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'stillwater' : An exhibition that explores touch and the everyday through ceramic objects and photography

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Abstract

The exhibition, *stillwater*, is a Capstone Project that showcases ceramic-based installations in addition to photographs by Ian Sherlock. Both Ian and myself use material and process in its raw form. The work that Sherlock exhibits in *stillwater* is a series of pinhole camera exposures of the sun passing. He sees this simple yet profound passing of time as an opportunity to gain tacit knowledge of the sun. In my work, I gain parallel knowledge in the medium of clay, as I am physically invested in every mark that I make. There is no smoothing over or correcting; every moment is recorded. In both of these direct and visible gestures, repeated acts become an offering of intimate access to the everyday.

This reflective essay will provide the context for the work in this exhibition, formed by historical and contemporary artistic influences. These inspirations are aesthetic, material, and conceptual. The project is grounded in the experience that I had in Japan, where I focused on rituals that permeate everyday life. The research informed the central piece in *stillwater*, called *Wash*, where viewers are invited to wash their hands with a handmade pitcher and basin. Many other artistic influences are explored, who also focus their attention on the experience and objects of everyday life. Through contextualizing this exhibition, the reflection reveals the role of this body of work in contemporary Western culture, as it responds to a desire to deeply touch and connect to the overlooked moments in our everyday lives.

Executive Summary

The exhibition, *stillwater*, is a Capstone Project, but also the culmination of the work that I have been engaged in over the four years that I have studied at Syracuse University.

‘Stillwater’ became an opportunity to present both my own work and the artwork of photography major, Ian Sherlock, as we both use material and process in its raw form. The work that Sherlock exhibits in *stillwater* is a series of pinhole camera exposures of the sun passing. Sherlock sees this simple yet profound passing of time as an opportunity to gain tacit knowledge of the sun. In my own work, I gain parallel knowledge in the medium of clay, as I am physically involved in every mark that I make. There is no smoothing over or correcting; every moment is recorded. In both of these direct and visible gestures, repeated acts become an offering of intimate access to the everyday.

To amplify our potential to convey our quiet, contemplative work, it felt important and beneficial for these two bodies of work to come together in response to a desire to encounter art, life, and the everyday through simple but potentially profound gestures. Shown together, the two bodies of work add gravity to an intentionally subtle display of beauty that alone, might be easy to overlook. As young artists it seems even more pertinent that Ian and I desire to slow down the volume of our viewer’s intake. It is no coincidence that we show restraint in the amount of works we display. The question of “what is enough” is something I continually ask myself, and remains a thread that runs through the work of artists that have influenced me which I will discuss.

Within *stillwater*, *Wash* is the central art installation in which the viewers enter a space, one at a time, to have an intimate interaction with handmade, ceramic vessels. The room is dark, but on a backlit table in the farthest corner sits a pitcher, basin, and towel. The light guides the viewer to the washstand where abstract electric eel pulses emanate from just below the basin. A

looped video of hands feeling their way through Onondaga Lake appears inside the bowl, encouraging the viewer to touch and use the pouring vessels with their own hands. *Wash* is informed by installation, performance, and ceramic-based works of art that I have studied and encountered and that I am now placing in conversation with my own work. The first iteration of the wash station was installed in the spring of 2015. However, in the summer of 2015 I traveled to Japan for seven weeks, which altered how I built and conceptualized the current piece that I call *Wash*.

I chose Japan because I was compelled to make work in the country that had aesthetically and conceptually influenced American potters for centuries, and also to experience what it means for ritual to permeate everyday life. Daily activities like drinking tea and washing ones' hands outside of shrines were enacted with a particular sense of sacred and practiced touch. I noticed how simple actions could be enlivened through focused attention on the contact between person and object. *Wash* is a direct response to my experience in Japan. The piece is ultimately an offering to the audience to fully engage with the experience of washing their hands. Many other influences have shaped the works I have created for *stillwater*, from abstract expressionist, Mark Rothko, to contemporary artist, Andrea Zittel. This project and reflective essay reveals the shared philosophies of many artists who have informed the ideologies behind my artwork.

