

“Mon Valley Mud: The Reinvestment of What Has Been Left Behind”

An Honors Thesis

by

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We hereby approve the Honors Thesis of

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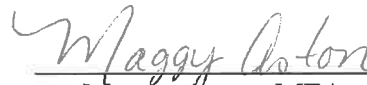
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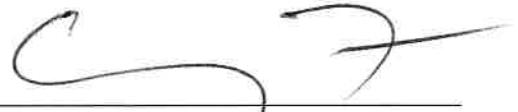
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The exhibition, which has been set forth in the Manderino Library Gallery in March of 2020 by Joe Carter, is a tripartite show which has been titled, “Mon Valley Mud: The Reinvestment of What Has Been Left Behind.” It is serving as his senior studio, and honors thesis. The work has all been completed in the last year and presents a cohesive body of work that has been produced in addition to his standard studio work. There is a ceramic, photographic, and a written informational handout, all of which together allow for an analysis of the meaning, intent, and purpose of the show.

The ceramic section is the most prominent, as it is off the walls, on gallery stands, withholding a few exceptions. The forms that are present include vases, jars, pitchers, and platters. All made from a dark stoneware, the pieces are scattered throughout the gallery and show similar themes of alteration and surface decoration. Like entasis in a column, all of the pieces have a top and bottom smaller than the center but to varying degrees and proportions. Very familiar in shape and silhouette, but in volume they have been altered. A press in here, a swipe there, all of which are marks of the maker, easily imagined being done, which have the potential to keep an engaged viewer guessing and looking. The pitchers have large handles, and full beaklike spouts. Lines have been incised in irregular overlapping spirals up the forms, dancing in and out of the distortions in form. On handles and spouts the incisions have been added in a manner which invites the viewer to look at the attachments in a way that lines up the surface decoration on the main body of the piece. This invitation to manipulate the location of a piece in space in relation to oneself in order to create these connections in surface decoration suggests a sense of playfulness and interaction.

Some of the pieces have had a dark, white, or tonally the same as the clay body slip applied as decoration which has been applied in various broken ovoids around the indentations. The semi-circles, like the distortions, have a simple physicality to them. Brush marks are easily seen near the end of their movement where they run thin, and some show textural marks within the body of their form. Secondly, they call attention to the distortions through a simple, child-like circling, such as an error in an arithmetic problem. The circling calls out the alterations in various intensities through slip selection. Slip is also, when applied to the vases, applied down the length of a groove in the handle, calling attention to the distortion that has been provided for the hand of the viewer. The incised lines have also been called out by the application of slip. In some places, the slip fills the line, breaking its flow and continuity around the piece. In other places, the slip skips over, allowing the line to flow, thus breaking the circular motion of the brush stroke.

Glaze has been applied to the pieces in a couple of different ways. Some pieces have been completely covered, the full height of the piece. Others have had glaze applied in multiple gradually widening streaks up the piece, nearly reaching the bottom. Lastly, a large portion of the pieces have had glaze applied in a wrapping, dripping manner; this envelopment tends to start on one side with rivulets wrapping around the swelling body of the piece, ending by petering out, reaching the bottom of the piece, or ending in a glassy bead. Similar to the slip, emphasis on the distortions may also come from glaze application. Pools form and flow out of the depressions, while avoiding the high points, pushed out from the interior. Rivers of glaze flow along the incised lines, and then break the line and flow in other directions.

The glazes themselves are all, at the least, slightly different, but share a few traits. All of the glazes are rough to some degree, with a sandy quality. There are some which are glossy, and some which are matte. Colors represented include glossy olive green, glossy green with streaks of blue, matte black, sandy and multicolored, light brown, and glossy dark brown. In some cases, the roughness has begun to melt out, creating dots of glassy white. Some areas of glaze which pass over the applied white slip show a leading line of salmon-y orange. Though the glazes are largely organic, natural colors, what may be considered dull, the glazes being the only color in the gallery cause a visual draw and impact on the viewer is still possible.

As well made and thought out as these pieces are, ceramics is still a field that may not be considered art. In Plato's *Republic*, he refuses to refer to anything that could be considered "craft" to be an art form¹. While we have come far from the days of Plato, it is still important that a good argument is made for it being artwork. It could furthermore be argued that this should always be questioned when presented with something such as this. The pieces are in a location which generally is used as a presentation space for artwork. Pieces have been thoughtfully made, decorated, and arranged such that they are pleasant to view, or at the very least may be easily viewed. If the literary purview is pushed into the more recent centuries, specifically to the writings of Erwin Panofsky then we have another way of arguing that these pieces are artwork. He sets forth that artwork is artwork because it has aesthetic experience, and demands to be experienced aesthetically².

