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DON’T KITSCH YOURSELF!: A Social and Political Critique of American Culture through the Ceramic Collectible and Souvenir

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Abstract

The objective of this thesis paper is to describe my current projects and research within my studio practice. First, this thesis illustrates my personal relationship with kitsch, my ordinary suburban childhood experience, and how these relate to my artwork. Then, the paper discusses my research interests in self fashioning, nostalgia, and sentiment and how it affects the content, imagery and material choices that I make. Next, the thesis goes on to describe particular projects, their subject matter and content. Finally, the thesis concludes that the artwork is successful but where it goes in the world has yet to be determined.
DON’T KITSCH YOURSELF!
A Social and Political Critique of American Culture through the Ceramic Collectible and Souvenir

by

Hollie Lyko

BFA, University of Hartford, 2010

Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts.

Syracuse University
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I grew up middle class to a single parent in Hatfield, Pennsylvania, a small suburb north-west of Philadelphia. In 1996, the summer before I entered third grade, my mother and I upgraded from a one bedroom apartment in Hatfield Village to a house of our own in the development called Fairfield. We had bought the end unit of a town home in a small neighborhood full of identical houses, nestled between Hatfield Elementary School and Pennfield Middle School. It was the most glorious day of my childhood - Move-In Day. I had won the biggest prize I never even knew I wanted. (See Figure 1.)

My mother and I had been sharing a bedroom since I was born and now we had a mansion. I had a bedroom. There were two bathrooms. I had an entire basement to fill with toys. We had a mailbox. We had two trees. We had a driveway. I no longer had to drag my bike up two
flights of stairs. And I officially became a Walker - I didn’t have to worry about taking the bus to school for another eight years.

Growing up, our house did not have much by the way of nice things. We ate off Corelle and shopped at Walmart. We had furniture but it was the kind you put by the side of the road in ten years with a sign that says free. The only nice things we really had were safely kept on display inside our curio cabinet. It stood about six feet tall and was three feet wide. Inside it were my mother’s porcelain treasures - beautiful ladies from the American Fashion collection and exotic animals from the Wildlife of the Seven Continents collection. All of the figurines were produced between 1984 and 1992, by Lenox, an American china company. Several times a year, I was handed a cotton rag and a bottle of Windex. It felt like I was perpetually opening up the cabinet doors, selecting objects, wiping them down, carefully placing them on our stained pink carpet, wiping their glass shelves and putting them back just so. The underside of the figurines read in gold: Fine Porcelain Sculpture. It was until years later at Hartford Art School that I realized those figurines were indeed not Fine Porcelain Sculpture after all.

However many times when I hear someone claim that kitsch is ugly, trite and banal, part of me refuses to believe it can’t be something more. While I agree that kitsch can often be those three things, it is also beautiful, humorous, comforting and personal. My headspace around the concept of kitsch resides in both the academic world and the domestic space of the suburban middle class. Living with kitsch porcelain collections for so long without knowing they were kitsch has given me an appreciation and understanding of what these objects do for an individual. For my mother, these objects were the pre-house purchases of upward mobility - a collection of
subconscious desires. In Susan Stewart’s book *On Longing*, she writes extensively on objects of desire, suggesting that

“the collection relies upon the box, the cabinet, the cupboard, the seriality of shelves. It is determined by these boundaries just as the self is invited to expand within the confines of bourgeois domestic space. For the environment to be an extension of the self, it is necessary not to act upon and transform it, but to declare its essential emptiness by filling it. Ornament, decor and ultimately decorum define the boundaries of private space by emptying that space of any relevance other than that of the subject...If this task of filling in the immediate environment with things were simply one of use value, it would be quite simple. But this filling in is a matter of ornamentation and presentation in which the interior is both a model and a projection of self-fashioning.”

This self fashioning of the domestic space through mass produced objects compels me to examine the types of objects marketed to the middle class and how they relate to the American collective conscience. How these objects are marketed, displayed and sold along with their relationship to the domestic space influence my thinking and making.

