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Everything I thought I was supposed to do

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Everything I thought I was supposed to do

by

Jeff Conefry

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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December 15, 2017                  Nari Ward
Date                           Signature

December 15, 2017                  Valerie Jaudon
Date                           Signature of Second Reader
“The disinterest in painting and sculpture is a disinterest in doing it again,” (Judd, 1965)

In 1965 Donald Judd coined the term “specific objects” in an attempt to define a new category of art that was neither painting nor sculpture, “...where the differences are greater than the similarities.” (Judd, 1965)

It is within the liminal space between traditional mediums that my creative practice deconstructs the materiality of painting to subvert historical expectations. The irony associated with this deconstruction, excavates one medium to generate the building blocks for something inimitable. These blocks are most easily re-categorized into Words, Limits, and Power. It is these three themes that are the foundation of my thesis exhibition.

**Words.**

The artist and viewer can both use words in language to exchange ideas about how successful a piece of art is. The artist can express the outcome as being intentional as a simple way to determine success. The problem with this kind of analysis is twofold. One, it relies on the artist to be honest about their intentions to the viewer and themselves. Two, it relies on those expressed intentions to create expected results. The path from intention to object is generated during the making which is not always so clear.

Language can help define parameters of production, but cannot guarantee its success. Alternately, no action has meaning on its own without a relationship to the viewer and their relationship to language. Words and actions need each other, but it is the space between them both that my work is intended to operate. Success for me is when my work generates a kind of
specific ambiguity where specific actions generate resulting relationships that cannot be easily expressed in words.

**Limits.**

*“the more you limit yourself, the more fertile you become in invention”* Kierkegaard

Limiting the variables in a problem helps me focus my attention on details easily overlooked. In a world full of distractions, focus and attention are welcome elements that help counter my natural tendencies for anxiety and depression. The more the process of making becomes about just solving finite problems, the more productive the process is for me. With an ever more finite problem comes the greater possibility of interesting solutions.

As a socially awkward child growing up with a single mother, I would spend countless hours alone. Thankfully, like Robert Irwin would say, “Boredom is a very good tool”. My time alone was always fruitful. Even with limited financial means, I learned how to invent and produce something from nothing. I always had paper, glue, and time. I would fold and glue paper into ever more earnest structures that I could then play with creating a more complete world. This would lead to the creation of its own logical system that would define the world parameters, identify problems or conflicts, and invent solutions. It is this basic problem solving that drives the course of production in my studio today.

Working with limitations makes every element used in the creation of an object that much more important. Beyond the physical qualities of a material is the time needed to make the simple things more complete. A perfect example of this is the way I produce my paint surfaces. I pour acrylic paint into molds or directly on a substrate one layer at a time, allowing it to dry
before adding a new layer on top. This process creates a surface with 3 to 7 layers of poured paint. Each layer will take 24 to 36 hours to dry, so a typical surface comprised of 5 layers will take at least a week to create.

One surface or paint skin holds one week of time. This gives a seemingly simple material the ability to store a record of its own making. Seven days of work are compressed into 3/8 of an inch of material. The method of applying one layer on top of the previous one is revealed as a sequence of events very much like sedimentary rocks or the rings of a tree.

To emphasize the importance of this sequential action, I use layers of different colors. In this way, my color acts as a marker or sign to indicate an action. As such the color needs no other reference then to be relevant to the color next to it. This difference can be stark or subtle as long as it indicates the change. Working with prescribed limits, the development of my personal logic system supports a process driven practice where an initial deconstruction expands those building blocks into physical manifestations of time.

**Power.**

The topic of power can be addressed in my body of work art historically, psychologically, and qualitatively. First and foremost, there is an institutionalized power within the categorization of painting and sculpture. It is the power of these definitions that my work challenges through the refusal to exist as either, insisting on the ironic use of ambiguity in form and intent.

Beyond the didactic discourse is the psychosexual interpretation of intervention and arrangement. There is an insinuation of power through the violence of intervention. Cutting holes and building projections emphasize the anthropomorphic qualities of my objects that
reflect impulses to destroy or disfigure. To cut or break a form in a way that seems disrespectful or fetishized, helps me to push against the historical sanctity of painting. That intervention is extended through the placement of the work in juxtaposition to the viewers’ bodily presence.

Exhibitions have a long history of challenging the gallery or institution where the work is presented. The viewer comes to an exhibition with certain physical expectations. Hanging a piece, a little low or a little high in of itself challenges conventions. Anytime you do something that is not expected, that doesn’t adhere to tradition, you begin to dictate your own terms.

Qualitatively, the expectation of craftsmanship can be perceived as a kind of power that gains importance the wider the distance becomes between high and low craft. It is my power of intent to choose when and how to meet or defeat those preconceived notions of craftsmanship.

**Conclusion.**

“Specific Objects” exist in opposition to traditional categorical standards of medium. My objects are containers that hold a complete record of their making. Their function supersedes the absolute use of words as the sole conveyor of information. Limitations take seemingly simple elements and expand them into new potentialities that embody my history and psychology. Ultimately, questions of power challenge the viewer beyond their historical expectations. My practice continues to expand the space between words and actions where the simplification of historical form can embody complex futures.

**Bibliography**
Image list

01  “Untitled”, 2017
Cast acrylic paint with wood structure
42 x 6 x 6”

02  “Prop Painting”, 2017
Cast acrylic paint with wood structure
48 x 24x 6”

03  “Untitled”, 2017
Cast acrylic paint with wood structure
12 x 6 x 6”

04  “Three”, 2017
Cast acrylic paint with wood structure
36 x 6 x 6”

05  “Split”, 2017
Cast acrylic paint with wood structure
12 x 12 x 3”

06  “Yellow Indicator”, 2017
Cast acrylic paint with wood structure
5 x 5 x .75”

07  “Object for another object”, 2017
Cast acrylic paint with wood structure
and fire extinguisher cabinet
26 x 20 x 4”

08  “Object big enough to put my arm in”, 2017
Cast acrylic paint with aluminum structure
6 x 6 x 24”

09  “Untitled”, 2017
Cast acrylic paint with aluminum structure
12 x 12 x 4”
“All the things I fucked up Apr 8, 2016 to Nov 12, 2017”, 2017
Cast acrylic paint on steel I-beam
18 x 12 x 12”

“Untitled”, 2017
Cast acrylic paint with wood, aluminum, and steel structure
42 x 42 x 6”

Installation Image 01, 2017

Installation Image 02, 2017