While all of the movements and artists that I have mentioned may not be conscious of their inter-relations, it is this synthesis that shapes the meaning of my artwork, and pushes me to further probe their relationships and relevance to contemporary art and society. It is clear that all of these influences share an attention to the everyday, to the moments, histories, and gestures that are easy to overlook. It is the fact that the quotidian has been so absent from conversation in contemporary Western culture that it is raised in the art world again and again. It has always

been the artist's role to draw attention to things. However, these artists and myself are doing more than just pointing to the everyday. We are suggesting that it is threatened; as we are beginning to preserve it through the physical objects and meaningful interactions we create.

It feels that my role in the art world is in many ways to continue to elevate and frame the gestures in our lives that may become seemingly obsolete in our increasingly fast-paced world. Through research in Japan, I have witnessed manifestations of Asian thought that have provided the West with inspiration for the past century. In my career as an artist, I will continue with this line of work, experiencing and composing gestures that offer deeper encounters with the mundane.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Executive Summary.....	iv
Acknowledgements	vii
Advice to Future Honors Students	viii
Reflective Essay	1
Works Cited.....	20

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the immeasurable support that I have received from the Renée Crown University Honors Program. Without the encouragement to apply for funding, and the gracious Crown-Wise Scholar Award, I would not have gained the connection to Japanese ceramics and daily life that has grounded my research and exhibition. Funds from the National Council for Education in the Ceramic Arts through the Regina Brown Undergraduate Student Fellowship supported the materials, printing, and rental space for this exhibition. I am forever grateful for my faculty mentors, Peter Beasecker, Anne Beffel, and Errol Willett, who inspire, encourage, and challenge the work and ideas that I have developed throughout my education. In a communal ceramic studio, it goes without saying the support and help of undergraduate, and graduate peers is necessary in this labor intensive and technical process. The Ceramics program at Syracuse University has instilled a sense of community and interdependence among its students that I can now carry in to my career as an artist.

Advice to Future Honors Students

For students working towards creative projects for their Capstones, I would advise to start thinking about your choice of topic sophomore year. My topic grew and changed, but it was rooted in ideas that I wanted to engage with for a long time, and still do. With students organizing exhibitions, I would recommend showing and finding your location early on. This was one of my biggest struggles I encountered, and it could have been avoided had I known what I wanted in a space earlier on. Never think that you will have time in the future to figure out the logistics, as it is always better to think about these things earlier on so you can focus on the creative side closer to the end of the Capstone period. I would also recommend writing about your contextual influences continually while doing your creative work. In addition to making the creative reflection easier, it was inspiring to research artists and movements while working through my own materials and ideas. These influences inspired significant changes in the work, and I am more prepared to talk about how the work relates to the field of art.

Reflective Essay

In this essay I will explore the context, process, and meaning of my Capstone exhibition, *stillwater*. Each influence has offered both material and conceptual frameworks for my artwork. In some cases what was initially an attraction to a particular aesthetic has transformed into an exploration of a concept that drives the form, and vice versa. My process and decision-making are woven into this reflection, as they stem from the artist and movements I study. Meaning is perhaps most speculative, as the affect of the work is difficult to decipher without time to see where and how the work will engage with personal, cultural, and political conversations in the world today. However, through orchestrating the meeting of various influences, I continue to probe and develop the questions of those before me, all of who demonstrate a desire to facilitate a sincere connection to objects, people, and everyday life. I do not hope to find or unveil truths through this exhibition and scholarship, as much as raise questions for the viewer about the presence and absence of intimacy in our lives.

The exhibition, *stillwater*, is a Capstone project, but also the culmination of the work that I have been immersed in over the four years that I have studied at Syracuse University. *Stillwater* became an opportunity to present both my own work and the artwork of photography major, Ian Sherlock, as we both choose to display material and process in its raw form. The work that Sherlock exhibits in *stillwater* is a series of pinhole camera exposures of the sun passing (figure 1.) He sees this simple yet profound passing of time as an opportunity to gain implicit knowledge of the sun. In my own work, I gain tacit knowledge of the medium of clay, as I am physically involved in every mark I make. There is no smoothing over or correcting; every

moment is recorded. In both of our direct and visible gestures, repeated acts provide an offering of intimate access to phenomena of everyday life (figure 2.)

