

Integrative Project Thesis

University of Michigan

Stamps School of Art & Design

“Testaments to Practice”

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I. Crafts·man·ship

'kraf(t)smən, SHip/

noun

noun: **craftsmanship**; plural noun: **craftsmanships**

the quality of design and work shown in something made by hand; artistry.¹

During my time here at the University of Michigan Stamps School of Art and Design, I have continually found myself appreciating objects that are well-made. In my studies of wood, metal, printmaking and primarily clay, it has never been about doing something once, but doing it until I get it right. In other words, I am a craftsman. My daily and weekly art grind is driven by craft and a desire to perfect my throwing process; to be faster, more efficient, and more in control of my forms. According to designer David Gamache, craftsmanship boils down to three ingredients: quality work, a passion for betterment and experience². To me, being a craftsman is not about conveying a message or concept, but about the never-ending search to improve my skill. I label myself a craftsman because of my desire to improve product through refinement of process. In the words of Gamache, “craftsmanship is doing what you love and doing it well...” He says, “Learn to think of your work as practice toward becoming an absolute expert in what you do. Craftsmanship is not a destination; but a life-long discipline.”³

That being said, craftsmanship and “pride in workmanship” are by no means new concepts. Robert Williamson of Strategic Work Systems Inc. speaks of this in his writing “A World without Craftsmen.” He explains;

Artisans were the predominant producer of goods in the era before the late 18th century Industrial

¹ "The Definition of Craftsmanship." Dictionary.com. Accessed April 1, 2016.

<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/craftsmanship>.

² Miller, Tessa, and David Gamache. “Craftsmanship: Doing What You Love And Doing It Right.” *Lifehacker*, June 19, 2012. <http://lifehacker.com/5919254/craftsmanship-doing-what-you-love-and-doing-it-right>.

³ Miller and Gamache, “Craftsmanship: Doing What You Love...”

Revolution and were the predecessors of the 'craftsman.' Artisans, and later craftsmen were revered in their knowledge and abilities to build, create, or construct their products with high degrees of excellence.⁴

Over the course of this year, I worked to draw attention to the still prevalent world of handmade functional ceramics and the intrinsic value of the maker, through my vigorous production on the potter's wheel. I expanded my practice, increased my production and delved deeper into my motives; exploring and questioning the value I find characteristic to being a good craftsman in today's world. With this work, I argue that the value of my works is not only in their existence but also in the nature of their genesis.

II. Machine-made

adjective

1 : made by machinery —distinguished from *handmade*

2 : stereotypes, mechanical⁵

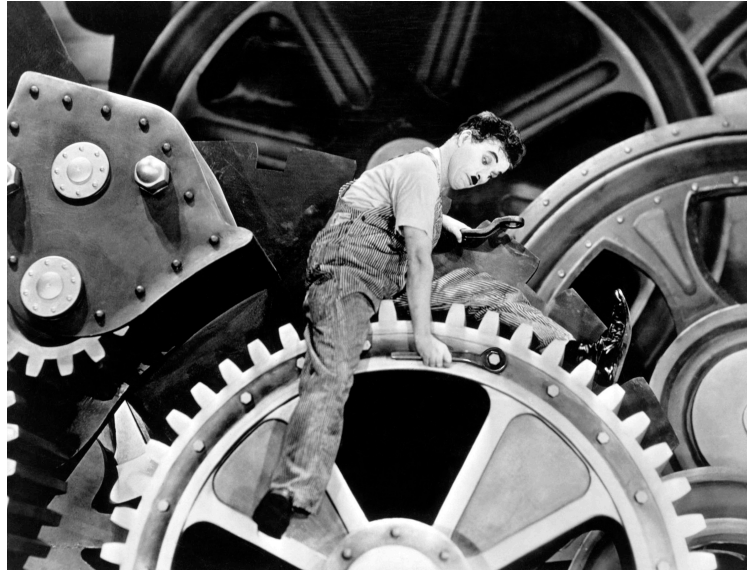
Along with James Watt's improvement of the steam engine, came its application to the manufacturing process. Tasks that used to take years of training and apprenticeship to master were broken down into menial mindless steps on a mechanical assembly line. As our society's infatuation with factory systems grew, craftspeople and their skills fell by the wayside. Believe it or not, artists like myself are still feeling the wake of this revolutionary shift away from quality handmade goods. As a craftsman, live and well in this post industrial revolution era, I am irritated with the dominance of factory systems over my market. It has replaced an importance of

⁴ Williamson, Robert M. "A World Without Craftsmen - Maintenance Technology." Maintenance Technology. 2007. Accessed February 20, 2016. <http://www.maintenancetechnology.com/2007/07/a-world-without-craftsmen/>.

