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Accumulation of Divine Service

Blaine Atwood

A thesis 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

Accumulation of Divine Service

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Master of Fine Arts

Accumulation of Divine Service is a ceramic installation referencing the sublime attribute of service, and how it relates to our temporal existence. Many aspects of the sublime are implemented into the contemporary art world today. The sublime can refer to ideas from terror to joy, and all across the spectrum of human emotions. The unifying element that seems to tie them together is a quality of awe-inspiring greatness, or the metaphysically divine. These attributes can inspire the mind and often lead one to dwell on the existence of a Supreme Being or Deity, what His purposes are, and how we as mortals work with or for that purpose.

This installation encompasses some of my thoughts on the divinity that I believe dwells within all mankind. I do this by incorporating into the installation two repeated elements, the finial and the mug. The finial is an architectural element that is implemented at the apex of most religious meetinghouses. It is used for this purpose because it points toward the heavens and lifts the mind upward toward God. The mug, on the other hand, is one of the most humble and universal ceramic service vessels. It is used around the world as a drinking container whose sole purpose is service, or to give life-sustaining nourishment to mankind. The combination of these two visual elements seeks to encompass my personal art practice, my research, and the element of the sublime that we all possess.

Key Words: sublime, installation, accumulation, divine, service, finial, mug, multiples, cosmos, universe, order, ornament
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Introduction

Accumulation of Divine Service is an installation that was influenced by issues I had as a youth, my personal background in functional pottery, and other artists that work in clay but create non-functional art pottery. I have implemented ideas from these influences, creating conceptual visual signifiers. These lead the viewer to come to conclusions about the sublime and divinity. The main signifier of the sublime is the finial that is an architectural ornament that tops most religious structures. Research on the origins of ornamentation and its function further unite the connection of ornamentation to divinity. A specific attribute of divinity, which can be found in its true believers, is the act of service. I use the mug as a signifier of this act of service, as its only function is to serve mankind life-sustaining nourishment. I incorporated into the installation a large mass of mugs. These mugs symbolize both the multiple acts of service that sustain the sublime institutions, and the work that is often required to keep an individual connected to the divine.

Life Experience

I have grown to realize that my desire to reference the sublime in my art happened when I was between 6 and 13 years old. Due to having an undiagnosed case of dyslexia, I struggled with mainstream academia. I was told I was an underachiever, lazy, and stupid. I was told these things, but I never really believed them. I believe that the true worth of a person isn’t measured by how good their grades are or their capacity to learn new things, but it is something inside that really matters.

Many times this value or potential, as we grow older, is hidden, concealed, or misunderstood. Brian Kershisnik is a Utah Painter who often uses a “little blue object” in his
paintings to symbolize this hidden value or “potential and talents”\textsuperscript{1}. In an interview at BYU he explained that everyone has this value but we tuck it away or never learn what it really is. This little blue object is a sacred divine attribute that we all possess.

As a youth this hidden attribute had me constantly taking things apart, searching for proof that the true worth of the object was the magic inside the item. These hidden spaces on the inside have also been the source of reoccurring dreams that I have had for years. In the dreams, I find access to hidden rooms inside of my house, my grandma’s house, or the house I was raised in. Inside these rooms I find a treasure trove of knowledge, real true value that will stick with me forever. I believe that every person is born with a certain intrinsic value and great potential. This is a gift given to all mankind and I believe it was given to us from our Creator and I have the desire to express this in my artwork.

Functional Pottery

Functional pottery is an area that I am comfortable with and, along with other artists and cultures, is the bridge leading me to using my pottery as a form of fine art. I really enjoy the process of making pottery on the wheel. It seems to me to have a calming effect. I like the idea that things I make will eventually become part of someone else's everyday life and rituals, that I have a hand in making that first cup of coffee or milk more enjoyable. I know that when people sit down to have family dinner that I have made this a more fulfilling event. Using my functional pottery in this manner has helped me throughout my life, giving me reassurance that I have worth, and that I can use my talent to affect others in a positive way.