My studio practice manifests itself from my childhood experiences and memories - one of growing up within the suburban landscape of malls and shopping plazas. Of visiting American tourist attractions like the Liberty Bell, Santa’s Village, Gettysburg, Dorney Park & Wildwater Kingdom, Hampton Beach, NH; and of living in a domestic space curated and decorated with collections, from the curio cabinet full of Lenox, to our fridge littered with the souvenir magnets from our visited attractions, to the twelve years of CVS Christmas ornaments we hung on our

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mantle. In addition to growing up with a remarkably specific middle class experience, I also attended *Theatre & Kids* performing summer arts camp for ten summers. It was there that I learned the art of the deadpan comedic delivery and improvisation. This intersection of the collection, the souvenir, porcelain kitsch, absurdism, and comedic performance have become my research interests.

I source my materials from antique stores, E-Bay and Etsy, like a medieval knight on a quest. I am always looking for something specific but something also remarkably ubiquitous and ordinary. For the objects that I slip cast in porcelain, I search for Christmas decorations from the 1950s-70s. They filled my grandmother’s cape cod style Massachusetts home every winter - a lot of plastic blow mold injected Santas, light up ceramic trees complete with fake snow, and strings of C-7 light bulbs. It is in these cheap decorations that I show the gluttonous abundance and extraordinary presence of American Christmas. The banal holiday trash that decorates homes across the country with a pervasive, mass produced Christmas. It is within these decorations that I also find comfort. Fond memories of my own childhood, my grandmother’s house, and the impatient joy of waiting for Santa. While I do not have my grandmother’s original decorations, the facsimiles I find are able to tap into a wellspring of personal sentiment. The kind that makes your eyes swell with tears, and suddenly you are eight years old and the illusion is still real. The memories and moments before you realized your uncle was shit faced every Christmas Eve telling jokes about black people. Before you knew your blue bike from Santa really came from someone’s else trash. Before your grandmother died and the whole family tore at each other like a pack of hungry dogs. There lies the power of seemingly benign kitsch objects. Stewart writes
“the antique as souvenir always bears the burden of nostalgia for experience im-
possibly distant in time: the experience of the family, the village, the first hand communi-
ty… Antiquarianism always displays a functional ambivalence; we find either the nostal-
gic desire of romanticism or the political desire of authentication at its base.”

Antiques are not inherently nostalgic; it is only when one has memories associated with an object
that make that object nostalgic.

When an object becomes linked to a romanticized memory, a time and place yearned and
longed for, it becomes nostalgic kitsch. The objects I slip cast are the discarded decorations of a
white Middle class Christmas hosted by old folks born during the Depression. I use these objects
for their instant recognizability as mid 20th century American nostalgia. Many people hold on to
a particular object because it has sentimental value - overwhelming emotional significance or
associations. In The Artificial Kingdom, Celeste Olalquiaga writes

“Selection and organization allow collectors to establish a particular relation with
their objects: no matter how common, an object can always be rescued from it’s apparent
banality by the investment in it of personal meaning, that ineffable “sentimental value”
which can beat the most priceless items.”

These are the things you would grab if your house was on fire. Things you would never ever
dream of selling. Things you treat with care and reverence. Things you keep safe. From these old

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3 Olalquiaga, Celeste. *The Artificial Kingdom on the Kitsch Experience*. University of Minnesota

4 Olalquiaga, Celeste. *The Artificial Kingdom on the Kitsch Experience*. University of Minnesota
decorations I use industrial techniques to replicate them in porcelain, a material with historical implications of value, class and preciousness. My illusions and memories are now crystallized within the ceramic object. (See Figures 2 and 3.)

Figure 2. *Delft Santa*, slip cast porcelain with overglaze decals, on MDF panel, 2019.