⁵ Merriam-Webster. Accessed April 1, 2016. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/machine-made>.

skill and craft with discipline and anonymity.⁶

Thinking about this shift, I found myself referencing the Charlie Chaplin film *Modern Times*, and its comparison to Lewis Hine's photograph *Power House Mechanic*. While these pieces are both examples of man's interaction with machinery, they present very different scenarios. In *Modern Times*, a man is tangled up with a machine,



(Still from Charlie Chaplin's film *Modern Times*)
trying desperately to take control.⁷ Hine, on the other hand, presents us with a man clearly dominating the massive machine behind him.⁸ In thinking about this juxtaposition between Chaplin's man vs. machine and Hine's man as a member of the machine, I realized that maybe I should stop considering myself an opponent of our machine-dominated age and find a way to position myself, and my practice, within it.



(Hine's Photograph, *Power House Mechanic*)

⁶ Hill, Roger B., Ph.D. "Industrial Revolution." *Industrial Revolution*. 1996. Accessed March 13, 2016. <http://workethic.coe.uga.edu/hir.html>.

⁷ *Modern Times*. By Charlie Chaplin. Performed by Charlie Chaplin. Beverly Hills, CA: United Artists, 1936.

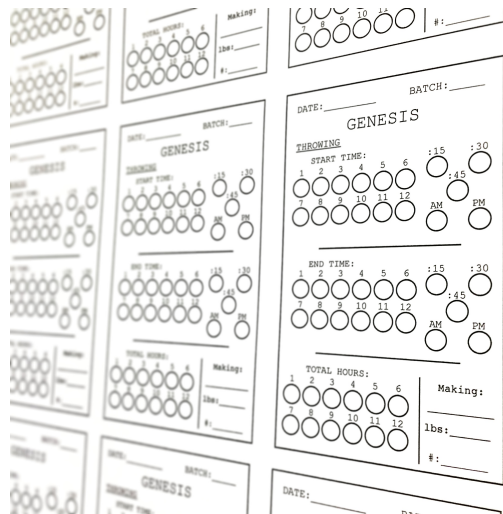
⁸ Pohl, Frances K. *Framing America: A Social History of American Art*. New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, 2002.

It was at this stage that I thought of performance artist Tehching Hsieh. In his work *Time Clock Piece*, he punched in (for “work”) every hour on the hour for an entire year. This piece was a statement about the strenuous hours of industrial laborers.⁹ I wondered how I could bring this aspect of the industrial work place, which I unfortunately compete with, into my studio practice. It would not only add to my work but could be a huge help in documenting my production and hopefully its improvement over the year. With that in

(Artist Tehching Hsieh performing his work *Time Clock Piece*)



(Punch Cards)



mind I set out to design my

own employee punch card that would fit my needs:

one for wedging, one for throwing, one for trimming and one for glazing. At first, I created a worksheet that

I could complete with every studio work session. It

was then brought to my attention that that the nature of

industry is to be efficient in every aspect. I went back

to the drawing board to redesign the more thought out punch card you see here. However, these

punch cards were not received well and have since been removed from my process.

⁹ Ardia, Mai. "NYC-Based Artist Tehching Hsieh: When Life Becomes A Performance." *The Culture Trip*. Accessed December 28, 2015. <http://theculturetrip.com/north-america/usa/new-york/articles/tehching-hsieh-when-life-becomes-a-performance/>.

III. Hand·made

han(d)'mād/

adjective

adjective: **handmade**; adjective: **hand-made**

made by hand, not by machine, and typically therefore of superior quality.¹⁰

I cannot help but question the industrial world I have grown so accustomed to living in and the complications it presents for someone like me. I aspire to create and sell functional pottery, meant to live in the cupboards of everyday homes, rather than on a shelf or in a museum like an artifact. I spend countless hours and pounds of clay researching this ancient trade through creation and repetition, continually striving toward a more fine-tuned skill. Despite my efforts, consumers still tend toward the ever-accessible, “perfect” machine-made ceramic goods. I use the word “perfect” alongside machine-made because of the characteristic sameness. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines perfect as: “completely correct or accurate, having no mistakes or flaws.”¹¹ Machine-made goods are the result of a process engineered to reduce flaws. They may be well-made, but by the nature of their process, lose their individuality and evidence of human touch. In this sense, they are each “perfect.”