To amplify our potential to convey our quiet and contemplative art, it felt beneficial for these two bodies of work to come together to convey our strong desire to encounter art, life, and the everyday through simple but profound gestures. Shown together, the work adds gravity to an intentionally subtle display of beauty that is easy to overlook. The perfunctory way many, including myself, encounter art in museums and galleries is alarmingly fast, making it far too easy to miss subtle yet resonant works of art. I sat in a history of art lecture this spring with students claiming that they had not spent more than ten minutes in front of a piece of art. If we are not giving ourselves over to a work of art then it is likely not reaching its fullest potential. As young people and artists it seems even more urgent that Ian and myself share our impulse to slow down and limit of our viewer's intake. The question of "what is enough" is something I frequently ask myself, and hopefully is reflected in my work. For example, in *stillwater*, the piece *Together and Apart* (figure 3,) is the pairing of two objects facing each other inside an elongated container. The composition is a metaphor for the simple act of two people squarely facing one another. This minimal grouping creates a surprising amount of tension between the objects, displaying the power of attention in a simple gesture.

Central to *stillwater* is the installation *Wash*, in which the viewers enter a room, one at a time, to have an intimate interaction with handmade, ceramic vessels. The room is dark, but on a backlit table in the farthest corner sits a pitcher, basin, and towel. The light guides the viewer to the washstand where abstract electric eel pulses emanate from just below the basin. A looped video of hands feeling their way through Onondaga Lake appears inside the bowl, encouraging the viewer to use the pouring vessels with their own hands. *Wash* is informed by installation,

performance, and ceramic based works of art that I have studied and encountered, and that I am now placing in conversation with my own work. The first iteration of the wash station was installed in the spring of 2015. However, in the summer of 2015 I traveled to Japan for seven weeks, which ultimately inspired me to incorporate an added level of ritual in the piece. I now include a performer that repeatedly organizes and refills the collection of pitchers at the wash station.

I chose Japan because I was compelled to make work in the country that has aesthetically and conceptually influenced American potters for centuries, and also to experience the permeation of ritual in everyday life. Daily activities like drinking tea and washing ones' hands outside of a shrine were enacted with a particular sense of sacred and practiced touch. I noticed how simple actions could be enlivened through focused attention on the meeting of person and object. *Wash* is a direct response to my experience in Japan. The piece is ultimately an offering to the audience to fully engage with washing their hands.

In Japan, this attention to objects begins with creating it, which instills the deep-rooted relationship to touch that is palpable in Japanese daily life. To make clay vessels in a country whose pottery tradition goes back to 14,000 BCE is to be enveloped by a deeper sense of intention and purpose during the act of making. I recall standing in front of an early Jomon, cord-marked vessel in the Tokyo National Museum, mesmerized to share the same method of construction used in Japan thousands of years ago (figure 4.) While the function and impetus for ceramic objects has changed significantly since Jomon vessels, I was inspired by the notion that the same pace and sense of time is recorded in Jomon pottery as in the vessels I coil and pinch. The process repels innovation, because it surrenders to the time that it takes to form the object. Pinching also visually embodies the passage of time in the captured instance of each finger mark.

There is little smoothing over, what you see is what occurred. The marks of Jomon pottery historically ground my process in a distinct, rhythmic, and timeless gesture of the hand.

This sustained fluency in handicrafts, and strong relationship to clay, is apparent in more than just the objects that I saw in Japan, but also in the heightened sense of touch that seemed to permeate everyday encounters. More recent conceptual and philosophical inquiries that speak about the objects potential to add beauty to daily interactions comes from the Japanese Mingei or folk craft movement. This movement was disseminated in the West by way of the British potter, Bernard Leach, who traveled to Japan and wrote *The Potters Book*. Leach also wrote the introduction to the seminal book, *The Unknown Craftsman*, written by one of the founders of Mingei, Yanagi Soetsu. These books arguably romanticized the East for artists and citizens of the Western Hemisphere, who fell in love with a country and ceramic tradition that emphasizes truth to material, lack of ego, modesty, and everyday use.

