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Fashionable Art

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A selected project submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

Fashionable Art

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My final thesis exhibition, Fashionable Art, opens up a link between art and fashion. I used clay as my primary medium to create hyper-realistic handbags in the style of Trompe l’oeil. I am interested in placing art in fashion settings and fashion in art settings. In the show, I placed many purses on pedestals for a gallery setting, in a glass case for a purse shop setting and also placed large photos in a fashion photo shoot setting. I am concerned with creating an environment that celebrates the handbag from just an accessory to an art object. By using clay as my primary media, the purse becomes a more permanent representation. I am able to freeze in time a small piece of our cultural timeline.

I am interested in creating these hyper-realistic works because I want the viewer to be led into thinking these are real purses and to explore the idea of fashion being more than just a piece of clothing or accessory, but also the history and affect it has on each of us, big or small.

Keywords: handbags, purses, trompe l’oeil, hyper-realistic, fashion, clay, ceramics
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INTRODUCTION

My final exhibition, *Fashionable Art*, is the result of four years of exploring the style of ‘Trompe L’oeil’ ceramic art and handbags. During this time, I expanded my technical skills and my knowledge of handbag fashion and history. I explored the ideas of consumerism and materialism, but eventually became interested in the link between art and fashion and using the medium of ceramics to create permanent forms of fashion. I visited high-end handbag shops and researched popular styles of the times. My final exhibition is a consequence of this research. I desired to recreate one of those shops and in juxtaposition created another space with an art gallery setting. In this paper I will outline four aspects of my final exhibition: history, process, influences and contextualization.

HISTORY

Purse History

The history of the purse goes back thousands of years and started out with being a man’s accessory. Purses have always been a sign of status and wealth. They were meant to hold the men’s gold and were worn by the rich. As time went on, women began using small purses to hold keys, pincushions and toiletries.

“When women assumed new roles outside the home—as workers, wage earners, students, and travelers—their handbags changed relatively rapidly from dainty trifles to serious objects.” ¹ The size and utility of the purse changed with the issues and needs of

¹ Hagerty, Barbara G. S. *Handbags: A Peek inside a Woman's Most Trusted Accessory.*
the times. They got bigger during WWII because women began working outside the home in factories and needed the bag to be larger so they could carry their needs for their day away from home. In the 1960-70s they became an expression of freedom and personal style for women. In the 1980s, women began to storm the male dominated workforce and women’s power suits and small expensive leather purses became a women’s necessity. Today, the purse is still a symbol of status and wealth, but is more attainable for most any woman. Many lower class women will go into debt or save all their money just to buy a purse. There are websites that rent designer handbags for those who can’t afford to pay the exorbitant prices. It seems that the purse still to this day fulfills some of the purposes it did thousands of years ago.

*Trompe L’oeil Style History*

The challenge of illusion can be great. Trompe l’oeil is a genre of art that recreates reality through the use of materials to possess photographic realism. Found both in two-dimensional and three-dimensional works, earliest examples are found in paintings dated back to the 1500s in Italy and later in Northern Europe. Careful construction of linear perspective and shallow picture planes explores the sense of how depth adds to deception. Invisible execution is essential to the success of one of these works. The goal is for the viewer to not be distracted by brushstrokes, tool marks or

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fingerprints. The deception will occur when the object is so skillfully produced that the viewer is momentarily deceived.

**Personal History**

From the moment I developed motor skills I was creating. When I was only nine months old, I somehow escaped from my crib, climbed onto the kitchen counter and began my creative process. I peeled all the bananas, squirted hand lotion all over them and took an orange marker and drew a work of art next to the lotion-covered bananas. I started with simple wall drawings in my crib and mud pies in the backyard and eventually progressed to realistic clay purses. Because of these early expressions of creativity, I was often placed in art classes and given art supplies as gifts. This helped me focus on my creativity and develop a love for the arts.

I instantly fell in love with ceramics when I took my first class in high school. As I entered college I started taking all the art classes available. It was there I took more ceramic and sculpture classes. The assignment that led to my eventual decision to make purses in grad school was my first Trompe l’oeil project. I choose to make a floppy rain hat. When I gave it to my grandparents for Christmas that year they were fooled by the piece and it made me feel like I had accomplished something that nobody else I knew could.

