UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

A Line

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in

Visual Arts

by

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The Thesis of John Patrick Shields is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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The following thesis describes in detail my artistic process. It references concepts and materials utilized for the cultural production of art making. The text gives historical contexts relating to my creative development. It describes the current body of work that has been produced during earning this masters degree, and it projects into future project based on this research.

Chapter 1: A Line

The work I make is difficult to look at during its creation. It is problematic while it struggles to exist. It sits neglected, half started, uncertain if it will continue, as a multitude of inappropriate ideas are projected onto it. Sometimes it is abused with the wrong material or procedure. When and if the work is ever wrestled into a singular resolved form it is only through an abundance of mistakes that have been played out upon it. Speculations, reactions, irrational procedures, intuitive reasoning, strategic planning, and systemic operations are all either smashed together or pitted against one another to achieve coherence as representing the landing points of thoughts- sometime these thoughts are crash landings. It is very important that my work maintains a space to play out these mistakes in. I consider my working methodology to be in pursuit of evolution and discovery.

Like the biologists who clearly understands that the mistake is the premise of evolutionary life I attempt to understand how a single, idiosyncratic glitch can open up a new strain of generation. Creating an inventory of operations that express potentials across diverse materials and concepts often takes priory over final outcomes. The goal is momentum, to propel work. I would prefer that stopping be a bi-product of either running out of material, time, or steam, or exhausting a procedure. This for me establishes knowledge through the experiencing the limits of resources and operations. In this I can understand the failures of both strategy and my intuitive actions and then respond with a learned expertise. Being unconcerned with completion serves to open up the space for risk and experimentation. This as a risk in and of itself as completion must play a role in the pursuit of art. In an interview I recently saw with Mike Kelly he comments on the art world being the only place to go to fail. I don't know if this comment holds true but it is a wonderful idea and helps me to ponder the value of failure. Failure alleviates the anxiety of working under the constraints of having to design a reliable deliverable. I am looking for a sanctuary that allows failure to exist so that it can show its value as a productive practice.

I don't think art requires the support of empirical evidence like the biologist's utilize, yet art does require the assertion of a theoretical position. For me it won't be as clearly stated as it was with the achievements of last century where Americans cast aside the rules that governed

painting traditions in order to build out a new position that broke the constraints set by their European predecessors. Today society is too messy. There are an overwhelming amount of roving targets. I think we must wait some years before greater ideological unities are established that reveal the polarization of camps. The clearest thing for me to attempt to theorize against is the future.

Early recollections bring me to the fabric store with my mother. I hated it. Even as a child I felt depressed by the environment that these stores were located in. I disliked spending Saturdays and Sundays driving to strip malls or industrial areas so that she could dig through the rows of yardage of patterns and textures in search of something suitable for her application. The glare was unbearable, walking through the dry, black parking lots reflecting the harsh southern California sun. Her pursuit of textiles seemed like an endless, unrewarding endeavor to me. I saw no satisfaction in this form of shopping – buying something that required so much work to process before it became anything useful. She always tried to include me in the decision making, consulting my opinions regarding a color or texture. I wouldn't play along. I couldn't wait to get out of those stores. I would desperately express the urgency that we must leave at once so I could ride my bike to the liquor store to play the arcade games in the back.

This was early 80's. I must have been 7 years old. She would assure me that she was almost done and continue her search. I would storm off, most probably looking for some trouble in the store. Trapped in the aisles of rows and rows of bolts of fabrics I would feel disgusted in turning a corner to be confronted by endless floral patterns. Beige drove me nuts and there was nothing worse than the baby fabrics with their horrible tessellations printed onto flannels. The satisfaction of running my hand along the rows of smooth silk only lasted so long. I can remember how touching the velvet would evoke the sensation finger nails on a chalk board for me at that time. I would torture myself by clutching onto the largest wad of crunchy velvet until it was unbearable and I had to let go. I wanted to destroy velvet. Eventually Mom would come find me and we would be free to leave. After the fabric store she would hunker down and get to work. Fabrics of all variety were strewn about being pinned to those flimsy tissue paper patterns.