“Perfect” brings up an important distinction between well-made handmade objects and well-made machine-made objects. As potter Michele Luu puts it,

My pottery pieces are not perfect. There are so many steps that go into making a finished piece and ‘mistakes’ can happen during any one of these stages—wedging the clay, throwing (which is an entirely long process in itself), drying, trimming, more drying, bisque firing, cooling, sanding rough edges, glazing, firing again, and then sanding once more. I’ve had my fair share of uneven trims and messed up glazing but I feel that there’s a certain beauty to these so-called imperfections. That is what makes it handmade and there is something authentic and unique about handcrafted items in a mass-produced

¹⁰ "Definition of Handmade in English:." Handmade: Definition of Handmade in Oxford Dictionary (American English) (US). Accessed April 3, 2016. http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/handmade.

¹¹ Merriam-Webster. Accessed April 2, 2016. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/perfect>.

society. Everything made by hand is truly one-of-a-kind.¹²

It is these “so-called imperfections” that Luu speaks of, which set handmade goods apart from their machine-made counterparts.

At the start of this project, I sat at the wheel and began throwing, shaking off the cobwebs from the summer and assessing my goals for my Integrative Project. My thoughts turned to a professor I had while studying abroad in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. The amazingly talented ceramicist, Greg Payce, is the voice in my head when I’m feeling a little lost in the studio. He is a huge advocate for research through making, something I’m not sure I understood before meeting him and embracing his catch phrase “love your work.” I asked myself amidst my confusion: “what would Greg do?” The answer at this stage was “just keep making”. So that’s what I did.

It was at this point that I was calling my project *Manchine*, trying to improve my skill and increase my production, while thinking of myself as part of a throwing machine. Naturally, I questioned if this assembly line of one would be able to compete with today’s machines that are void of human interference and make more, faster, for less money. I asked myself, “What are you doing? Why are you doing this?” This led me to an important realization: I place value on the presence of a living, breathing, maker. There is something very intimate about *me* creating a vessel for *your* use: a user-maker relationship unique to handmade goods and absent from those that are machine-made. The absence of this relationship is why I am filled with disappointment when I flip over a ceramic dish, only to find a company insignia or a “made in China” decal.

¹² Luu, Michele. “The Beauty Of Wabi-Sabi.” Web log. *Wordpress*. Michele Luu, January 22, 2015. <https://michelleluupottery.wordpress.com/2015/01/22/the-beauty-of-wabi-sabi/>.

Where is the value of that maker?

As I read more into the value of handmade goods, I came across one journal in particular that seemed to make sense of my work. “Art and Authenticity: The Importance of Originals in Judgments of Value,” by George Newman and Paul Bloom identifies two key dimensions that are particularly important to the valuation of original artworks. The two dimensions are: “(1) the assessment of the art object as a unique creative act or performance and (2) the degree of physical contact with the artist.”¹³ This was somewhat of a revelation for me. I flip over ceramic goods, crossing my fingers that I find a human signature scratched into the clay because it tells me the piece is a result of someone’s individual attention and care. It is undeniable evidence of a user-maker relationship in which I am ecstatic to participate. Well-made, handmade pottery is both a physical testament to the craftsman’s skill and a record of their process; a way of documenting a performance with idiosyncrasies that can never be replicated exactly.

¹³ Newman, G. E., & Bloom, P. (2011, November 14). Art and Authenticity: The Importance of Originals in Judgments of Value. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1037/a0026035

IV. Well-made

'wel'meɪd

adjective

adjective: **well-made**; adjective: **well made**
strongly or skillfully constructed.¹⁴

To me, well-made objects, whether handmade or machine-made follow a few criteria: 1) they have a satisfying weight and are not clunky or hefty, 2) the inside form is honest to the outside (it is well trimmed), 3) the form considers ergonomics/function, 4) they have a “breathy” volume about them; meaning that they look as if they have just taken a big breath of air, and lastly, 5) a well-made object will not interfere with the experience of using it. In other words, I believe a well-made mug is one you forget about while drinking your coffee, not one whose handles’ discomfort is distracting. The fact is, however, that even when a potter meets these criteria and creates a well-made vessel intended for use, it often lives the majority of its life on a shelf. Why is this? What causes consumers to treat handmade pottery as precious, unusable art? Why can’t it be admired *and* used?

