2012

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*The University of Montana*

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MICHAEL FLYNN 2012

By

MICHAEL SEAN FLYNN

Bachelors of Arts, Loyola University, New Orleans, Louisiana, 2007

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
Sculpture

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

May 2012

Approved by:

Sandy Ross, Associate Dean of The Graduate School
Graduate School

Brad Allen, Chair
School of Art

Rafael Chacon
School of Art

Trey Hill
School of Art

Beth Lo
School of Art

Greg Twigg
School of Media Arts
My 2012 thesis exhibition was created to represent my visual perspective as an artist. Each work began with an initial idea or spark of inspiration. However, it is the process leading to the final outcome that shapes each visual composition. All of my works are similar in that they are multifaceted in terms of structure and each is unique in terms of when and where it was created. Forms of expression are based on a response to my current position in the world and a reaction to the events and imagery I see in everyday life. By finding inspiration in my surroundings and basing my artistic process on available resources, I can construct a work of art to address any topic. Throughout this presentation I will be discussing the origins of my selected ideas, processes, and the ideas or sparks behind the work I make. Aligning my artistic practice with both raw video imagery and process driven sculpture, I have an integrated artistic voice. (Figure 1)

Through my investigations of the everyday, I hope to make the viewers of my work consider how they perform their daily actions, which are a part of shared human experience. Looking at everyday objects and practices for inspiration, I then use them in a new way, such as using a window air conditioner to cool a pillow. The readability of elements within my work allows viewers to connect on several levels. Often humor is a point of entry for my viewers. This powerful tool has the ability to transform my viewer’s mental state. Laughing is a reaction to certain stimuli, and traditionally a visual expression of happiness, or an inward feeling of joy. A hint of laughter or a smile resulting from viewing my work may remain in my viewer’s memory. Like any other everyday moment, my work allows the viewer to determine their own meaning and how it fits into their life.
My overall goal as an artist is to present ideas linked to recognizable subject matter such as water, food, exercise, and communication. The accessibility of my imagery is derived from the familiarity of the objects I incorporate into my work. My investigations are based on topics that are important to me, often the necessities of life. To discover a new topic I examine my current position in the world. My works are rooted in the everyday. How I decide place myself within the world has become an art tool. When in Prague, I had no studio so I made work that needed no materials, just visual documentation of my interaction with space. (Figure 4, 5, 6) When in Philadelphia, I also had no studio but worked around this obstacle by creating a mobile environment to capture and manipulate imagery. Here at The University of Montana, I have a studio and I was also given a space to display my thesis exhibition. While I was creating the works for my thesis exhibition, I allowed the features of the gallery space to determine the scale and level of viewer interaction in the exhibit.

*Breathing Under Water* as structure itself is just suspended water (Figure 2). The position of the work above the entrance to the room suggests that viewer interaction is needed for its completion. Constructed out of steel, acrylic, and water and suspended nine feet above the ground. The work gives the viewer free access underneath the structure. The incorporation of *Breathing Under Water* into the architecture of the space not only activated the location, but was needed to allow the viewer to continue to perform the everyday process of breathing. The artwork is not complete until it is activated by the viewer physically being underneath it, or imagining breathing underwater.

The incorporation of the viewer’s body is similar to my early investigations that brought awareness to actions I performed with my body. In contrast to this, *Breathing*
*Under Water* is a live investigation that is powered by its environment and audience. The nature of this work suggests that an interaction or an exchange of energy is needed for its completion. The main success of *Breathing Under Water* was how it allowed the viewer to interact with the work passively without having to put in any additional effort or energy beyond the everyday act of breathing.

Encouraging interaction with a work through the intentional placement of a sculptural object in a space can be seen on no grander scale than in the work of Carsten Holler. Holler’s 2006 exhibit *Test Site* transformed the turbine hall of the Tate Modern into what the name implies a site where Holler could test an idea that he had been developing throughout his career. *Test Site* allowed visitors to travel through Turbine Hall on five large spiraling slides that connected the different galleries. The work appeared as a futuristic plan for transporting people through space. As the sizes of his slides have grown over time, so has his ambition for the project (Figure 3).