Figure 3. *Delft Santa*, detail, slip cast porcelain with overglaze decals, on MDF panel, 2019.
For the found objects that I alter through the addition/subtraction of imagery, I hunt, scour, and dig for ceramic plates with subliminal messages. Often, these plates are collectibles or souvenirs and contain images of Americana. It is within this Americana that I read a subtext into what and who America values. When on the hunt, I look for particular images - the celebrity, the state plate, the political leader, the historical site, the idyllic landscape, the sales pitch and corporate branding. Working with both figurative imagery and the landscape provides me with insight into how American Culture views not only particular people, products and man made places, but also how it views nature and its perceived relationship to it. Tomas Kulka describes some of the recurring themes within kitsch as

“heavily emotionally charged. They are highly charged with stock emotions which spontaneously elicit a ready response. The subject-matter typically depicted by kitsch is generally to be beautiful (horses, long-legged girls), pretty (sunsets, Swiss villages), cute (puppies, kittens), and/or highly emotionally charged (mothers with babies, children in tears).”

I associate the images I choose with variations of or twists on Kulka’s examples. For instance, when I search for something pretty, I am looking for romanticized scenes of American Landscape; images that have potential for commentary, like Yosemite National Park. When I am seeking something emotionally charged, I often look for images of political leaders that have been assassinated, like JFK. When I find Budweiser collectible plates with the iconic Clydesdales, I ironically associate my family’s specific history with alcohol to the strategic marketing and

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branding of a source for addiction. These images I seek are essentially propaganda - ideals, dreams, and successes marketed and sold to ordinary people, who willingly and generously drink the Kool Aid, compelled to collect and acquire objects for their own self-fashioning - to become Americana themselves.

When looking for source material, I also search for what I do not see. After a year of rummaging antique stores, I only encountered plates depicting white people. It then became my quest to find anything other than whiteness. I searched for three months trying to find black people on a plate. Then I found it - *Southern Cotton Fields* by Syracuse China produced in 1952. (See Figure 4.) This romanticized image of brown people picking cotton was revolting as much as it was predictable. I lived with this plate in my studio for two months, allowing it to become part of my periphery. Eventually, I figured how to approach the object and what I wanted to say with it. That is my relationship to the plates that I find. It is never a find it, fix it and finish it kind of situation. It is a slow process of intellectual digestion, one where ideas morph, change and mature.

Figure 4. Full view and detail image of the original plate titled *Southern Cotton Fields* from the American Scene collection produced by Syracuse China in 1952.
With the plates I collect and use, hand painted objects are out of the question- I only seek out decaled images and transferware. The lack of the individual hand in these objects is crucial- it speaks to their production as low quality replicas of a not so special original. Something affordable and common. The objects I use were once dispersed and sold in department stores nationwide. This information is typically found on the back of the plate, in the form of a company logo or factory name. Antique blogs and forums on the internet along with collector’s guide books assist me in identifying individual plates, their production years and their background.

Through the subtraction and addition of imagery through eraser, ceramic decals, and china paint, I unmake and remake found objects, re-contextualizing their original intent and meaning as a way to interject my own social and political commentaries.

The 22 November 1963 series consists of twelve altered JFK collectible plates of varying sizes and degrees of ornamentation. These plates were originally manufactured in the 1960s and have no manufacturer’s marking or inscriptions. They each contained the same photograph of President Kennedy, First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy, son John, Jr. and daughter Caroline taken by Cecil Stoughton, President Kennedy’s photographer during his time at The White House. The original image on these plates was a full color photograph of the Kennedy family leaving Easter Mass at St. Edward’s Church in Palm Beach, Florida on Sunday, April 14, 1963.

In this series, I removed parts of the original image with a dremel tool, erasing the background entirely and leaving all or parts of Jackie Kennedy, John Jr, and Caroline. (See Figure 5.) These three figures stand alone on the now white background of the ceramic plate. Mrs. Kennedy holds John Jr’s hand while Caroline stands apart from them, separated by the absence of where her father stood. The act of dremeling a ceramic surface is itself aggressive - an act of violence I
associate with Kennedy’s murder. In this attack on the plate, I detach the figures from the context of the photograph, creating uneasy, uncanny compositions. The images of the figures have the reflective quality of the underlying glaze, contrasting with the matte ceramic surface that I have exposed with the dremel. This juxtaposition of surface quality allows the figures to float in empty space. The gold band around the rim of the plate has remained, acting as a halo - a reminder of the Kennedy Family legacy and their iconic place within our culture.