I attribute this to a multitude of things. For one, handmade goods are generally more expensive than their machine-made counterparts and many consumers have no idea why. There are very few people who truly understand when I say that I am a ceramic artist. Usually they are immediately sparked with amusement and say “like in *Ghost*?!” Realizing that this classic movie is the only connection they can make, I say, “yeah, kinda.” However, the reality is, it is not “just like *Ghost*.” Patrick Swayze is definitely not behind me on my stool, caressing the clay and my

¹⁴ "The Definition of Well-made." Dictionary.com. Accessed April 20, 2016.
<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/well-made>.

hands as we harmoniously bring up the walls of a pot together.¹⁵ It's a bit more complicated than that. There is technique of hand, posture and breathing involved, all of which are hard enough without the ghost of my deceased lover behind me. But believe it or not, this momentous scene is all many people know about pottery and its process. Ignorance of the process has certainly paid contribution to the stigma that pottery is something precious, elite, and not for everyone.

Interestingly enough, it wasn't until I glazed my first batch of bowls that I thought to question the reasoning behind my color choices. I kept an eye out for color pairings I enjoyed and found that I am extremely inspired by the pallet around me. I am drawn to differing colors that meet to form crisp lines. I asked myself, (My Egypy, Painting by Charles Demuth)

“Where else have I seen colors meet to form line?” One movement that echoes these visuals is the Precisionist Movement. Specifically, the work of Charles Sheeler and Demuth is extremely appealing.¹⁶ The fragmented colors create line beautifully and naturally in a way I have been trying to produce through my glaze application.

When I first began my study of ceramics four years ago, I told my



¹⁵ Ghost. Directed by Jerry Zucker. By Bruce Joel Rubin. Produced by Lisa Weinstein. Performed by Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore. Paramount Pictures, 1990. DVD.

¹⁶ Pohl, Frances K. *Framing America: A Social History of American Art*. New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, 2002.

professor, Susan Crowell that I had glaze anxiety. Quite frankly, it drove me crazy not to have complete control over things like glaze run, interaction and everything else that goes on in the kiln. While I could see aspects of precisionism in my glazing, the unpredictability of my media and its processes lead me in a different direction. Through my research of the Japanese ideal of Wabi-Sabi, I have overcome my need for absolute control over my glazes. Michele Luu says in her journal, “Wabi-Sabi represents a comprehensive Japanese world view or aesthetic centered on the acceptance of transience and imperfection. The aesthetic is sometimes described as one of beauty that is ‘imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete.’”¹⁷ No matter how precise my handwork has been in the studio, the process ends in the hands of the kiln gods. Sometimes that copper red just comes out green or doesn't adhere to the piece at all, cracking and crawling against the clay. Is this a bad thing? Should I be upset if my white porcelain cups pick up some blue flashing from another volatile glaze in the kiln? While this used to drive me crazy, my study of Wabi-Sabi has taught me to cherish the subtleties over which I have no control.¹⁸ It is these testaments to process and human interaction that I believe set handmade pottery apart from its machine-made counterparts.

¹⁷ Luu, Michele. “The Beauty Of Wabi-Sabi.” Web log. *Wordpress*. Michele Luu, January 22, 2015. <https://michelleluupottery.wordpress.com/2015/01/22/the-beauty-of-wabi-sabi/>.

¹⁸ Koren, Leonard. *Wabi-sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*. Point Reyes, CA: Imperfect Publishing, 2008.