In the art world there is a difference between functional and non-functional pottery.

\textsuperscript{1} Kershisnik Brian, (Utah Artist), BYU.
"Since ancient times, repetition has been an important aspect in the history of clay. Ceramic artists have always used molds to make multiples, whether for utilitarian or sculptural purposes. This still holds true today. Many contemporary potters use multiples to make functional ware, while other artists working in clay use multiples in creating sculptural installations."²

All of the art forms in this exhibition are wheel thrown vessels and shapes, and refer back to the origins of functional pottery. Historically, pottery has been considered a functional utilitarian art. These terms are used as a way to distinguish the difference between fine art, which is art that is considered to hold a deeper meaning, and art that is created for a utilitarian function.

Desiring to express more with my pottery as a fine art, I turn to other potters who have made this transition. I found myself influenced by great ceramic artists like Paul Soldner and Peter Voulkos. These artists became big names in both the fine art world and ceramics. They did this by starting a conversation about clay being a nonfunctional medium with pieces that still have some relation to the origins of function.

I am also influenced by the spiritual concepts attributed to some Native American pottery. In these tribes, the Native American valued clay for its use as a vessel that could hold and store life-sustaining food and water. Some tribes would sacrifice maize by spreading it on the ground while harvesting clay from mother earth. Clay was a valued commodity with creative potential, physical structure, and a spirit of its own that was connected to mother earth much like our own bodies.³

The vessel pot has relational parts that make a comparison to the body. A pot has a lip, belly, shoulder, neck, and foot. Most important is that it holds something inside it that we need to live. While making functional and non-functional pottery I think of people much like the clay of

³ "Classic Martina Martinez: Native American Pottery Maker of San Ildefonso," DVD.
the Native American. These influences helped me to realize that with both people and pottery, there is a physical structure, but the great value lies in its potential.

Contemporary Ceramic Art Influences

More recently, in trying to develop a stronger conceptual artwork I have implemented ideas from several other artists. These artists are Brad Schwieger, a professor at Ohio University, Matthew Chambers, a young and rising potter, and Walter McConnell, who creates installation work with mass-produced ceramics. Brad Schwieger’s technique of cutting up his vessels, giving them a unique look, has found a new home with my finials. I was looking for something more organic and natural that would both give visual excitement and remove my work from directly referencing specific architectural types. By using a ceramic tool and cutting out small sections of clay while the finial shape was still spinning on the wheel I was able to employ Brad's technique.

I also implemented, into my finials, ideas I found in Matthew Chambers’ work. In his artist statement, he references some of his influences that include architecture, sculptural design elements, and traditional wheel thrown pottery. "Each piece is a constructed abstract exploration of shape and form combining traditional processes and contemporary form, designed to create visual and tactile beauty and intrigue."\(^4\) In an article in Ceramics Now Magazine he states, “I make sculpture that is born from the potters wheel. Many sections are thrown and built to create a constructed beauty, rhythm, and symmetry in abstract form.”\(^5\) In addition to this he has also striped the ceramic surface of the glaze, leaving the vessel beautifully crafted with a fired ruff

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\(^5\) Matthew Chambers. Ceramics Now Magazine (blog), http://www.ceramicsnow.org/matthewchambers
textured surface that shows a ceramic sincerity that is often hidden with the glaze. This honesty in the clay surface is an element that I applied to my finials.

Walter McConnell is a New York ceramic installation artist who incorporates thousands of mass produced ceramic pop culture ceramics in his installations. He arranges these installations in such a manner that they take on an ethereal shrine. His use of multiples and the arrangement of items in his sculpture show an understanding of a historical reference to the sublime. I have used both of these elements, as well as others, in my installation to help inform the viewer and lead them to derive meaning from the artwork.

