

Dani Epstein

Senior Studio Thesis

drift

By altering the form and function of traditional objects, I create a looser interpretation of familiar forms. The resulting objects propose to shift and change with the user's needs; this constant engagement is meant to create a long lasting and changing relationship between object and owner. I create forms that are abstract enough to allow new meanings and uses to be invented; extending beyond my vision and initial intentions for each piece. The intent is not to simply create functional pieces, but to start a conversation on new ways of approaching utilitarian objects. In the creation of new forms, various considerations in material and technique play with our expectations of value and purpose, and meld traditional craft processes with newer technologies and materials. These applications of technique and material challenge form's intent in both its practical and or hypothetical uses and explore the relationship between material and form.

This work stems from the understanding that historically there have been alterations to functional forms to further fit our needs or conventions. By changing customary forms even more, perhaps at times to an extreme, brings into question their ultimate usage and future significance. For example, there has been a long progression in the evolution of the form of silverware which mainly focused on what was technically favorable, but also what was considered appropriate in an evolving society (Petroski 20). While the four-tined fork is considered the most optimum for eating, variations of the design of the tines can completely

detract from its purpose (Petroski 11). Even if there is a baseline of technically favorable characteristics that a certain object should maintain, it should not conflict with diversifying the form that these components are presented in and their potential to serve other functions.

Traditionally, silverware is used to perform the task of eating, while in other cases it is simply decorative or signifies some form of attachment; and by doing so removes the function and replaces it with either an aesthetic appeal or value while continuing to allude to its potential function. If we are to examine the fork, knife, and spoon critically; we are piercing, scooping and cutting food, yet we perform those same tasks in other capacities, and in varying scales with a range of other utensils. Within the body of work, a vague comb becomes a fork/rake hybrid and an oblong ceramic form shifts between a vase and a vessel, depending on how it is positioned. Extending from silverware, and considering tableware more generally, the objects in this collection possess three primary traits; openings, closings, and supports. These traits take the forms of containers, rigid surfaces, indents, threads, and caps. *Drift* questions the utility of everyday forms by broadening possible functions and formats, and through our observations or use of objects we may find either a need to improve, or critically analyze and re-categorize them.

My work fits under both critical and speculative design. Speculative design is a broad concept in which ideas are speculated as potential possibilities which can be realized in physical form (Dunne and Raby 2). In my work, this is adopted as a means to generate new ideas and understanding. Speculative design questions the reality we live in and proposes ideas that do not offer any particular solution (Dunne and Raby 12). One of the benefits of speculative design is the lack of barriers and production constraints, and instead proposes new values and attitudes toward forms (Dunne and Raby 29). Within speculative design resides critical design where there

is an inquiry in the design of both object, and how it engages with the user (Malpass 3). The intent in critical design is to propose ideas that examine the user's relationship to products (31). This is also a different approach than designing for the marketplace and separates the object from a commercial setting. Most of our understanding of our surroundings is through objects; in critical design this can take place through conversations and interactions (43). My forms aim to alter these surroundings and set up a new dialogue. The ultimate goal is to find that in-between, to not offer solutions, but suggest potentials.

Artist Allan Wexler's work surrounds these ideas. He examines both our habits and behaviors, while presenting various scenarios that could be seen as potentially functional, while others purely speculative, all invite participation and challenge our expectations. The book, *Absurd Thinking: Between Art and Design* by Allan Wexler, seems to purposely leave you unable to place his work in either category (Allan Wexler). I too see *drift* and my work as an in-between, as this series falls within several categories and disciplines. Although certainly, my work is not meant to be mass produced, but is intended to encourage the viewer to think differently. Through these explorations, we can begin to examine how we have adapted to our surrounding objects and perpetuated a cycle, ultimately restrained to a limited scope of interactions and form.

Material choices play a large role in this collection, as they inform the viewer's ability to interpret the physicality and potential of the form. Typically, shapes and materials connote an object's function; the limitations of a shape first lie in the material selection which guides its usage, and then the form itself which further implies its intent. Materials themselves are usually indicative of possible functions (Pye 35). By mixing materials and altering forms, I question these design guidelines and remain open to new combinations and associations. By using

ceramics, silver, gypsum and textiles, I began to explore how materials could potentially conceal or open up possibilities. There are holes in the objects to be threaded, openings to be plugged, and handles to be held. In this way I am presenting clues as to how these objects can be considered as well as presenting multiples of some objects that are arranged differently. Through this, I aim to create more imaginative approaches in forms that guide the viewer through observation to analyze objects of varying recognition. The materials are sensitive to each form and are meant to invite, and create new experiences. In my ceramic forms, some are doubled to form either a cup or a tray while others are arranged differently with the inclusion of found objects, or reduced in scale. While some pieces were fabricated in metal, others were created by 3D printing in gypsum or porcelain, yet all were further manipulated by hand; an essential aspect to bring character and warmth to each piece. The inclusion of fabricated metal parts connecting to 3D printed pieces enhances the form's character. The objects are meant to generate questions, but also maintain a humorous and relatable quality, despite their unfamiliarity. The vague and various suggestions of utilitarian objects seek to build enduring human connections to objects, implying that there are ways for objects to continuously fulfill some kind of purpose over a longer period of time, whether it be functional or aesthetic. Through an emphasis on silhouette and materials, I offer more ambiguous and alternative forms to create less transient moments with our surroundings.

In my work, I play with forms that combine the familiar and the vague, such as a circular fork or a spoon hook. In certain works, like the gypsum piece with cork, I cannot relate it to an existing utilitarian form, but have guided its potential use with the inclusion of a handle, three openings, and two legs. I even struggle saying the words *leg* and *handle* because while they are a

description of the form, I am suggesting how it could stand or contain a liquid just by my word choice. However, these are also clues or starting points, and by establishing new clues, the user is enabled to create a new narrative (Malpass 115). Ambiguity is one of the avenues in critical design that allows for these open-ended narratives to occur more freely. The more ambiguous, the easier it is for the user to disassociate themselves from a traditional use the object would fulfill. This abstraction also encourages engagement with the object and more varied results in its interpretation (Malpass 63). My work allows the viewer to create situations and build narratives that these forms could exist in. Through drawings, I am able to give freedom to the object not confined by a certain mass, material, or scale. The drawings and the objects talk to one another and through this combination of two and three dimensions, they begin to merge together, suggesting ongoing possibilities. This allows for a broader look as to what an object could be and allows for more deviations in how different viewers visualize how the drawing could be realized in physical form but also how some of the three-dimensional pieces mimic graphic qualities in the drawings.

This research began to question behaviors and patterns, and to examine how comfort and conventions limit our flexibility and openness to change. I am sensitive to the fact that material and form have a history as well as to the way they are produced and presented. I question why we keep certain things on the mantle, why some objects are used until they are threadbare, while still others are discarded because we grow tired of them. Challenging what I consider useful or proper, this body of work remains inquisitive, ambiguous, and playful. Perhaps curiosity and engagement can redefine conventional forms, but I'm just speculating.

Works Cited

Dunne, Anthony, and Fiona Raby. *Speculative everything: design, fiction, and social dreaming*. MIT, 2014.

Malpass, Matthew. *Critical design in context: history, theory, and practices*. Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017.

Petroski, Henry. *The Evolution of Useful Things*. 1st ed., Alfred A. Knoff, 1992.

Pye, David. *The Nature and Aesthetics of Design*. Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1978.

Wexler, Allan. *Absurd Thinking: Between Art and Design*. Edited by Ashley Simone, Lars Müller Publishers and the Authors, 2017.