It is with this history and notion of Mingei with which I traveled to Japan. The folk potters of Japan thrived for a few decades, but the reality of globalization and a production based economy makes any craft culture question its role in a world where things can always be made cheaper and faster. This being said, in my own brief experience in Japan it seemed as if modern life and the handmade were not necessarily in tension with one another, but instead both approached with a craft-oriented mindset of undivided attention to detail, a strong work ethic, and devotion. I observed a convergence of the seemingly opposing sides of craft and technology, in the teacup made by a national treasure that sat in the kitchen, which doubled as a family room where the television was always on. In a way the lack of separation between the digital world and craft traditions made room for a wholehearted embrace of both. Experiencing this facet of day-to-day life in Japan taught me that I did not have to forfeit my own interest in digital art for

the sake of craft. This is not a radical concept, but one that does not naturally present itself in a Bachelors of Fine Arts education in Ceramics in the United States.

It is not a coincidence that I attempt to blur the hierarchy between digital and craft-based mediums in the piece *Wash*, where both modes work simultaneously to bring the viewers' attention to the experience at hand. While one can romanticize that handmade objects have the power in and of themselves to captivate our attention in the West, it is more likely that our dualistic frame of mind and attraction to screens has shaped what brings us to our senses. Therefore, it felt logical to incorporate video projection and sound in *Wash*, in order to provide the possibility of a sensuous experience through the ubiquitous gesture of washing ones' hands.

The Mingei movement might be most well known in the West for their aesthetic influence on American potters, but another aspect of the movement that has influenced my work is the active questioning of what it means to display the quotidian in a museum or gallery. In *The Unknown Craftsman*, Soetsu writes, "I would like the visitor not so much to "meet the craftsman at home" as to see how such things fit into everyday and to take home some ideas for enriching his own life."¹ This is actually a radical concept, given that the gallery and museum are traditionally perceived as close to the end of an art objects life. However, with utilitarian works, the gallery is only the beginning. A leader in this movement was Kawaii Kanjiro's former home and studio was turned into a museum. Walking through this home was more relatable than walking through a white washed museum of displaced objects in vitrines and on pedestals. At Kanjiro's home, the objects were configured as if still in use. More than anything, the Mingei approach to display has led me to incessantly question the role of the exhibition in my own work, and where the life of my artwork begins, ends, and most significantly, persists. As a young artist

¹ Soetsu Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman* (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1989), 105.

I am still navigating this question through employing varying degrees of interaction in the exhibition space and through leaving traces of touch and time in the objects themselves.

In addition to historical and experiential influences, I have found that understanding and sitting with works of art that I find physically and conceptually moving has helped me construct the context and identity of my own work. The British ceramist, Edmund de Waal is an artist and writer who has affected my work on different levels. De Waal's art and writing has been influential in the field of ceramics in denying the separation between art and craft, by elevating the crafted object through placing them in a much grander context than one would expect. De Waal's book, *The Hare with the Amber Eyes*, is a perfect example of how objects can become more than material, a concept that has inspired how I frame the role of touch as an immaterial experience. In the book, de Waal traces an heirloom collection of Netsuke, which are Japanese, hand carved, palm-sized sculptures. These objects that were forgotten through war and changing fashions are now brought into focus, just as the forgotten history of de Waal's Jewish and exiled ancestors is uncovered through the course of the book.

De Waal's newest book, *The White Road*, has informed *Wash* with its particular inquiry into the history of porcelain, which emphasizes an aristocratic and also personal obsession with purity of material and whiteness. As the ceramic vessels I make are porcelain, de Waal's research and questioning has lead me to interrogate my own impetus and reasoning for the continued use of the "purest" material. In the final stages of putting together 'stillwater,' it became apparent that I needed to think more about the relevancy of washing one's hands in relation to the issues surrounding water globally and locally. Living in Syracuse I am in close proximity to Onondaga Lake, one of the most polluted lakes in the country. In *Wash*, a video projects into the washbasin of hands moving through Onondaga Lake water. Coupled with the

perceived purity of porcelain, this video provides a juxtaposition that questions the importance of and blurs the line between things being pure and impure. Onondaga Lake is in the process of undergoing a dredging and restoration plan, sponsored by the company that played a significant role in polluting the lake.