My Mother's life's work has been designing Costumes. They have been costumes for ev-

ery type of work you can imagine, Halloween, Church plays, Broadway musicals, Shakespearean Theater, children television programming, exhibition duration, and Hollywood movies. I've witness my mother piece together a creative career that has taken her across the globe. Her demanding discipline required that she be constantly transforming every room in the house into a production space. It seemed like she never had enough room to spread out. It was impossible to walk around the house barefoot without the fear being stabbed by a straight pin (painfully, this happened on multiple occasions.) At Christmas she would have very specific gift request. One year she slowly and deliberately declared, "All I want for Christmas is a French Curve". I dropped the ball that year, coming up short as I had no idea what a French curve was. The sewing machine always fascinated me. Thanks to my mother I was fairly proficient on a sewing machine by age 13.

It was many years before I understood her influence. Inadvertently I learned about the marking and grading of patterns and how a flat, two-dimensional textile could be constructed into a three-dimensional form. Years later I have continued developing the skills she introduced me to in my own practice. I sewed my way through architecture school by applying garment design techniques to building proposals and making arguments that structures should be flexible, and lightweight and the accessibility of textiles and the tools related to them provided far more economic means of construction (and if properly designed could rival the beauty of any other contemporary materials and techniques). Sewing and drawing were somehow linked. It has never been novel for me use a piece of fabric and a sewing machine to sketch out an idea.

In as much as my first experiences of making emerged from the world of garments, so too did my introduction to semiotics. Fashion literacy was being developed in the house I grew up in. Conversations between my older sister and my mother would range anywhere from the origins of hounds tooth patterns to the differences between men's suits in the 1950's versus 1960's to debates on whether not Marie Antoinette's wardrobe was thought to be risqué' due to the Turkish textiles that they were patterned in. It is very possible that had I not been privileged with this exposure to the world of garments I may not have the type of engagement that I do with my work. To be extreme, I might not have found myself in pursuit of the production of art at all.

In my attraction to work of Lee Bontecou I can clearly understand how the direct and

indirect influences of the garment world have lead me to my appreciation of her work. Bontecou was creating wall mounted relief sculptures from canvas, metal, resin, and found objects. They were constructed by crudely but accurately stitching various weights of canvas over thin welded metal structures. She stretched the canvas across these structures under such extreme tension that they conveyed an intense rigidity transforming the softness of the material. These wall mounted reliefs took on the form of faceted protrusions that would circulate around dark black voids. Sometimes the void would include sharp objects, reminiscent of the teeth of a frightening creature. Some seams are articulated as being machine sewn while others are painstakingly fixed together by cooper wire piercing through the canvas and twisted together as individually fastened points. The succession of cooper knots glimmer along the seam highlighting a form been held together with the most desperate means possible.

These connections piece together the soot stained khaki patchworks into striations of converging and diverging topographies that dramatically plunge into violent blacked voids. The complexity of techniques that Bontecou utilizes is astounding. They are sophisticated forms that are at odds with what seems to be an almost primitive material. Nothing is taken for granted in the choice of materials. The canvas is specifically military surplus, directly referencing the war in Vietnam that is being fought as she is making these works. The frightening teeth at the core of the void's interior are just that – teeth from old industrial saws that are rusted, jagged, and heavy. Perhaps a nod to defunct American industry that had started its migration overseas leaving many people jobless. The radical difficulty of hard materials being stitched into soft materials inverts the norms of our understanding of structural integrity. Hard, soft, khaki, rust, soot, and black are choreographed as though one is witnessing the real-time mutation of the organic and the mechanic struggling to become one. They do so in a manner that frighteningly embodies the tension of technology's effect on nature and the political and social climate of a historically depressed and violent America.