By removing parts of the original image, I create a visceral reaction of loss and grief. The assassination of our 35th President on November 22, 1963 was one of those cultural moments that defined a generation. Culturally defining moments elicit a collective feeling - joy, outrage, grief and sorrow - to name a few. Just like 9/11 and Columbine define my generation, JFK’s assassination shook the country. Through the erasure process, I am unwinding the collectible plate back to the moment of President Kennedy’s assassination. In their original state, these plates

Figure 5. Full view and detail image of JFK #1 from 22 November 1963 series, 2018.
served as mere political memorabilia. The original objects were products of industry using collective memory and cultural grief to turn a profit, riding on the sentimentality of the American public to participate in the exchange. Commemorative and collectible plates do not innately have the power to transport one back in time. It is only within the identity of the individual collector and their personal connection to the event/person/place that gives these objects any meaning or value.

In *American Standard*, I have altered a plate originally titled *Southern Cotton Fields* from The American Scene Collection produced by Syracuse China in 1952. (See Figure 6,7.) The series was commissioned by the department store B. Altman and consists of twelve plates featuring original watercolor imagery by Adolph Dehn. *Southern Cotton Fields* depicts an idealized image

Figure 6. *American Standard*, full view, 2018.
of brown people picking cotton in a field nestled between cottages and woods. The sky is blue and the clouds are tinged pink with the summer’s warmth. In the foreground, chickens and a lone donkey roam the yard while sunflowers thrive alongside the cottage.

Like in the 22 November 1963 series, I have erased all of the image and surrounding glaze except for the workers picking cotton in the field. All romantic notions of agricultural labor, American slavery and sharecropping are removed. What remains behind is the image of four brown people picking cotton. Through the erasure process, I have given the plate several new subtexts. Beyond a reminder of American slavery, American Standard addresses current racial oppressions and inequalities in America along with our history of exploitative agricultural labor. With Donald Trump’s inflammatory rhetoric, endless police violence toward unarmed black men, and the visible presence of white nationalist groups, this series questions how much America has really changed since this plate was originally produced in 1952.
In the series *Yosemite Falling*, I have altered the image of the collectible plate “Yosemite Falls” by Harry Johnson. (See Figure 8.) Produced in 1988, these plates were the first issue in the America the Beautiful series by W. S. George. Yosemite National Park is located in the western Sierra Nevada of Central California and is currently managed by the National Park Service. On average, it receives 4 million visitors each year. The plate’s original image depicted Yosemite Falls, the highest waterfall in the park. The waterfall is nestled between the mountains, surrounded by mighty pines and firs, and comes to rest at a beautiful stream where a few deer are peacefully gathered. Complete with the National Parks and Conservation Association Seal, the America the Beautiful series “[celebrates] the majestic beauty of America’s national parks.”

![Figure 8. Two plates from the series Yosemite Falling, 2019.](image)

Last year, the Ferguson fire in California threatened Yosemite National Park, causing the park to close for two months. Using traditional china painting techniques, I have added thick smoke to the image of the plate. Having witnessed several fires while I was on residency in Los
Angeles in the fall of 2017 and then watching Yosemite burn via the internet the summer of 2018, I could not help but feel smothered in apocalyptic doom. Helplessness and despair, fear of the flame. Harry Johnson’s image of Yosemite is outdated and on its way to extinction. Updating the plate to face an ugly truth taps into the sentiment of collective grief and longing that will inevitably come in time.