The local Onondaga Nation and people will argue that the pureness of the land and water will never be returned to its original state, which witnessed the gathering of the Iroquois confederacy that brought together six different nations on the shores of the lake. With this history in mind the possibility of purity is unrealistic and muddled, just as the porcelain that I have chosen for this work is pointedly gray. No porcelain clay body is void of iron contaminants and the “purest” porcelains just have the smallest ratios of trace iron. De Waal follows an incessant obsession with purity of rich white men, by traveling to, exploring, and researching the kingdoms and leaders wrought with this obsession. The story of porcelain begins when Marco Polo, the Venetian merchant traveler, brings a small porcelain jar back to Venice from Tinju. De Waal clarifies the origins of the name Porcelain in writing, “the object and the name come together and start this long history of desire for porcelain. The name of this grandest of commodities, this white gold, the cause of the bankruptcy of princes, of *Porzellankrankheit* – porcelain sickness – comes from an eye stretching Venetian slang, the vulgar wolf-whistle after a pretty girl.”² So the history of white clay in the Western hemisphere is tainted and defined by vulgar desire. De Waal’s vessels reference the forms of historical porcelain objects, and are presented in minimalist groupings that poetically attend to this past (figure 5.) While my work does not overtly address this complicated history, I am intent on leaving the crude marks of my fingers and the porcelain unglazed, so as to showcase an honest and raw beauty that endures

² Edmund de Waal, *The White Road* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 8.

through a regrettable past. I have not escaped an obsession with white clay, as the material seduces me too.

Ironically, we can now recognize that these aristocrats were chasing after whiteness that is actually unattainable and always tainted with varying degrees of impurity. De Waal's investigation led me to familiarize myself with the complex history of the location that I am exhibiting an installation centered on water. I want to open up potential for viewers to question the meaning of purity in their own surroundings and lives. This issue still feels relevant, as access and contamination of water has been in the media spotlight particularly in the case of lead contamination in Flint, Michigan. These crises should be acted on right now, but as de Waal's *The White Road* suggests, these issues of purity and access are always present, and it is merely a matter of paying attention.

Paying attention is the ultimate affect that I want my contemplative installations and objects to have. I took a course freshman year, called 'Meditation Habitat,' which centered on the idea of offering visitors a contemplative experience inside of the outdoor structures that we would build. Our professor, Anne Beffel, introduced students to a method of planning and making that lead to the creation of a very specific and composed experience that framed and shifted the viewer's experience of the everyday. Throughout the course I collaboratively designed and built an outdoor structures called "Framing the Sky," with the intent of giving people on campus the opportunity to focus solely on the sky and passing clouds. The form opened outward, so that the sky was the only thing in one's line of vision (figure 6.) It was inspiring to watch people interact with the piece and then comment on how it changed the course of their day, or made their experience of the sky new again. Ever since this course, creating

works that have a four-dimensional and possibly physiological affect on the viewer or user has been a guiding principle in my work.

‘Meditation Habitat’ also introduced students to contemporary artists whose work is influenced by Zen Buddhism and Eastern philosophies. In taking this course I came into direct conversation with a handful of artists in the post World War II period that were specifically interested in the Eastern intellect. *Japonisme* infused Western art in the late 19th century, borrowing from Eastern aesthetics, but this more recent movement is specifically engaged with Eastern thought. John Cage was at the forefront of this movement in the art world, and is quoted saying that “our business in living is to become fluent with the life we are living, and art can help this.”³ This quote suits the intentions of the ‘Meditation Habitat’ course, and *stillwater*, which both aim to focus one’s attention on the present, and more pointedly, the ubiquitous parts of our lives that pass us by.