The great fortune of witnessing her retrospective at the Hammer museum introduced me to an alternative reading of the textile, expanding my understanding of what material could say and do. I have been cataloging understandings of textiles in an attempt to find usages of them in work. Soft materials are understood differently today. "Hi-tech" fabrics have infiltrated indus-

trial design that can produce ultra-strong, ultra-light products ranging from bicycles to airplanes to bullet proof vests. “Extreme textile” is a term that design students now utilize. It is nearly a subject in vocation schools. Robotic knitting and computer controlled sewing machines follow the same fundamental procedures to process these materials with the aid of computation. Weaving fibers on gigantic mandrels can produce jet fuselages. The additive fiber processes emerging in non-garment based industries are valued for their efficiency in waste reduction and increased high tensile strength. My fascination with fiber-based processes ranges from the traditional to the high tech and I have been attempting to exploit the tendencies of both. In some works I have knit nylon by hand while other works are the combinations of hand craft and machine aided fiber lay-up.

A piece I created for the Object-Type group show at UCSD was the result of working closely with the Abstract Painter, Monique van Genderen. She, along with Kim McConnell and PHD student Xing Zhao conceptualized and curated this show with a prompt for new works to be produced that riff off the work of a former UCSD visual arts professor. The title of the show was borrowed from Le Corbusier’s Object-Type principle that is loosely defined as an evolution of form occurring between ideal and necessity. I chose to draw inspiration from a series of works by Manny Farber which were oil paintings that hung in space and were view from both sides. He made these pieces using a very weak material, butcher paper, and layered an enormous amount of oil paint onto it. The thick, dry paint made up the structural integrity of the work, superseding the weakness of the paper. Farber made these abstract works during the sixties when many painters were experimenting with abandoning the frame. He was taking it even further, getting rid of the canvas and in doing so he was very closely approaching a painting only comprised of paint.

These methods share similarities with my interests and my current work. I have been exploring the potentials of carbon fiber strands embedded in epoxy resin with oil paint. Similar to Farber’s butcher paper, the strands of carbon fiber possess no rigidity and are weak until they are activated with viscous material that hardens such as resin, which is similar to the dry oil paint that created the rigidity that Farber’s structures required. By suspending the work from the ceiling to be viewed on both sides, he creates an architectural and sculptural relationship. I extended the idea of his double-sided piece to include translucency, exploiting the clear charac-

teristics of the epoxy, allowing one to see through the work as well as its front and back. Carbon and Kevlar fibers were laid out in lattice configurations to govern the structural integrity of a thin flat surface. It contained black lines as carbon and yellow lines as Kevlar. They were layered heavily on top of one another to produce different line weights.

Laying out the fibers brought me to my engagement with drawing. In the architectural drawing line represents structure. The culmination of lines collaborate to form a resistance to the forces of gravity that are imposed on structure. In this piece the line was not a representation of structure but the structure itself that created a context where the drawing was generated both compositionally and out of physical necessity. Farber's material holds true to the traditions of oil painting in moments where I differentiated with cadmium blue oil paint being mixed with epoxy to create translucency. By spreading the mixture at various thicknesses across the fibrous lattice I was able to make the fiber disappear and reappear behind gradients of opaque to translucent. The edges of the work were cut and articulated in a manner that attempted to both contain the piece and suggest an open-endedness. The intention was that it could be read as crop of an expanded plane while at the same time be read as a self-contained object. This simultaneity is exploring the duality of a work's completion and latent potentials. The industrial properties of the material I used, Kevlar and carbon, loan their physical properties to a previously un-achieved lightness in manufacturing. Commonly used in the fabrication of gliders, sailboat sails, bicycles, automotive parts, and, now, airplanes, these materials in the context of art contradict the heavy traditions of stone and bronze sculpture. Although they are lighter and cannot produce the same mass, the nature of the fiber's ability to be continuous and expansive enable them to compete with the enormity of scale in which so many sculptures find resolve. Here a comparison between Farber and Bontecou may be appropriate when considering the materiality of sculpture and painting. In both of their works we see inversions of the structural integrity. Light and heavy, soft and hard being properties that are switched from their common understanding. The creation of this piece helped me further establish my investigations of material based objects, focusing on the concept of 2.5-dimensional work. Currently I consider the work as both sculpture and painting, borrowing techniques and concepts from either traditions.