V. Work

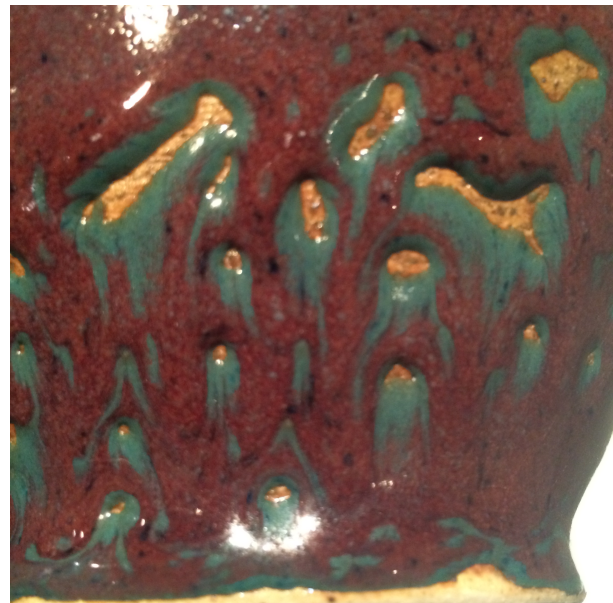
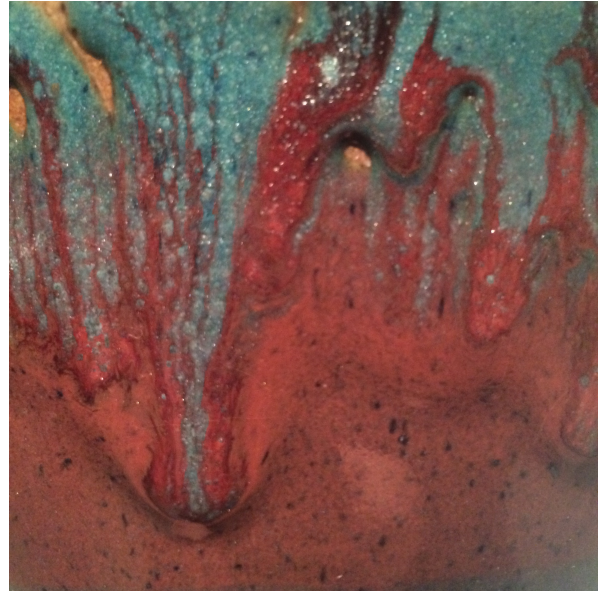
wɜrk/

noun

noun: **work**; plural noun: **works**; plural noun: **the works**

activity involving mental or physical effort done in order to achieve a purpose or result.¹⁹

Wabi-Sabi: Beauty of Imperfection



¹⁹ "Definition of Work in English:." Work: Definition of Work in Oxford Dictionary (American English) (US). Accessed April 20, 2016. http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/work.

Precisionism: Color Meets to Form Line



Improvement of Form: From Hefty to Breathly



Improvement of Handles: Ergonomics and Weight



The Show: Testaments to Practice



VII. Con·clu·sion

kən'klooZHən/

noun

noun: **conclusion**; plural noun: **conclusions**

1. the end or finish of an event or process.²⁰

This year, I have created over 100 ceramic objects. I have increased my efficiency and am using materials more wisely. I even have more control over my forms and their volume. There is a clear progression of improvement in my craft, especially when it comes to my pulled handles. In addition, I successfully formulated and worked with my own glazes. As I mentioned previously, my process began with research through making. Using my drive for improvement and the questions it forced me to ask myself as a springboard, I decided that my year would be about increasing my speed of production without sacrificing the quality of the result. Bisque-ware began building up on my studio shelf, and I realized I needed a plan. At the end of this all, I was going to have a show. What was it going to look like? It was at this time that I formulated my first idea. I decided that I was going to fabricate a gallery kitchenette in which my pieces would live for the duration of the exhibition. This was where I imagined them living after the project, so it seemed only right. However, as the weeks rolled on and the work developed, I grew more and more accustomed to the idea of myself as a one-man factory. Perhaps having this attitude towards my studio practice could combat the treatment of ceramic objects as precious.

It was this motive of producing more, faster that lead me to create and use a machine for my show. It was both an attempt at literally competing with machine-made ceramics,

²⁰ "Conclusion." The Free Dictionary. Accessed April 20, 2016. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/conclusion>.

and an effort to make my craft approachable. I hoped to shed light on my process and help others understand the value of my role within it. It is for this reason, that I decided my conveyor belt machine would lead nowhere; a visual representation of what I believed from the get go. The value of my works is not only in their existence, but in the nature of their genesis. These pieces are not precious, but rather just parts of my journey as a craftsperson.

Endnotes

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