Interactive artworks that provide fresh outlooks and access to everyday life continue to influence my process and work. Cage, along with other philosophers, writers, and artists, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jack Kerouac, and Marcel Duchamp, were all influenced by a freedom and depth of thought that came from exposure to Eastern philosophies which go against the grain of dualistic Western thought. These leaders in their fields paved the way for future artists such as Andrea Zittel, who continue to question the Western lived experience by putting a spotlight on the everyday. Many post-war abstract and performance artists are criticized for too loosely borrowing and interpreting philosophies that were traditionally accompanied by strict regiments and disciplines. Zittel almost directly responds to this critique by imposing rules and a high level of control on her own day-to-day schedule and artistic practice. An essential aspect of Zittel’s

³ Alexandra Munroe, *The Third Mind* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2009), 201.

oeuvre is intense structure, which she does not impose on anyone else, but which still leads observers to question their personal lived experience.

I was doing background research for the ‘Meditation Habitat’ course when I came across the work of Zittel. I contacted her and made the case for why I desired to live in one of her projects in Joshua Tree, California. I took a leave of absence after my sophomore year of college at Syracuse University, as I was compelled to physically experience how Zittel’s control over the designed experience of her utopic vision might deepen my understanding of what it means to pay attention to daily life in the United States.

Zittel granted me the opportunity to live in her work: I stayed in her encampment, sleeping in her wagon stations for one month. The “stations,” or small pods, are sleeping structures, and sit next to an outdoor kitchen and bathing facilities surrounded by the boulders on Zittel’s land (figure 7.) Living in this isolated and controlled environment was incredibly clarifying in that it made me hyper-aware of the interaction between the landscape, the artwork, and myself. I was stripped of my usual experience of the everyday, which forced me to take note of the natural rhythms of the high desert. My main focus usually came down to finding shade. There were no distractions in this Wi-Fi free, and socially and visually sparse area. I found I became more conscious of my own presence and of subtle nuances of the desert landscape.

Experiencing Zittel’s realized utopia continues to inspire the work that I create. Her aim to heighten awareness of the everyday through a work of art is a similar framework from which my own art grows, as I take simple actions and ritualize them by creating specific contexts for particular objects and interactions I hope to illicit. In the desert I came to realize one of art’s greatest powers: making the viewer mindful of everyday life. I am now more intentional with the spaces that I use in an installation, and consider how they will impact each object and the

viewer's ability to associate the work with their own life. This mixing of art and life creates the potential for art to exist and impact us elsewhere, not just in the confines of the gallery.

Influenced by Zen Buddhism, this mindset was made accessible to artists during the post-war period, and then to Zittel, and now myself.

My positive response to living in Zittel's work is also in part because of the way she articulates process itself. Zittel says, "rather than escaping labor, it became more interesting to think about ways to give it more meaning and use it as a means of pleasure."⁴ Each morning, everyone staying on Zittel's property would give an hour of their time to do tasks such as raking the sand. This job was not towards a practical end, but for the sake of labor itself. In relation to my own work, labor reveals itself in the individual objects, which exhibit the seemingly tedious act of pinching clay, over and over. Yet, through this monotony I give myself over to the object, and gain a deeper connection to the process. The shift from labor to meaningful gesture also reveals itself in the repeated act of refilling the pitchers, tasked to the performer in *Wash*.

After deeply connecting to the desert landscape and Zittel's designed space for living, I would argue that labor is also a means to create intimacy in a work of art by fostering extreme familiarity with a single act. Intimacy in art means that the viewer can sense things the way the artist does, or that there is an honesty and transparency between the process and the product that is readily and easily taken in. I see this happening in my own artwork in a literal way when a person has an impulsive gesture towards touching the objects I make. While this reaction occurs with handmade ceramics in general, it has become clear that it is a result of the imprint of the hand, which echoes and invites touch. Vulnerability and intimacy go hand in hand, and in making this body of work I have felt more vulnerable than I ever have through a tactile process.

⁴ Trevor Smith, "The Rules of Her Game." In *Andrea Zittel*, ed. Paola Morsiani and Trevor Smith (New York: Prestel Verlag, 2005), 40.

