and ubiquitous household items like cleaning products, shoes, clocks, and kitchen utensils present our excess. These multiples of objects get jumbled together and smashed into one flat surface that must get sorted through rather than admired.

All of these things become intersected in a collaged surface that in some cases has no relationship to any set space; tossing them up in the air and spilling them out into the viewer’s space. The objects create a visual path that leads the viewer around the piece through color placement and movement of pattern, yet by subverting the ground plane the stability and organization of the piece becomes disrupted. Because there is no area that grounds the viewer in the work, and because the objects remain in a constant state of disarray the viewer begins to lose touch with reality. This sense of vertigo creates more obstructions in navigating the prints and our lives, leaving us in a state of confusion.

Scale is another factor I alter in my prints like *My Excavation, Wish, Want, and Admire, Excessive Build-up, and Whirl Wind*. Here the scale goes beyond still life and creates an environment that is meant to be over the top. The scale of the work also points to amount of labor and time invested in the prints. Ironically, my process is actually more labor intensive than the manufacturing process of the items I’m depicting.

Much like the Dutch painters, Cubism and Pop Art also share a link with my work as they both often made collages and assemblages of everyday objects. My brightly colored objects reference that of the glorified products of the new consumer society of the 1960’s. By using repetition and redrawing items, I eliminate all personality within them, which coincides with the Pop Art movement of Andy Warhol. Where Warhol’s obsession
with stuff and commodity culture was a celebration of label, I show the cheapness of manufacturing and excess creating in a sense ‘un-pop’ art. The ‘un-pop’ that I create shows the other side of consumerism; left over detritus and landfills. We then begin to have a different understanding of our lack of control in consuming products.

Visually the work also shows signs of Cubism with its flattened space, bright colors, and illogical compositions. This collapse of time and space that happens in Cubism as well as in my work can be seen in the print *Discombobulated Medley*. Here everything exists in the same space; there is no clearly defined fore, middle or background, causing the disassociated matter to become connected and linked to one another displaying a topsy-turvy form that seems to swirl up and topple over at the same time.

As my work carries a sense of unity and transformation, it also provokes an unexpected experience of visual pleasure and meaning, by utilizing elements like attractive colors, and stimulating patterns. I transform individual objects we wouldn’t necessarily deem as worthy into lavish works of art in order to bring attention to our consumerist condition. It is through appealing elements and my own formal academic training in art that I purposefully create alluring work that puzzles the viewer, and turns our common domestic goods into viable subjects.
Visually the work is a shallow disarranged space where navigation becomes a key feature in how the work operates. The function and placement of the objects become removed from their original context through fragmenting, color, and elaborate patterns. This makes parts unrecognizable and obscured by one another, while at the same time creating a complex surface that defies gravity and logic. The compression of space pushes everything together and up against the viewer so it must be undertaken all at once; however, it can’t be understood in an instant and goes beyond our capacity to process and control what’s going on to where the work begins to function like camouflage. Patterns are often mixed in to confuse us even more about the space and provide yet another surface element we must deduce. In some work it’s hard to tell where the pattern ends and the objects begin, as the motifs and forms function against one another pushing and pulling in and out within the configuration of stuff. Bright colors add an energized, almost unsettling acidity to the work, while the constant flux of goods reference stimuli in American culture like flashes on a television screen, bright showy ads on billboards, and numerous pop up windows on a computer monitor.

The work Wish, Want and Admire, transforms our everyday clutter and trash into a decorative work of art. Arabesque patterns and brightly colored objects are stacked one on top of another flat against the picture plane. This large four by six foot
woodcut attracts and engulfs the viewer. I use decoration as a way to take the objects out of their normal context, beautify and mystify them, while at the same time masking the banality. In this piece one must navigate through the items and decipher what we recognize as our own, discarded trash, or pattern. The appearance of the work has the impression of all the objects spilling out of the trash pile on top. The empty boxes, cleaning products, and shoes become linked together by swirling pattern and saturated color. At the same time this work can also give the illusion that the trash pile on top recedes back into space leaving more room for things to be piled on. The objects within are those acquired without a conscious thought, such as hangers, utensils, and books reflecting our condition of living of always wanting more, and our nature to discard them without a second thought swelling landfills with products that fail.

Historically the spiral was used for “common purposes on objects of use.” Adding spirals and curvilinear patterns into the compositions complements the domestic objects weaved through out the work. I seduce the viewer through wallpaper like patterns as a way to draw them in only to reveal conflicting ideas beneath. Pattern is described as “devices once used singly or scattered in loose disorder, which are now being deliberately arranged in rhythmic sequences.” I use the contrasting element of arranged sequences to provide stability and order in the disarranged chaos of stuff. It’s this order out of the disorder that holds the two diverse components together and allows it to function rhythmically.
Although patterns are inserted to beautify the work, I also use them to mock the items embedded within our lives. Instead of achieving plain simplicity, the decoration and patterns are scattered all over adding distraction and elevating the objects and their desire for collection. The essay *Ornament and Crime* states that ornament is not a source of increased pleasure in life. I feel that if we see something that is pretty and decorative we are programmed to want it rather than focusing on what purpose the item serves, or its quality, we get it because it looks nice. In my prints I use decorative pattern to do just the same, to confuse us about what is really being displayed. By blurring the boundary between clutter and ornament, the viewing pleasure increases, but adds nothing to the objects and weighted burden felt by them.