My work sometimes develops systematic principles. It does so in a method that is both

measured and approximated. Some forms are generated by strictly following a formula while other investigations loosely develop actions to be deployed upon materials. In one case for example, a block of high density foam is cut in half resulting in two parts. The two parts are separated, rotated 180 degrees, then adhered back together using epoxy resin. Via the rotation, two faces that once projected outward are now laminated onto one another. After this procedure the block of foam's original scale and mass remain intact. The only trace of this action left is a fine seam running through the volume where the lamination has adhered the two pieces back together. This process is repeated on the block at a different angles, cutting open two new faces that will again be rotated, sending these interior faces outwards and laminating the exterior inward. The more this action of cut and rotate is performed the more traces of laminating lines appear. This process allows for the emergence of patterns defined by the laminating lines. Repetition yields more intricate, finer grain pattern. The system recursively burrows further and further, inward and outward, as an involution, constantly renewing the pattern's surface reading on the mass. Like the systemic traits of a fractal patterns infinite involution, the labor applied to the mass inversion can continue indefinitely. This begs the question of how a work is completed when it is being generated through an open-ended system.

These works relay an intensity that can only be achieved over a prolonged time frame. The intention is not to use restraint, but to exploit the potential of a process in turning mass inside out. When one understands that the production of intricacy is what the system can produce then repetition becomes the system's driver. Only one cut can be made at a time. Only one rotation can set up two faces to be laminated back together. This leaves only one new trace line through the mass. More and more I am finding the value of intricacy is related to time. Time enables the labor required to make the repetitions that produce intricacy. In many of my works time is exposed through the process. This interest in prolonged, durational production expands well outside of the sphere of fine art. From inspiring sounds in experimental music to ideas about slow food growth, duration has become a form of resistance to the speed and demands of global capitalism.

In a less systematic approach another work started with a block of Styrofoam. It was dimensioned at 4' x 8' x 1', reminiscent of standard building material sizes. A series of holes have

been melted through the material with acetone to create different sized apertures. The surfaces have been burnt at various intensities with flames fueled by gasoline. Varieties of patterns, similar to pock marks have emerged as the result of the different exposures to the fire. The surface was treated with an oil paint and epoxy mixture that is absorbed differently by the material depending on the porosity created by the fire. The process of making this piece was an example of the uncertainties I must explore when seeking a resolve. At first the holes had been melted with the acetone and then reinforced for strength with the epoxy. This approach yielded some results but did not seem suitable to deploy as a techniques across the entire piece. Black oil paint was applied on the white foam around the apertures producing an almost figurative image. A skull like form emerged with the apertures as eyes. This suggested the foam was merely a surface for representational exploration rather than the piece being an exploration of material's transformative properties. This realization lead the work into a state of neglect where it sat and I contemplated its abandonment. The foam was subjected to the heavy rain showing no signs of effect.

After months of idle progress I waged an attempt to continue working on it. I would start with the idea of melting more holes into it. This time I would use gasoline as it was far cheaper than the acetone I had used. I drenched an area of the foam with gas and waited for the chemical effects. Nothing. The foam was as impervious to the gasoline as it was to the rain. It just sat there, pooling up on the surface with zero effect. In a last ditch effort I took my only remaining option – fire. With the flick of a lighter the little pools of gas ignited, ensued by fear and excitement. I could see a yellowing and blackening of the material as the heat from the flames burnt up the gasoline and attached itself to the foam, shrinking into the mass. I quickly extinguished the flames on this first round to more clearly observe the effects. A wonderful undulated pattern of white, yellow, and black had converged breaking the continuity of the flat surface. When the flame connected where the epoxy and foam meet a different effect all together occurred. The epoxy acted as a barrier against the flame burning intensely around the barrier's parameter. The piece had now begun. The controls were established as being; amount of gas, length of exposure to flame, epoxy as boundary. I now worked my way around the piece utilizing this technique, adding further experiments with color, exploring how the flame would dull the shininess of the oil colors mixed into the epoxy.