My Bachelor of Fine Art final show was small, but cohesive. I used the ‘Trompe L’oeil’ style of work and created 15 pieces that I textured and colored to look like cloth
materials hanging over faces (see Image 1 & 2). I had several people get upset over the work because they actually thought it was a bunch of rags. I was hurt at first that people didn’t like what I was doing, but I realized it was the best compliment I could have received. I accomplished my goal of successfully making clay look like another material.

Graduate school at BYU-Provo started out slow. I hadn’t touched clay in over a year and had no direction. A suggestion by Professor Von Allen got the ball rolling. She asked what was the last thing I made in clay. I remembered a trompe l’oeil purse I made and that’s what I’ve made ever since.

As long as I can remember, I have always been drawn to tedious and repetitive tasks. I never thought about why I like to do them, but looking back and thinking about how I feel when I’m putting painstaking designs on these bags, I find a peace or feeling of relaxation. It seems to be a form of meditation for me, to repeat the motions and not have to think about it. Perhaps, it allows me to channel my OCD tendencies and perfectionism into a tangible form. I try to perfect or add a new element to each purse I make. Each new one seems to slightly improve from the last. Seeing the older bags I’ve made pushes me to keep improving and challenging my abilities.

PROCESS

Over the years, I have begun to perfect the techniques of creating hyper realistic purses. Ceramic artist, Marilyn Levine, who studied chemistry in college, developed a process of adding nylon fiber to her clay to make it stronger and more capable of holding
Professor Allen suggested I start using nylon fibers in my clay when I started to attempt making realistic purses. This gives me the opportunity to make them larger and thinner. I wedge in about 1-2% chopped nylon fibers into wet clay. The fibers burn out of the clay in the bisque firing and leave the purse even lighter. Because the fibers burn, it is necessary to bisque fire in a gas kiln or the fibers would quickly break down the coils in the electric kilns.

I use the slab technique to create each purse. I roll out large chunks of clay on a slab roller to about a ¼ of an inch. Then I lay it out to dry enough that it is able to stand without being crushed by its own weight. Timing is important when drying the clay. Too dry will create cracks and too wet will make it unable to hold its shape. I cut out the shapes necessary to make the design I chose and then begin to attach them together. I continually keep the clay malleable by spraying it with water and keeping it tightly covered until I’m ready to start carving in the designs and details.

When I first starting making the purses years ago I used acrylic paints because they were easier to control and gave a matte leathery look I was searching for. It worked, but I needed something more permanent and so I took on the challenge of finding glazes that would simulate the look of leather. After searching over hundreds of glazes and testing many of them, I found commercial satin glazes that produced the look I want.

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The surface detail usually takes the most time. I hand carve all the designs and sometimes I have to go over the same spot multiple times to get the right depth. I attempted to find molds I could press patterns into the clay with, but the detail didn’t look as real as when I carved the detail myself. The purse, “Jaen”, took about 25 hours in the creation of the crocodile skin texture (see Image 3). ‘Vivian’ took several hours of carving to get the look of overlapped layers (see Image 4). The designs are inspired by high-end handbags from companies such as Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Coach, Hermes, Gucci and Prada. Of which, I have spent hours of research their websites online looking for new styles to recreate.

INFLUENCES

There are many ceramic artists that use the Trompe l’oeil style in their art. Those that do it are flawless at what they do. Marilyn Levine was the first ceramic artist I learned about when I was in high school that used the Trompe l’oeil style. Her work had been in the back of my mind ever since. She used to make leather bags, suitcases, jackets, shoes, and gloves (see Image 5 & 6). Levine chose to give her work the look of distressed leather to seem as if they had been used and worn by someone. This created a narrative for her work. I’ve chosen to make my work look like it is in pristine condition. The state it would be at a shop before being owned. It was a conscious effort on my part to do this and is the central way it differs from Levine’s work. She was highly skilled and I aspired to be as good as her. I recently saw a piece of hers at a local gallery. I was disappointed when I saw that she used actual metal claps on the ‘suitcase’ rather than the whole work
being made of clay. It makes me even more determined to excel in this style and push the limits of clay.

Other ceramic artists such as David Furman (see Image 7), Victor Spinski (see Image 8), Sylvia Hyman (see Image 9) and Richard Shaw (see Image 10) are specialized in Trompe l’oeil style. I’ve found that many of these ceramic artists and others working in the Trompe l’oeil style use molds, either from actual objects or created from works they have previously make. I haven’t used molds to create anything with my purses. I did make a mold of a high heel shoe, but I prefer too much to complete the whole process with only my hands.