The Audience

Although I have a specific message and meaning that I want conveyed in my art, I prefer to have viewers, while interacting with my work, discover personal meaning of their own. Jeff Wall refers to this in an article (From a Discussion, Jeff Wall) where he talks about how he creates his work for an imagined audience. This audience will bring its own experiences and ideas to the table while viewing and interpreting the work. He goes on to say that it is the artists’ job to create a work that will provide a framework with enough information that the viewer is guided down a path that will lead them to discovering the artist’s meaning. I incorporate specific signifiers into my work that are intended to provide the framework that Jeff Wall speaks of. These signifiers include traditional wheel thrown ceramics (the mug), architecture (the finial), mass production (multiples or accumulation), and ideas that reflect my research on color,

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ornamentation, and the sublime. One of the main concepts that I would like the audience to discover is a sense of the sublime that dwells within us all.

The Sublime

The sublime that I am referring to in my work, through the use of specific elements, is a spiritual or metaphysical sublime. There is a difference between religion and spirituality. Anne Morgan says, "... our contemporary culture emphasizes a much broader view of the spiritual, welcoming multicultural perspectives, and spirituality no longer tied to specific religions and religious dogmas."\(^7\) Much of understanding of this type of sublime comes from the writings of Kant who explains, "The beautiful in nature has to do with the form of the object, which consists in the boundary. The sublime, on the other hand, is to be found in a formless object, insofar as in it or by occasion of it. Boundlessness is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought."\(^8\) It is because of this formless description of the sublime that we see many of the early modern artists, attempting through abstraction, to create a sense of the sublime.

Doreet LeVitte Harten says, "After the post modern era there are other ways that artists are addressing the sublime through the use of chosen signifiers."\(^9\) Many artists have found different ways to try and give the viewer a sense of the sublime. Some work with opposites, other involve time, place, or accumulation, much of which alludes to an idea or presence that can't be seen, and all use little hints and conceptual signifiers to help the viewer come to certain

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\(^7\) Anne Morgan, "Beyond Post Modernism: The Spiritual in Contemporary Art, Metaphysical is Hip (Again)," *Art Papers*, 26, no. 1 (2002): 30-36.
conclusions. In my work I have chosen to implement many of these same signifiers including the opposites between functional and non-functional pottery, accumulation, and the finial that is used architecturally to draw the eye upwards toward heaven.

The Finial

The finial is an architectural element and is used in my installation as one of the main conceptual elements as a reference to the sublime. It is typically carved in stone and employed decoratively to emphasize the apex of a gable or any of various distinctive ornaments at the top, end, or corner of a building or structure. The modernist may argue that this finial is just trite ornamentation, but this idea is changing. Brent C. Brolin writes, "Thanks largely to the impetus given by writings and works of Robert Venturi… Venturi proposed that the simple, universal solutions of modernism be replaced by ones that are complex, ambiguous, and individualized… 'Less is a bore'".\(^\text{10}\) In our contemporary world there seems to be a return to ornamentation in architecture and art as a consequence of the end of modernism.

I find inspiration in architectural ornamentation, more specifically, Persian architecture, Russian Christian onion domes, and the Islamic mosques in India. These all have common architectural elements. Among these is the use of ornamental design, the use of ceramic material (brick), and at the apex of the construction is a finial. The finial is a tried and true element used as a signifier for almost all successful churches. Jeffery Howe states,

"Architectural symbolism had been the defining factor in almost all the styles associated with the eclectic revivals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The modernist movement had suddenly discarded nearly all of this traditional symbolism. The chapel Mies van de Rohe designed for the Illinois Institute of Technology was

deliberately stark and unexpressive, leaving the general public dissatisfied."\(^{11}\)

Another signifying element that I have incorporated into my finials is the idea of stripping the clay of its glaze. One reason for removing the glaze is the ability that glaze has to hide and cover small details that the artist wants to have seen. I have chosen to expose the raw, unglazed, naked clay surface because I want to unveil the truth and honesty of the natural clay surface, the real value that is often hidden beneath the glaze. These brick like finials then serve as an ornamental symbol that references the sublime in my installation.