¹ Plato, *Republic, Book X*, (Letchworth: Bradda Books).

² Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press), 10-11.

We as humans alone are the composers of objects for purely aesthetic joy. It must first be noted that all of the work in this exhibition is of shape and form with traditional household function. Pitchers for drinks and platters for serving have culinary function. Jars may be used for food storage however, that is not necessary. Lastly, vases, which are the most fundamentally aestheticizing forms as their use is but that of the presentation of flowers or sprigs of other organic matter which we use to decorate the spaces we inhabit. Though some of the pieces have functional usage, the pieces certainly appear to have been composed in an aesthetically informed way. Far from commercially produced slip-cast ceramics, the pieces have had physical work and compositional thought put into them. They are interesting to look at and thus may institute cause for a lengthier investigation of each piece. These pieces, which are decidedly art due to the compositional and aesthetic thought evident within the object, have the possibility to lead the viewer to an initial decision on meaning of the work due to their most basal compositional components.

Guy Debord in “Writings from the Situationist International,” writes of the “*dérive*” or drifting³. His idea is that by letting one’s consciousness drift a psychogeographical observation may be made. Psychogeographical observation is the observation of the layout or features within one's own mind. This method of interior discovery may be applied to the way in which one observes a composition, letting your eyes and mind drift over the piece in whichever way they may be inherently pulled. Furthermore, Debord states that this sort of drifting compositional analysis may be encouraged by the diminution of border regions. The compositional elements of

³ Guy Debord, “Writings from the Situationist International,” (Blackwell Publishing) 703-704.

all the ceramic pieces lend themselves to this process of visual drifting. Like a spot-the-difference exercise, the use of well-known forms and silhouettes gives the viewer the opportunity to more easily relax the eye and notice what is different.

One of the things that may be noticed first within the pieces in the gallery, is the distorted, pushed forms. There are voids, and forceful distended swells from the interior and exterior of the pieces. One may see these alterations from the exterior, or interior which may elicit a further investigation of the forms far side. In some cases, these alterations make space for where it is suggested a human include themselves in the form, specifically in voids left for hands to grip. It is hard for one to stay focused on the first region found, as the overlapping layers of surface decoration, incised lines, slip, glaze, run together to pull the eye in many different directions.

These overlapping elements also lead into the diminution of border regions. Where one decoration may be lacking, another takes over to pull the eye past to the next area of high composition, giving a rhythmic push and pull across the vessel. While these sections do not allow for initial fixation, it is important to remember that there are two more sections within the gallery.

The photographic section is dotted across the walls of the gallery. Photographs are all black and white printed on a glossy metallic paper. Within the prints, subject matter varies from picture to picture, but all the photographs were taken in areas in which sediment was collected. There are images of the Monongahela river with the surrounding foliage, and reflections on the water. Some images show a dilapidated building, with graffiti abounding on the walls, and jutting steel emanates from crumbling sections of wall. Other photos show a still operating

power plant, with cooling towers spewing a white cloud stand in a picturesque rolling landscape. The photos overall show natural beauty, decay, and the progress of man.

Photography, like ceramics, has been a hotly debated part of the art world since its introduction. Walter Benjamin, a scholar on modernity, wrote, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” In this, he analyzes photography, among other things, which have become possible due to mechanical reproduction and whether or not he views them as works of art. One of his concerns with mechanically reproduced works such as photography or film, that we would now generally view as art, is that they demand no concentration for the viewer but are rather just distractions⁴. I would argue that these works are much more than distractions, but rather informational storytelling devices with which we can begin to piece together the meaning of this exhibition. This is in stark contrast to what reproduction has done to ceramics. Ceramics mass reproduction for capitalistic means may be inherently democratizing due to the power of supply and demand. That is, those pieces which are inherently more fit for the market, those that have been labeled as capitalistically good due to the profit gained by them as chosen by the consumer, will be produced at a higher rate when compared to those not chosen by the consumer. They represent nothing other than the object that they are, and thus are not affected by reproduction in the same way as the photography present in the exhibition.