I am far from being equal to their skill, but I am confident as I continue down this path I will one day rival them. Hyman said, “Not only do I want to fool the eye, but every sense.” This seems to be a common desire for artists working in the style of Trompe l’oeil.

**CONTEXTUALIZATION**

Through my research about purses, I learned about the process of designing bags and what makes an ‘It’ bag. An ‘It’ bag is a purse that everyone wants before it even becomes available and then becomes a classic that will be popular and purchased for many years to come. There are two features every ‘It’ bag shares. One, it has a distinct

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feature that makes the brand instantly identifiable. Second, it is marked with the company brand (see Image 11-14). I’ve come up with my own monogram to put on each of the bags I make. I combined my initials L and K to create this monogram (see Image 15).

Purses can be used as an expression of a woman’s personal style. Owning a beautiful thing can give you feelings of happiness. To me, a designer handbag can be a beautiful work of art. The process of creating a bag alone is similar to creating art in other medias. These bags are hand crafted, use the finest of materials and use the elements of design just as an artist would while creating a painting or sculpture.

Research for my MFA show included visiting Las Vegas, Nevada several times to visit the many high-end handbag shops. I took ideas of how they displayed the purses, talked to many sale associates about each brand’s designs and the quick turn around of fashion design. One shop had a very classic Victorian set up and I was instantly drawn to it (see Image 16). For my show, I rented furniture, a large rug, curtains and a large ornate mirror to create a space in the gallery to resemble this shop setting.

I wanted to create a stronger narrative with fashion, so I coordinated a fashion shoot with models and my clay purses to create wall photos and a catalogue like the ones used by these high-end shops. The fashion shoot took hours of preparation and help from a dozen people to complete the task. I had to find a photographer, several models, hair and make up artists, borrow props, secure locations, and transportation. The actual shoot

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took 10 hours to complete and most everything came together smoothly. It was surprising to me how complex planning and executing a photo shoot could be. Out of 1,200 photos, I choose eight to be blown up to 24 X 36 inches and placed on the gallery walls (see Image 17, Image 18). I choose about 20 other photos and created a ‘store catalogue’ to place in my ‘shop.’

CONCLUSION

My MFA final show was a play on fashion as art. Creating purses out of clay gives me the opportunity to elevate the status of the handbag from just an accessory to an art object by placing them on pedestals and installing them in galleries (see Image 19, Image 20,21,22, Image 23,24). By sculpting the clay to look as if it is a real handbag, I am also able to place them in a fashion setting. I set up a fashion photo shoot with models and my clay purses. This made it possible to create a dialog between the art object and fashion object connecting them. The untouched look of these bags gives them the appearance of being a brand new bag in a shop setting, which blurs the line between perception and reality (see Image 25,26, Image 27,28, Image 29,30, Image 31,32, Image 33,34). The permanence of the materials produces a frozen state of time in our cultural timeline, keeping them in a perfect state indefinitely.
Image 1) BYU-Hawaii Campus April 2007

Image 2) BYU-Hawaii Campus April 2007
Image 3) Jaen, Ceramics 2010

Image 4) Vivian, Ceramics 2012
Image 5) Marilyn Levine *Stallone* 1992

Image 6) Marilyn Levine *DIA bag* 1984

Image 7) David Furman *Jake’s Tools* 2012

Image 8) Victor Spinski *Paint Tray* 2006

Image 9) Sylvia Hyman *Spilled Packages* 2002

Image 10) Richard Shaw *Pastel Cabin on Paint Box* 2009
Image 11) Coach monogram.

Image 12) Coco Chanel monogram.

Image 13) Gucci monogram.

Image 14) Louis Vuitton monogram.

Image 15) LK monogram
Image 16) Ornate shop set up from actual handbag shop.


Image 19) MFA Show, May 2012

Image 25) Ren, Ceramics 2012

Image 26) Tabitha, Ceramic 2012
Image 27) Talia, Ceramics 2012

Image 28) Kazia, Ceramics 2012
Image 29) Bianca, Ceramics 2012

Image 30) Monica, Ceramics 2012
Image 31) Amelia, Ceramics 2012

Image 32) Hadley, Ceramics 2012
Image 33) Carol Coin Purse, Ceramics 2012

Image 34) Elenna, Ceramics 2012
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