Ornamentation

The origins and historical use of ornamentation give the finial in my piece a greater depth of meaning. In English, the word ornament comes from the Latin word *ornamentum*, rooted in the word *ornare*, which means, to confer grace upon some object of ceremony. This seems to be a vital purpose for the use of architectural ornaments, like the finial, on various houses of worship. By most accounts, the term ornament originated in the Greek term *kosmos*, which means something like universe, order, and ornament. These three elements worked together when one considers that the ancient Greeks used the word *kosmos* in contrast with *chaos*. So just as I believe, in the beginning there was chaos or unorganized matter and with the hand of God, order was created, and out of that came the universe.

There are two possible ways that ornament can then be tied into this scenario. Ornament can be separated out from the other two by imagining it to be the force or power used to transform and unify two conflicting worldly elements. We see a visual example of this unifying

concept implemented in our modern day, as ornament is often located in the margin between two different kinds of things, like a wall and the ceiling.¹²

A related Greek word to kosmos is kosmeo, which means to arrange, to order, and to adorn. Specific Greek ornaments were used to signify that something or someone had been equipped or prepared for a specific duty or purpose. Our society still does this by using, for example, Christmas light decorations, and ornaments to prepare for the holidays. So in the second relationship we understand that after the creation of the universe God set about to confer grace and beauty upon the earth adorning it with ornaments of plants and animals, mountains and rivers as though it was a sacred object, preparing it for the creation of man.

Much of the origins of ornamentation show that the ornament had both meaning and function. It may be a finial to reference God or, in many cases, an actual physical element that would bring greater purpose and function to an object. "This purpose of ornamentation is different than that of mere decoration. The term decoration implies a pleasing arrangement of things and a suggestion of the decorous, a condition marked by propriety, good taste, good conduct, and good appearance."¹³

For my installation, I found that I could use the origin and historical use of ornamentation to give it a deeper connection to the sublime. In my research I discovered that architectural ornamentation is often used as a unifying element between two dissimilar objects like the wall and the ceiling and floor. I reference this use and the Greek origins in my work through the placement of both the finials and mugs. I created multiples of my objects and placed them

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climbing a corner and running along the baseboards of the gallery space implementing this very relevant research into my work. Referencing the sublime through the use of ornamentation and the finial in my work has given it a level of sophistication, especially when put into contrast with the worldlier element of the mug.

The Mug

The mug is used in my installation as a worldly element that represents service. One of the most commonly used ceramic service vessels in the world is the mug. I chose to incorporate the mug into my work for two reasons. First, it represents one of the two different worlds of ceramics that I have a love for. I love creating interesting nonfunctional art pottery, but I always feel like I am coming home when I make the functional pottery that friends and family can use and cherish. Second I use the mug as a representation of the idea of service. The mug’s main purpose is to serve mankind life sustaining liquid nourishment. I implement this idea of service into my work by using over eight hundred mugs. In my installation the mugs are all found underneath the finials as though they are literally supporting the finials. This is used to illustrate that the only thing that keeps the divine growing and thriving is the service of the true believer.

I glazed the mugs green in part to contrast them to the finials, which are unglazed and represent the institution or belief of the sublime, but also because I wanted a humble earthy color. I was exploring the idea of there being a difference between earthly elements and divine elements. The color green also references rebirth and new life, a concept that runs deep inside a true believer in divinity.

As another signifier of the divine service of the mug, I included one mug and a pitcher full of water set apart from the others and in their natural setting, on a table, as though someone
had been served this water and it awaits them. Furthermore, the water is a reference to the living waters both spoken of in scripture, speaking of it in a spiritual nature, and in reality, the life giving nourishment of water that we all need. The placement of these two pots is out away from the main installation. This placement introduces the viewer to the service vessel and illustrates the duality of use of the mug. It is obviously functional when filled with water, and yet, in the installation it becomes simply symbolic of service. To me, the mug seemed to be the most appropriate vessel to use to highlight the divine attribute of service that is given freely by the masses as they worship, pressing forward toward salvation. Along with the representing the attribute of service, the use of multiple mugs further emphasizes the work and service that is often necessary to maintain a personal relationship with divinity.