Creating this process was a lesson in grappling with the inconsequential nature of the foam. The foam was recovered from the robotic lab where I had been previously cutting forms out of the Styrofoam by programming shapes into the 7-axis arm to automate the production of sculptures. It was in these robotic procedures where I established my frustrations with foam. The discovery of it being inconsequential only came after hundreds of hours of milling to understanding there are no ramification with the cuts made on it. The foam is uniform, possessing no directionality or grain. Unlike a material such as wood whose grain governs all sorts of degrees of tensions and compression or a textile that has been designed with a specific weft and warp that enable particular stretch co-efficiency, the foam has no bias. It is structurally monolithic. Its compressions and tensions are neutralized. My frustrations with this material were alleviated by submitting to the knowledge that foam has no bias. That is its intelligence.

The piece has gained various reactions from the public during its display. “It looks like a monolith”, “it looks like decaying flesh”, “It looks archaeological”, “it looks like coral”, “and It looks toxic”. All of these associations are of interest to me as the work I make is not seeking to solely dictate a hierarchy of language. The associations are helpful and provide a perspective from my own views on my practice. The comments add up to antithetical contradictions of synthetic versus natural or ancient versus futuristic. In working with materials and tools ranging from traditional to contemporary I find myself contemplating the tendencies of material, there origins, and their effects on the environment and in doing so I arrive at the notion of nature and future as constituting two principles in opposition. This has become a paradoxical meditation I am confronted with while I work.

The common anxiety of having to mine the resources of the natural to continue a desirable future, but in doing so we may choke out the human life support, fascinates me. In all of the materials that I have come to utilize in my practice I am confronted by their consequence. They do not contribute in any way (except negatively) to the nature’s reproductive system that yields biodiversity. Epoxy as a bi-product of petroleum refinement, Styrofoam, an extruded polystyrene that has been banned as food containers in many Californian cities, carbon fiber, notoriously difficult to produce created under extreme heats of up to 1800 degrees Fahrenheit, even the polymerizing characteristics of oil paint – all these materials are intended to land into an inert state,

suspending the flourishing energy exchanges of the laws of thermal dynamics.

In 2011 scientists discovered off the coast of Hawaii formations of rocks that contain a level of plastic never before seen. They attribute this to lava flows interacting with plastic pollution in the ocean, cooling from sea temperatures producing unique physical, chemical compounds that are ultimately described as rocks. Scientist ponder a lingering question whether or not this means a human effect on the fossil record and should this area be marked as the Anthropocene? The popular and problematic theories of the Accellerationists come to mind when I try to grapple with the question. I join them in wondering in the billion years from now how will the planet have reconstituted itself and will the trace of humans be apparent or not? In a an intentionally gross simplification I find the fundamental principles of the Accelerationist agenda to be that of an attitude of "ride this shit till the wheels fall off" as a means producing their own fact-checking platform for their future projections to confirm what they consider to be inevitabilities. The French theorist Paul Virilio eloquently outlines an irreconcilably struggle that humans find with time. The velocity that humans are confronted by, through discoveries of ever decreasing scales of time, situate themselves in a non-compete stance with technology. Humans will never (at this moment) have a genuine experience with a pica second putting one at odds with the technology that can. And while some view the computational capacity of technology as a liberator it may also be the oppressor.

With a cautionary approach to the future, I try to understand now as the debate between a synthetic versus an organic order of our physical world. Now could be time that intensely governs the future's agenda in a struggle to reconcile with the process of nature. The scientific discoveries of plastic rocks plays out as anecdotal to my work. It helps me counter-act time's velocity and enables thoughts about a time beyond my own. Proof of substance and matter, from synthetic and organic origins are transformed by temporal conditions and processes and in doing so moves towards a basic understanding of our environment and its relationship to us.