Within my research, I have found that nostalgia is intrinsically linked with death. Whether the death of a moment or experience, i.e. a fleeting memory, or with the death of a person or place, there is an act of grieving and longing that nostalgia cannot escape. In my work with slip cast christmas decorations, I am buried deep with longing for memories that my mind has crafted over the past thirty years. But I also use those cheap, christmas decorations to show the gluttonous abundance and extraordinary presence of Christmas stuff. I am thoroughly conflicted about what Christmas really is, torn between an educated elite and a middle class suburbanite. I love Christmas. I also love that I love Christmas. And I hate that I love that I love Christmas. It is a fanatical, fantastical three month frenzy embedded with cultural implications of holiday shopping and gift giving. Americans as a whole, willingly oblige in the cacophony of Christmas consumption. Because what is more fun than spending too much money, indulging in too many treats and decorating your home with abundance of crap that spends the majority of its life tucked away in your basement? From christmas music, christmas candy, christmas presents, christmas trees, christmas dinner. More is better is more more more. What happens when capitalism, consumer culture, American gluttony and the birth of Jesus Christ collide? Hollie’s Trinket Emporium. (See Figure 9,10.)
*Hollie’s Trinket Emporium* is the space in which I create my own collectibles, complete with box and Certificate of Authenticity. I am transformed into a corporation. I am sole proprietor. I am CEO. I produce limited editions of Christmas plates, ornaments and knick knacks. I merchandise my products like a retail display, complete with fabric, risers, and sale signs. My installations become a performance set. I use my theatrical, comedic and improvisational training to perform as my alter ego - your home shopping host! (See Figure 11.)
Inspired my mother’s own QVC addiction, the Trinket Emporium is a platform where both object, installation and performance collide. Within my collectible plates and ornaments, I source my imagery from popular culture, using TV celebrities, like Pee Wee Herman and Mr. Rogers, cultural myths, like Area 51, and cultural icons, like My Little Pony. The Emporium is absurd and ridiculous. It mocks the treasured collectible and pokes fun at the Middle Class. But at heart, it ultimately mocks the art world. The system that repulses me, intrigues me, and confuses me. How does bad art get so famous? Why does a lot of art look like a whole lot of bullshit? Why do artists take themselves so seriously? These are the inspirations behind the Emporium. How do you get in if you can’t find the door? And if you do find the door, do you even open

Figure 11. The author performing Hollie’s Trinket Emporium, 2018.
it or hop back on your pony and make a break for the Shire? Like a riddle from a scene out of
Middle Earth, The *Emporium* is a place where frustrations are channeled, honed and refined.

Performing live in a gallery, often with a sales assistant, I approach viewers and attempt
to sell them the *Emporium’s* treasures. All trinkets can be purchased for $24.99. I repeat a sales
pitch and can accept credit card payments through an application on my cell phone. I use per-
formance as a medium to disrupt expectations. Normally, one expects to enter a gallery, look at a
work of art and have a deep thought. I use my body to directly engage/confront/bombard the
viewer in order to aggressively sell art/collectibles/kitsch. The *Emporium* seeks to disrupt the
establishment from within- challenging the viewer and the art world…for only $24.99!

Working with the realm of mass produced objects, I am interested in the aura of objects,
when it is present, when it leaves or if it was ever there at all. Olalquiaga describes “aura” as

“a metaphysical halo that surrounds certain experiences and things, giving them
an invisible glow. Fundamentally connected to tradition, the aura is an incidental aspect
of an object or event, derived from its use value or direct relationship to production:
usually made by hand or at the early stages of industrialization, aureatic objects bear the
imprint of the hands that gave them birth. Rather than an intrinsic aspect of an object,
therefore, the aura is a consequence of the particular mode of production that generated it,
much like the glow of the comet, which does not emanate from its body but from the dust
that surrounds it. The aura may be said to have appeared ontologically at the very
moment when it disappeared as a phenomenon, emerging when the pre industrial
conditions and labor structure that made it possible partially ceased to exist.”