Multiples and Accumulation

In my installation I embrace the long history of the production potter and the multiple repetitive pots that are a part of a production potter’s work.

"Artists who choose to work in clay as their primary material but distance themselves from the legacy of ceramics are still tied to the methods inherent to the process. Since ancient times, repetition has been an important aspect in the history of clay. Ceramic artists have always used molds to make multiples, whether for utilitarian or sculptural purposes. This still holds true today. Many contemporary potters use multiples to make functional ware, while other artists working in clay use multiples in creating sculptural installations."\(^\text{14}\)

With my foundation in hand made functional pottery on the pottery wheel, I chose to create every individual piece rather than cast them. I wanted them to have the appearance of sameness, but upon closer inspection the viewer could find differences and uniqueness that is prevalent in

both culture and society.

While working as a production potter, I always liked the look of organizing sets of dinnerware on my ware shelves. They started to look to me like congregations of people waiting in line or little solders waiting for the call to move forward. With this installation, I installed over one thousand individual pieces of wheel-thrown pottery, to convey this sense of a congregation all lined up, pushing forward in a journey or pilgrimage toward a great and final destination. I believe that this idea reflects the life of the true believers of the divine, and I want the audience to experience this pilgrimage while interacting with my installation.

When considering meaning and use of multiples and accumulation in art work Jerry Saltz states in an article in Artnet Magazine:

"Occasionally, however, accumulation and multiplication -- of which may be hard-wired into us -- overcome convention and carry you away. Multiplication connects us to infinity which connects us to our desire for it; repetition is reassuring, terrifying and mysterious all at once -- it is a field of dreams and a comfortable prison, part of the cosmic continuum, something that's been there since the beginning. Repetition is difference repeated within such narrow strictures that it opens new possibilities. At its best repetition conjures what Baudelaire called the 'sacred machinery.' That's why sometimes when rooms are filled with arrangements of objects, when configurations are fashioned from hundreds, thousands or even millions of similar things, repetition turns metaphysical, obsession and process become transcendental, and magic happens."\(^{15}\)

When using multiples and accumulation conceptually in an artwork one has to consider the construction and personal sacrifice that is needed to produce such work.

Process

The process of creating my art, especially this installation, is centered on the work. By this I mean that first I start making different items, and then I make more and more. As I study and research, I change what I am making and experiment with different forms and ideas, and then I work more. Gonzalez-Torres says that we shouldn't always be trying to bury our work in the theory of art. He states, "But always think about Practice…Theory is not the endpoint of work, it is the work along the way to the work." 16 The act of working, I think, can also be tied to the concept of the sublime, in that the actual work can be both meditative and challenging. The challenges that happen when making repetitive items are ones of boredom and fatigue. These can only be overcome by keeping focused on the prize at the end. I think of this much like a true believer would consider enduring to the end as they strive, through a devout life, to unite with the sublime.

Conclusion

Incorporating both functional and nonfunctional pottery into one art installation was intended to reflect both the sublime in the nonfunctional, and the true believer in the functional. Using these opposites also signifies a sense of the sublime. This duality is one way that many artists are addressing the sublime, by using it in their work as a chosen signifier. Doreet LeVitte Harten writes that many artists have found other ways to build a sense of the sublime "… There seems to be no reason to re-abstract the abstract, for it would be an act without logic. It is here that artists, by being compelled to point out the opposites, arrive at new ways of showing the

sublime".17 In my installation I use many signifiers that will lead the viewer to come to the conclusion that this piece is referencing deity, and our personal journey with the divine.

Appendix of Figures

Brian Kershisnik
Man with Small Blue Object

Paul Soldner
Peter Voulkos

Brad Schwieger
Matthew Chambers

Walter McConnell
Taj Mahal, India

Casa Mila, Spain

Finials form

Accumulation of Divine Service
Accumulation of Divine Service
Accumulation of Divine Service

Image #5

Accumulation of Divine Service

Image #6
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