The Italian still life painter Giorgio Morandi was initially an aesthetic influence on my work, but also exemplifies another means towards developing intimacy with objects. Morandi devoted his artistic life to recording the everyday. His deliberate and labored practice of painting ordinary objects in his room brought reverent attention to the mundane clutter of domestic life. As Morandi's work progressed over time, his sensitivity to the edges of these objects heightened. The arrangement and accumulation of singular items in his work become suggestive entities unto themselves as the outline of the forms blur (figure 8.) Painted the year before Morandi died, figure eight exemplifies this evolution, as there is no definition between the objects as they intersect one another and transcend their associations with function; the composition obtains an aura of otherness. Morandi's contemporary, Giorgio de Chirico, stated that "the purpose of perfecting technique is not for getting closer to the representation of the objects, but, to the contrary to detach it as far as possible to make of it-its own object- a thing unto itself."⁵ In this process of detachment that begins with the artist's relationship to the thing, the viewer's consideration of the everyday is elevated. Subconsciously, we often think of wonderment and awe relative to the grandiose overture. However, in standing still with the attentive squint of our eyes as Morandi did, edges blur, and the materiality of everyday life becomes a transcendent experience.

To have this experience with Morandi's work, viewers must give themselves over to time and space. This slow approach is also necessary with the work of the artist, Mark Rothko, who had a similar obsessive relationship to a single motif. Rothko was the first artist who led me to ask myself the question, what is enough? Firstly, Rothko's work reflects a practiced hand, and one that has been embodying the same gesture years, which to many people seems redundant and

⁵ Janet Abrams, *Giorgio Morandi: The Art of Silence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 59.

unexplorative. I identify with and carry on this obsessive need to repeat when Rothko speaks about “continuing almost compulsively to this day” his series of “dark pictures.”⁶ While I am even questioned by other artists about why I continue to use the process of pinching which to them may seem restrictive, it is a compulsion that is undescrivable and that I must continue working through.

The Rothko chapel in Houston, Texas introduced me to the founder, Dominique de Menil’s sentiments towards contemporary culture. De Menil recognized that Rothko’s work needed a viewer’s undivided attention in order to reveal its fullest potential. She believed that, “nobody is visually naive any longer. We are cluttered with images, and only abstract art can bring us to the threshold of the divine.”⁷ At the time of this statement, de Menil could not yet speak to the effects of the digital-age that gained footing in the 1990s. Today, visual stimuli are not only a result of physical disarray but of excessive imagery that overwhelms us daily. Even billboards may cycle through five images as we pass by. It is challenging in today’s world to pay attention to a single, let alone abstract image, for more than one minute. De Menil suggests that the antidote to chaos is stillness through abstraction. This conviction resulted in the creation of the Rothko Chapel. Surrounded by Rothko’s work, one surrenders to the dim lighting and vague horizon lines, and to the entirety of the space. The room falls away, while the absence of concrete subject matter offers an acknowledgement of something undefinable: the divine.

In contrast with de Menil’s sentiment towards the proliferation of images is the notion that technology can serve as a reminder of our human nature, and more pointedly, our sensuous lives. The American potter Chris Staley argues that the more prominent technology becomes in

⁶ David Anfam, *Mark Rothko: The Works on Canvas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 66.

⁷ Dominique de Menil, *The Rothko Chapel: Writings on Art and the Threshold of the Divine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 18-19.

our society, the more we must use it as a tool to remind us of what is important in our lives, which is our human relationships and the act of caring. Staley tells the story of reading an email about the death of a close friend and watching a tear run down his screen. The story, Staley explains, serves as a beautiful reminder of what is most important to us. The digital world is absorbing, but the tear on the screen, reminds us that we are not born of our instruments. Staley's moment of contemplation echoes Morandi's practice of recasting the objects in his periphery, thereby creating new and deeper relationships with them. Our machines are as ubiquitous today as the bottles that filled Morandi's room. We can learn from Morandi in his willingness to give himself over to an encounter, and become profoundly intimate with objects.

We do not consciously look at objects in our bedrooms like Morandi. However, Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote that "our relationship with things is not a distant one: each speaks to our body and to the way we live. They are clothed in human characteristics (whether docile, soft, hostile or resistant) and conversely they dwell within us as emblems of forms and life we either love or hate."⁸ We may not be aware of it, but our closeness to objects is a fundamental relationship within our existence. This familiarity with the mundane augments the experience felt through overlooked objects when we attend to them. Through recording daily life, like the passing sun, or a hand moving over a vessel, comes the potential to become intimate again with our lives, and the intangibility of otherness.