We conceived the Turbine Hall installation as a large-scale experiment to see how slides can be used in public spaces, how they’re received, and what they do to users and to viewers. It’s a ‘test site’ in the sense of a study using volunteers in a museum space. The slides here are large, especially the one from Level 5, which is 58 meters long, but in fact I’m using the Turbine Hall as a small model for the whole city.1

The primary goal of *The Orange Roll* was to create a structure that served only one purpose: to allow oranges to roll down its face. I designed *The Orange Roll* to place as much focus as possible on how oranges can roll down a track. To do this, I constructed the track to act as an unobtrusive structure. I also wanted to present a style of

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craftsmanship that would suggest industrial manufacturing. The acrylic tracks allow the oranges to roll smoothly before being caught in a net. The work can be perceived by the viewer in two ways: as an object that suggests that oranges can roll down it or as an interactive structure that allows the viewer to become a part of the work. By using signifiers such as an open ladder, the work naturally invites the viewer to interact or imagine how the structure could actually transport the oranges through space (Figure 7).

Oranges and fruit in general can represent numerous concepts such as fertility and fleeting life. Fruit can also symbolize success and the exotic, as evidenced by its global import and export. However, today they are also a symbol of the everyday due to their availability at any local supermarket. I am less interested in the orange’s symbolic associations and more interested in the orange as a subject because of its physical traits, such as its spherical nature and its’ vivid orange color. The orange’s circular shape allows it to roll at high and consistent speeds. The function of The Orange Roll is to provide a visual representation of an orange moving through space. By selecting an orange as the subject matter of this work, I present my viewer with an everyday object used in an obscure way.

The Orange Roll is completely overly constructed, reaching a level of absurdity and elevating the everyday orange to a position of importance, through the use of materials. Through this elevation of an everyday object, The Orange Roll suggests the importance of everyday events that are often overlooked as mundane. The oranges themselves could represent anything, but the goal behind the work is to show the importance and uniqueness of the everyday occurrences that take place in all of our lives.
Creating structures that allow the viewer to form associations and relationships but do not provide one meaning is the strength of all of my work.

*Up and Down Mirror* is a steel shaft that hoists a rectangular mirror cube up and down from ground level to ten feet at the top. As the mirror changes position, the viewer gains a new perspective on the space and the current environment and sees his own reflection in the work. The incorporation of the viewer’s image places the viewer directly into the structure through passive engagement. As one walks around this work, the scale and dimensional decisions made by the artist become more obvious. This industrial structure seems like it could have come right out of a warehouse or off a factory floor because I left both raw and highly polished metal finishes. This strong and powerful structure seems-like it could serve a grand purpose. Instead it simply moves an object up and down (Figure 8).

The idea behind *Up and Down Mirror* is focuses on the structural and mechanical requirements to move an object from one position to another. The original goal of this work was to transport the oranges for *The Orange Roll* back to the top of the track. As both projects developed, the ideas became independent, but my interest in transporting an object through space continued.

Industrial conveyor belts and elevator systems became the visual references for this work’s physical structure. Looking at how these industrial machines were constructed inspired this work’s creation. All of these systems were designed to accomplish something. Selecting a mirror cube as the transported object complicates the interpretation of the work, not merely suggesting a single purpose for the structure. Instead, it inspires individuals to interpret its meaning through the incorporation of an
object that is part of the viewer’s everyday life. This multiplicity of potential meanings leaves the only concrete meaning of the work to be the fact that the structure has the ability to move an object up and down.

The aesthetic and structural decisions I made in creating this work align with the works of Alexander Calder (Figure 9). Calder’s abstract shapes also had one simple meaning and provided the viewer with limited information, allowing for individual interpretation. His works use scale and movement to gain the viewer’s attention. This incorporation of simple movement continues to inspire my kinetic works.

The incorporation of sculptural objects, food, and my own body are key components of my video investigations. I use video as a direct way to visually communicate ideas by capturing found and visual objects to be presented in a new format. Since the invention of television, the glowing moving images on the screen have captivated viewers. When describing video art today, I cannot help but allude to video as a form of entertainment. With video technology, I can almost instantly generate content for manipulation, such as filming the peeling of an orange. The medium of video can be used in a vast number of ways, such as the creation of color and pattern, performance, narrative, and the documentation of events and ideas.