The works of photography display, in their subject matter, things which people largely avoid looking at or thinking about, though they are so close to people’s homes and recreational spaces. By putting them on display, in all their glossy well-lit glory, the viewer is forced to

⁴ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (Blackwell Publishing) 522-524.

notice the destruction adjacent to their homes, encouraged to trace the rubble of these past industries, and view the monolithic towers which still spew clouds into the air. Photographs today are reminders, representations of what was there the day the photo was taken, and is still there, in many cases. Exhibited within them is what has been left behind by humanity. Furthermore, the skeletons within these portraits are the corpses of giants which once drove and energized decades of mechanical production, so it is fitting, poetic even, that they be remembered through mechanical reproduction.

Their lack of color and decrepit stillness create a Kantian sublimeness⁵. The eye is presented the existence of quantity as opposed to quality which Immanuel Kant regards as being the difference between beauty and sublime⁶. It may be seen how many buildings and areas are in decay, and how much is rusting away in those spaces. The behemoths found within these pictures call to mind the wonders of the world, wonders of negative impact. An anti-wonder like nature at all the destruction humanity has caused in this region. Awe is felt at humanity's ability to create and leave behind such structures. Secondly, nature's ability to slowly chip back away at these structures is considered. Photos of crumbling walls, and glass covered riverbanks remind the viewer that eventual rot and destruction is what comes next for the still operating structures.

Whether or not it is art due to its level of reproduction, the photography demands to be aesthetically viewed. It asks to be viewed as such more strongly than the ceramics due to its lack of functional nature. Like the glazes on the ceramics, the photos shine in the light of the gallery in which they have been hung. Care has obviously been made in their composition and

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, (Hafner Pub. Co.), 103-106.

⁶ Ibid

production. The colorless nature of them draws the eye with visual weight and form, leading lines, and areas of focus versus out of focus. All of this starts to form an idea on what this exhibition is about, but further information is needed, and offered.

So often, works of art may be completely lost on the viewer without some background information, which may come from biographical information relating to the artist, but more often, whether found plastered on the walls or in an associated writing, it comes from information given in the gallery. Writings in the informational handout at the show start to give a clearer picture of the reasons for, and what meanings to extract from the work. Within the handout is a map of the Monongahela river watershed and on it are locations which have been highlighted. The indicated locations are areas of current, or past industrial usage. Within the writings in the handout is a chart containing chemical analyses of sediment samples taken from these locations. The chemical analyses focus on metallic oxide content of the samples.

Most importantly though, the handout indicates which pictures are from which locations, and which glazes use which sediments from which locations. Some notes on the glaze testing and production are included. Made largely from local materials, the glazes are simple and use only three ingredients, two of which are from the surrounding area. Local ingredients are river sediment from post-industrial sites and towns within the Monongahela watershed, as well as local wood ash collected from a wood stove in the area. Custer Feldspar is the only non-local ingredient used in the glazes as a local material that would have a similar effect was not able to be located.. Also noted within the handout is some information about the photography. It is stated that all the photo work was done on film, developed in an environmentally friendly

developer called “Caffenol.” By utilizing the information presented in the handout, we are able to have a more careful analysis of the work presented.

Now with all the pieces of this exhibition together, as Stanley Cavell suggests, we can properly follow them to a well thought out conclusion on meaning⁷. After the final addition of the written materials, it may be suggested to some extent that this work is about the destruction of the idea of the two half cultures. The idea of the two half cultures is the idea that in the world there are fundamentally two parts, the humanities and science, with art falling within the humanities. Schapiro suggests that this is only an issue because of the antagonism between the two parts⁸. By including a section of the work that gives exact scientific data relating to the materials used in the production, the scientific culture is represented. Furthermore, the process used for obtaining the final glazes used on the ceramic work could largely be viewed as a scientific one with careful measurements and repeated testing.

Using such careful notes and results may lead the viewer of this exhibition to see it as a peace-making gesture. It could be seen as though this exhibit is but a step towards the melding of the two half-cultures. Certainly, the use of two art mediums which have been historically contested as nothing more than craft by Plato and mechanical reproduction by Benjamin, could lead the viewer to imagine that the work is all about using gray areas, cultural and artistic, to create a space for inbetweens and bring together disparate values. While it is important to note

⁷ Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: a Book of Essays*, (Cambridge University Press), 198.

⁸ Meyer Schapiro, *Worldview in Painting: Art and Society: Selected Papers*, (G. Braziller) 158-160.

these gray areas are found throughout the exhibition, there are more important ideas hidden within the show, which are elucidated, once again, in the informational writings.