While all of the movements and artists that I have mentioned may not be conscious of their inter-relations, it is this synthesis that shapes the meaning of my artwork, and pushes me to further probe their relationships and relevance to contemporary art and society. It is clear that all of these influences share an attention to the everyday, to the moments, histories, and gestures that

⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, trans. Oliver Davis (New York: Routledge, 2004), 49.

are easy to overlook. It is the fact that the everyday has been so under acknowledged in contemporary Western culture that it circles back to the center of the art world again and again. It has always been the artist's role to point to things. However, these artists and myself are doing more than just pointing to the everyday, but suggesting that it is threatened, as we begin to preserve it through the physical objects and meaningful interactions we create.

It feels that my role in the art world is in many ways to continue to elevate and frame the gestures in our lives that may become seemingly obsolete in our increasingly fast-paced world. Through research in Japan, I have witnessed manifestations of Asian thought that have provided the West with inspiration for the past century. In my career as an artist, I will continue with this line of work, experiencing, reflecting, and composing gestures that offer deeper encounters with the mundane.

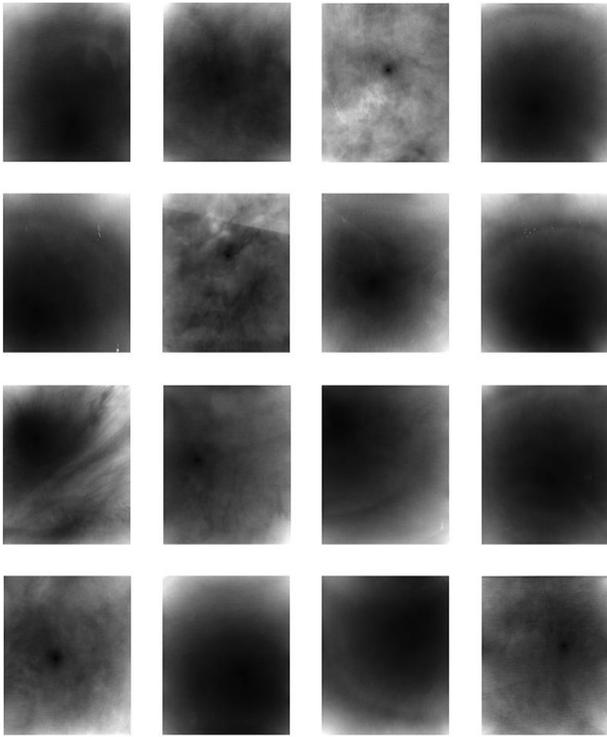


Fig. 1: Ian Sherlock, *On Looking Up* series, 2015.



Fig. 2: Lily Fein, *Pourers* (detail), Summer 2015, porcelain, 6 x 6 x 7.5 in. each.



Fig. 3: Lily Fein, *Together and Apart* (detail), porcelain, graphite, 2016, 37 x 4 x 4.5 in.



Fig. 4: *Jomon Pot*, 2500-1500 B.C. The British Museum, London.
<http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/a_history_of_the_world/objects.aspx#10>



Fig. 5: Edmund de Waal, *Signs & Wonders*, 2009, porcelain installation, Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

<<http://www.edmunddewaal.com/making/exhibitions-and-installations/v-and-a/#381>>



Fig. 6: Lily Fein and Andrew Weigand, "Framing the Sky," 2012, Bamboo, twine, silk screen fabric, 9 x 5 x 4.5 ft., Syracuse, NY.



Fig. 7: Lily at A-Z West Encampment. Photograph by Leah Weinstein. Joshua Tree, CA, 2013.
<<http://www.zittel.org/lily>>



Fig. 8: Giorgio Morandi, 1963, Oil on Canvas, 11 7/8 x 13 3/4 in. Museo Morandi, Bologna.
<<http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2008/giorgio-morandi/photo-gallery>>

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