TVs, projectors, mobile devices, and the Internet make up the majority of formats for displaying video art. These viewing and display limitations have become unique characteristics of the medium. This dependence on other devices to make viewing possible has made the presentation of the work an important element of the final product. In many ways, equal access has evened the playing field, allowing beginners to exhibit their work with the professionals on web sites such as YouTube. This wave of
accessibility has also flooded the viewer with imagery. This presents a new challenge for the video artist—to develop a unique style or point of view and create works that stand out from the rest of the viral videos.

The idea of a multi-layered thermal pillow is something I have pondered since my first year of graduate school. I wanted to create a sculpture that would resemble a commercial product. I would then gather images investigating how the product was created and the purpose it serves. This work marked a shift in my artistic process because it was my first digital representation of a sculptural idea, as opposed to my past video investigations that focused on nurturing my own body within preexisting environments. With Utopian-Pillow, the final visual product was an image completely constructed by the artist, not from preexisting materials or locations.

I also found inspiration for the Utopian-Pillow in late night infomercials for items such as the Sham Wow and the Snuggie (Figure 10). The goal of all these products is to provide something slightly new that is of interest to a particular niche market. A common driving force behind all the advertisements was selling and pushing the product by making viewers feel as if they could not live without the product. With the Utopian Pillow, I undertook a different approach: to simply prove that my product was real and worked. I accomplished this by providing information about the physical characteristics of my pillow. This idea of a utopian product that has everything is my artistic response to our culture, which many times over insists that having everything makes life better. The Utopian-Pillow can provide it all yet it also has stipulations, much like life itself (Figure 11).
Like the design of my past sculptures the design of *Utopian-Pillow* was based on aesthetic decisions to create a final visual representation of my idea through video. Matthew Barney’s work illustrates an interface of sculpture and video that interests me because he creates and chooses all the visual information seen in his films. Barney’s work combines human activity and constructed objects² (Figure 12).

The relationship between video and sculpture in the Utopian Pillow has taken on a form and format that is currently driving my artistic practice: the generation of an idea that is constructed in a sculptural manner to be presented as a video. The everyday is very apparent in my artistic investigation of food. Food is the essential cornerstone of all human existence. My original investigation of meat as source of nourishment for the body began in the open-air markets of Prague. As the smell of the cooked flesh permeates the streets, a line forms as hungry customers wait for a taste. The rotation of the meat signifies the passing of time and the essentialness of our next meal. This became the inspiration for this series of works that represent spinning meat. (Figure 13, 14)

The progression of my spinning meat series is a clear example of how my artistic ideas evolve, starting with a spark of inspiration captured on video, and ending result being a sculptural object with capability of holding 276 individual bites of meat. Spinning meat as the topic of interest may seem absurd at first, yet it is part of our everyday experience in regards to cooking or eating.

Gabriel Orozco’s work is never tied down to one medium and is driven by process and idea. Orozco generates his ideas through formulas, games, and past experiences. This variation of processes is exemplified in Orozco’s *Pensky Work Project* (Figure 15).

When talking about this project Orozco said:

“It’s a kind of game to drive this truck around the city, and I have to make the work with the found object and I have to come to a solution right there on the spot. So I work for a little while, sometimes thirty minutes, sometimes two hours, until I come up with a solution that I like, that I find finished. Then I take a Polaroid of it to be sure that I will remember it, and I store it in the truck. Then I go to the next place.”

The development of a method or formula for creating works of art was the process I undertook in the production of *The Cheese Steak Project*. A cheese steak is a sandwich made of bread, meat, and cheese. These three simple ingredients come together to create what has become an iconic Philadelphia food. In many ways, it represents an element of cultural significance to this area and of personal importance for me. To conduct my experiment, I created a mobile film studio to test and record the sandwiches’ physical characteristics. In order to show the subtle differences in sandwich construction, I selected ten different locations to investigate. Taking note of travel and food shows that examined similar concepts, my project had a different goal, not to judge the taste of each sandwich but simply to collect factual data about variations in sandwich composition. I took measurements of temperature, length, weight, and noted whether the meat was chopped or not chopped.