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6 page 17 The Artificial Kingdom
She goes on to describe that mass production and industry did not obliterate the aura but shattered it, dismantling and dispersing it. For the plates that I find and then alter, I imbue the aura that was disintegrated through mass production. Taking into account the implications of the individual art object and the value of the hand, I take the fragments of the original object’s aura and reassemble them to create a new, complete aura for the object. Within my work with slip cast objects, I am able to crystallize the fragmented aura in combination with the nostalgia by covering the surface of the form in both custom and commercial decals. This transformation through the reward of the surface separates the new object from the original ‘parent’ object, imbuing aura and increasing its use value. For the *Trinket Emporium*, I use porcelain blanks to create my own collectibles. I create objects with an intentionally fragmented aura. They appear mass produced - smooth, slick and industrial. They situate themselves somewhere between art object and industrial product, depending on the perspective/taste/preconceived notions of the viewer/customer/audience.

Within my practice, I stick to a material vocabulary of industrial methods and ceramic kitsch aesthetics. I replicate objects in clay through press molding and slip casting as a way to directly copy or mimic industry. The ceramic process affords me the ability to create my own permanent objects. Objects that refuse to break down and be recycled. Objects that deny their death; they can only become a shard, refusing to really leave this world. I am able to capture and crystallize my own nostalgia, personal experiences and memories with clay. The alchemical change that occurs in the firing process turns recollections into memorials.

Waterslide decals are an industrial method of image reproduction that I utilize to add image to surface. I source imagery from Google, draw or paint my own, or take my own pho-
toographs. I use a variety of decals: laser decals (sepia toned), digital color decals, commercial
decals and custom silk screen decals. Silk screening my own custom decals has given me the
freedom of producing industrial quality decals and having complete ownership of the image. I
often use commercial decals as well as my own images to play with the ambiguity of surface
manufacture, allowing my objects to operate in the in between. In between found and made, in-
dividual and the multiple, hand and industry, sentimental and cynical.

China paint is another technique I have learned to add imagery to surface. It is a tradi-
tional over glaze technique in which thin, transparent layers of enamel are painted on glazed
ware and fired between each layer, slowly building up color and opacity. I use china paint sub-
versively. Like in Yosemite Falls, I alter the images on souvenir plates without leaving evidence
of the hand.

In order to mimic the iridescent and gold surfaces employed by industry, I use metallic
overglaze and luster overglaze. Lusters have the ability to operate in many aesthetic realms: dec-
orative, funky, tasteful, tacky, camp and kitsch. When gold is used sparingly it can add value to a
work, but too much gold can cheapen it, ironically decreasing the aesthetic value. I use mother of
pearl luster to imitate the iridescent rainbow surface found on many dollar store and thrift store
knick knacks. These techniques, along with slip casting in porcelain, allow me to play with value
and class within my ceramic objects.

Before graduate school, I felt the need and pressure to physically create objects - to hand
build vessel forms and add my own imagery through mishima (inlaid slip), carving, decals, un-
derglaze, glaze and luster. My time in graduate school has taught me that making everything by
hand does not necessarily make it better. The materials and methods must match the idea. My
technical skills and craftsmanship in mold making, slip casting, image transfer, and retail pack-
age and display afford me the abilities to craft objects and installations that appear to be made by
industrial measures. Having such a long history of theatrical training and exposure to improvisa-
tion allows me to craft my performances, making them seamlessly serious and believable.

In the realm of contemporary art, I situate myself within a lineage of artists working the
kitsch object, consumer culture, personal identity, cultural celebration and cultural critique. My
influences begin with Robert Arneson and Howard Kottler, Mike Kelley and Jeff Koons. I situate
myself among contemporaries like Lucy Sparrow, Paul Scott and Caroline Slotte. The critique of
American culture through the lens of kitsch is the subject of my life long investigation and pur-
suits. I intend to further examine, analyze and re-contextualize ordinary ceramic objects. Where
these objects operate and perform is crucial to their contextualization and to my intentions as an
artist. This is the next step for my studio practice. Beyond making objects that do not fail - where
do these objects go and whom are they for?
Bibliography


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