*Excessive Build-Up* displays the things we don’t want anymore; old clothes and toys, outdated computers and exercise equipment, and plates and cups that all try to get resold via yard sales and thrift stores. The overall structure of the piece seems to conform to gravity at the bottom, as junk gets crammed into bags and boxes it remains hidden and stacked on top of one another like we would see in a garage or storage unit. Yet as we move up the piece and throughout the work the structure soon starts to topple out of control. Surrounded by a lantern below and yellow flood lights above, the pile continues to grow moving back in space with shelves of cups, glasses and a section of jumbled goods. The intense yellow, blue and red colors provide a lush surface that the designs intertwine throughout. This piece also has the added element of two different patterns interacting with one another and with the goods. Much like the other larger scale
woodcuts this one takes a look at our domestic trash that is not yet in a landfill, but waiting in storage because we don’t have the need or room for them anymore.

These large woodcuts are meant to dazzle and surprise. Being six foot tall they stand much larger than the majority of us, and begin to surround us and command a presence in our environment, much like the overwhelming junk they depict. The surface needs time to navigate and deduce, just like the process of creating it. The physical process of reductive woodcut allows me to strip away information layer by layer in order to slowly reveal the image until it’s all carved away. This process of a reduction is physically demanding, producing work that becomes a direct extension of myself. The scale is much larger than myself, providing a physical space I can get lost in. The labor becomes intense yet relaxing as I escape and meander in and out of the surface, having to sit on top of the block, navigate around, and crawl across the surface of the wood. Since printmaking allows me to create several copies of each print the work can theoretically be mass produced just like the goods it’s referring to in the compositions, yet the printmaking process actually is much more labor intensive than the manufacturing process of the goods I’m representing. Much like the material of wood I’m using to create my images, which is rarely used to produce any of the products we own.

The woodcut *Happiness* mixes articles of luxury like chandeliers, high priced purses, and multiple cars which begin to be seen just like the rest of the ordinary junk. Stacked on top and next to one another old shoes, a stuffed animal, lamp, and tea cups take on the appearance of yard sale table that begins to move back into space where a row
of storage units becomes filled, or the items get dumped off into the pile of trash in the foreground. Here the wood grain and knots add elements of movement that swirls us through the composition and into the background. The use of one point perspective gives a sense of infinite as this sea of luxury that is supposed to make us happy, eventually fades of into incomprehensible nothingness in the top right corner.

I created an installation of cut-out lithographs titled Whirl Wind. This work combines three different lithographic techniques consisting of stone lithography, plate lithography, and pronto plate. I choose this slight variety to provide different mark making and range of tonal quality to the objects, as well as to allow for deeper space and focal points in areas where the items become darker. The hand drawn nature of lithography provides a genial drawing sensibility in which I could render objects life size in order to give a sense that they were in fact real objects one could go up and touch, only to recognize that they were completely inaccessible. All the items are made generic, stripping it of its personality, shadows, labels, and fixed viewpoint. The black and white quality of the drawings also provides no hierarchy between objects; each one requires the same amount of attention and puts all the items on the same level. Displaying a culture that depends on so many things, no one object is more important then the next. It all sits at the same level of the requirements of daily life.

The installation Whirl Wind is made up of several different items cut out and installed somewhat conforming to gravity and having no structural basis. The objects are free floating and balance off one another, while still having a sense of weight which
could soon give way to the entire structure. The items are things we use everyday: forks, doorknobs, books, sunglasses, and a toaster. When installed they take on the form of a tornado like structure spinning and tossing the objects in the air. Things get turned upside down, flipped and seem to tumble out of one another and funnel down to the ground. Through the process of printmaking I create multiples of each item giving me the possibility to create different scenarios and structures each time the work gets assembled and taken down. The work gets reconfigured to fit each new space relating to the real items getting packed and unpacked and rearranged in each new place I enter.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

My work explores the everyday and mass consumption to comment on our current state of living. While examining my own nomadic life over the last six years I came to realize the amount of possessions I had accumulated and the clutter they create. As a result I became aware that contemporary living in general is a culture clogged with an excess of stuff that surpasses sustainability.

Through this awareness, I create work that subverts the conventions of still life and in a sense creates ‘un-pop’ art, which does not celebrate consumerism; rather it shows our lack of control in acquiring cheaply made goods. By means of woodcut and lithography, I create prints that critique my American middle-class culture’s need to possess things, and show a bombardment of shifting goods and styles that too often become waste. My cluttered compositions and collaged based style removes the objects I depict from their original context and transforms them through fragmenting, color, and patterns. I take away any personality and labeling from the objects making them generic, and add in elegant pattern to confuse the viewer about what’s really being displayed. By blurring the line between ornament and clutter, the repetitive motifs in some of the work give a sense that there is structure concealed within the uneasy mess as they begin to swirl out of our control.
Through my prints I alter our notion of domestic clutter and provoked an unexpected experience by adding unity, and alluring color and designs. By creating these lavish works of art, I present our discarded items for contemplation and ask the viewer to subjectively view them as viable subject matter in art. It is through my prints that I hope a realization is made in how our lives operate; how we have too many things and have created a value system that is too causal in caring for our possessions.
FIGURES
Figure 1: *Radiant Tumble*

Lithograph on vellum, 36’x 42’’ 2011
Figure 2: Gateway (Detail)

Woodcut on chiffon 4’x6’, 2011
Figure 3: *Whirl Wind*

Lithograph, 2010
Figure 4: *My Excavation*

Woodcut 4’x 6’, 2011
Figure 5: Wish, Want, and Admire

Woodcut 4’x 6’, 2011
Figure 6: Excessive Build-up

Woodcut 4’x6’, 2011
Figure 7: *Discombobulated Medley*

Woodcut 8.5”x 11”, 2011
Figure 8: *Happiness*

Woodcut, 18”x24”, 2011