I performed each of the tests with aesthetic considerations in mind, like the way I positioned the sandwich on the scale or how I cut the sandwich in half before exposing

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the consistency of the meat. This project encompassed many elements that are
critical to my artistic practice, such as the selection of subject matter, the gathering of
found objects, and looking at an existing object in a new way (Figure 16).

Created during a two-month stay in my home state of Pennsylvania, the work’s
creation was dependent on this area as the home to my subject matter. I created a video
based investigation powered by the presentation and arrangement of found objects. The
manipulation of found objects has been an important part of my video practice since my
first investigations. The incorporation of found objects within my videos to develop a
narrative can be seen in The Cheese Steak Project. I used a digital scale to weigh the
sandwiches and by simply filming this action I built content and narrative. The goal of
this work was to leave my audience members with a lasting memory and a point of
reference for any sandwich they eat in the future.

I feel my work is a reaction to an initial spark of inspiration. This spark can
happen at any time. By traveling and creating art in new places, I am able to slightly alter
my awareness of the everyday. By immersing myself within a different culture. With
this altered awareness of the everyday, I use available resources and my environment to
pass commentary on selected ideas. Using materials I find around me for inspiration and
process-based construction, I have developed a system of constraints that allows me to
make work about anything; but with anything as a topic, I must allow my intuition to lead
me to solutions.

The selections of subject material can best be interpreted as personal reactions to
my existence and appreciation of the importance of the everyday. While these everyday
occurrences may seem trivial when viewed individually, taken as a whole they construct
life. Some artists try to capture a significant moment or concept by presenting a single meaning. I do not. Maybe this is derived from my interest in individuality. In navigating through my education, I have come to realize that I am in control of how I learn. I am a visual learner—the exchange of imagery is my preferred language for communication. The work I make has no single meaning instead I present objects and images that already exist.

As an artist, I am constantly struggling to decide how much visual imagery I need to provide to keep my viewer engaged with my work. When making this decision, I look at the world around me for answers. I feel our current society is a place where nothing is really new, just a little different than before. This feeling has allowed me to focus my research on presenting ideas that are relatable to everyone in some sense. With my investigations of the everyday, I hope to make the viewers of my work consider how they perform their daily actions, which are a part of shared human experience.
Images

Figure 1: Michael Flynn, *Michael Flynn 2012*. Exhibition View, 2012

Figure 2: Michael Flynn, *Breathing Under Water*, Water, Acrylic, Steel, 2012

Figure 3: Carsten Holler, *Test Site*, Steel Slides, 2006
Figure 4: Michael Flynn, *Push Ups*, Digital Video, 01:00, 2010

Figure 5: Michael Flynn, *Water Metro*, Digital Video, 04:00, 2010

Figure 6: Michael Flynn, *Bodyman*, Digital Video, 03:00, 2011
Figure 7: Michael Flynn, *The Orange Roll*, Oranges, Acrylic, Steel, Concrete, Netting, 2012

Figure 8: Michael Flynn, *Up and Down Mirror*, Glass Mirror, Steel, Electric Host, 2012

Figure 9: Alexander Calder, *Gallows and Lollipops*, Steel, 1960
Figure 10: *Snuggie®,* Video Still, 2011

Figure 11: Michael Flynn, *Utopian-Pillow,* Digital Video, 06:30, 2011

Figure 12: Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 4,* Video Still, 1994
Figure 13: Michael Flynn, *Small Meat*, Dental Floss, Wood, Toilet Paper, Paint, 2010

Figure 14: Michael Flynn, *The Meat Wheel*, Steel, 2 RPM Gear Motor, 276 Bites of Meat, 2011

Figure 15: Gabriel Orozco, *Pesky Work Project*, Exhibition View Marian Goodman Gallery, 1998
Figure 16: Michael Flynn, *The Cheese Steak Project*, Digital Video, 21:00, 2012
Bibliography