In order to identify what is most important about this exhibition, it is relevant to note what is changing most from piece to piece as indicated within the handout, and by viewing the exhibition. Form is certainly changing but what changes more importantly is the glaze composition. Within the glaze composition, where the sediment is coming from changes most often. This sediment has been collected and processed from sites in which industrial processes occur, or once occurred. What has been left behind by the people and processes which once happened there have been collected, processed, analyzed and used for glaze. Using wastes of industrial mechanical production seems important because there is absolutely no reason to do that under normal circumstances. Something is certainly trying to be said with this material usage. It is difficult, time consuming, and wildly inefficient in time input of the artist when compared the purchase of standard glaze materials. On top of that they are not even perfectly smooth glossy glazes, and because of this, it seems there must be a reason. Within artwork with so much time input, and attention to composition, if something seems off, it is most likely because something is and it is intended to be noticed.

Indexical signs may be described as crumbs of humanity, and in this case the crumbs are sediment. Rosalind Krauss, writing in, "Notes on the Index, Part 1," notes, regarding the function of the index, "it operates to substitute the registration of sheer physical presence for the more highly articulated language of aesthetic conventions."⁹ If we view these sediments as an index of the industry, then it makes these glazes, and the pieces it has been applied to a further extension

⁹ Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index, Part 1," "Blackwell Publishing" 999.

of that index. In that same vein, and using Krauss' reasoning, it makes the glazes a substitute for the sheer presence of these industrial sites. By having these pieces in a gallery surrounded by images of these sites the idea is further bolstered. Direct representations, through photography, of the sites which the indexical signs used within the glazes are taking the place of physically, further bring the idea and presence of these sites into the purview of the audience.

Industrial sites such as these could also be viewed as monuments in their current state, with the photographs bolstering this idea. They are represented in full form, with intricacies coming out; large and hung on the wall, they are imposing in their monotone contrast. Their existence can be seen as inherently offensive. Society allowed these businesses and corporations to build on these lands, pollute, and leave behind their waste. In changing these left behind scraps to being something good, useful, and beautiful they are once again used. Titus Kaphar suggests that in order to gain power of the memories and monuments of the pain and suffering that has come before, we must alter it without pure erasure¹⁰. If we extrapolate the idea of the indexical sign taking place of the physical object, these ceramics are taking the wastes which have been left behind, and remake it into a form that is not free in the environment to travel, being taken up into environments in ways we do not know. Usage of the waste of such impersonal mechanical industries in the production of something made by hand is a strong message which can lead to an idea of what the exhibition means.

Guy Debord's writings, once again, give more insight into the meaning of this work. While his writings on the "dérive" give some possible explanation for the surface treatments, his writings also give some context for what this usage of industrial sediment can mean. In

¹⁰ Titus Kaphar, "Can art amend history?," *Ted Talk*.

Debord's, "Writings from the Situationist International," he speaks of the usage and power of detournement, or reinvestment of the cultural past¹¹. In this particular case, the cultural past is the industries that have supported the communities in the area, while simultaneously underpaying the worker, irreversibly harming them for profit margins, and raping the land. Though it is not pretty, it is the historical culture of the industry and, by proximity, the people in this area. Industrial subjugation ran rampant, and all that is left on this Appalachian plateau is a deeply troubled people, the skeletons of industrial sites, and the detrital effluence. By reinvesting these locations and indexes, the artist, as Debord suggests, negates the previous cultural past while, as Kaphar cautions against, not erasing it¹².

The river flows through these communities and unites a culture which has been spurned by all that created them. These works and exhibit mean to unite these people, and call to attention what this culture is built on, while looking forward to a future in which the people may reinvest what has been left behind through the use of who they are, and what they walk on: Mon Valley Mud.

¹¹ Debord, "Writings from the Situationist International," 704-705.

¹² Kaphar, "Can art amend history?"

On The Format and Tone of this Writing

This writing was written as though a third party was reviewing the work in order to make me, as the author-artist, fully look at the work in the same way that a viewer would. Furthermore, in doing so I allow myself to more honestly see if my work is achieving what I desire as the artist. Secondly, it allows me to apply methods of writing art critique which I have studied and worked on in my time spent during my undergraduate studies. The overall hope being that through looking at my work in this way I may make a more convincing argument for what I believe the work to mean.

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