American Macaroni

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

By

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Ceramics at SUNY New Paltz

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Abstract

Working predominantly in ceramics, I seek to explore the concept of lowbrow art, verging on ugly, in conjunction with personal experiences growing up lower middle class-to-working class. Memories are exposited through narrative imagery and joke-telling. Political issues surrounding class vs. worth, fine art vs. lowbrow are discussed with satire and humor to deliver a personal message.
Introduction—Artist Statement

Palatably gauche as a two left-footed ballerina and as tacky as shag carpeting, the self-flagellation and pseudo self-deprecation I express through my work serves both as a criticism of myself and the social class in which I was raised. I spend time reflecting upon my upbringing and childhood memories of a lower middle class-to-working class dynamic.

I predominantly use craft or non-fine art materials that challenge American middle class aesthetic through their playful and undeniably handmade appearance. Such materials are oversaturated roughed up ceramics, Crayola’ed tile, reconstituted wood, imitation Swarovski rhinestones, and embroidered wife-beater fabric. These individual components display sloppy craft, whereby art is intentionally designed to look shoddily made.

Combined with satire I develop narrative elements in form and surface that reference my childhood, memory, past wrongs, and anxieties that I have, feeling sometimes penitential. I find balance in methodical and haphazard construction that considers tensions between gravity and levity. The purgation of ills and rabble of commisery leads me to the assumption that after all, I might as well be the first to get a laugh in.
The Cultural Edge—Comedy as the Lens for Critique

I listen to a lot more comedy, and read a lot more of it, than I do tragedy. Comedy, I find, is a better resource for staying attuned to cultural changes. The reason is that comedy defines the edge of what a culture is prepared to address. The groan, the boo, the nervous laughter; this is where we find the edge. Only by going too far can we know if we’ve gone far enough. The edge will always pulse and move, but at any moment in time it will also exist and, importantly, the cultural logic behind the laughter and the groans will often remain quite stable even as it evolves over time; cultural discourses, after all, are notoriously hard to budge. –Derek Miller

A good storyteller is somebody who’s comfortable on his or her feet and is enough of a ham to get a charge out the response of a crowd, that surge of electricity that goes back and forth between you and an audience... A good story has to be extremely particular and peculiar to your life. It has to have an element of singularity and yet—and this is the alchemy and paradox of storytelling—it has to be something immediately universal, part of something that we all experience. –Adam Gopnik

A suburban Florida woman decorates the bottom of her in-ground swimming pool with a dolphin mosaic and it’s seen as luxurious and fun-loving. Contrast this with someone who uses broken pottery to decorate the dirt around a tree in their front yard and it’s seen as trashy and uncultured. I am concerned with how the educated eye interprets working class aesthetics, and how class systems perpetuate definitions of beauty and value. With humor, I compare how one object that would be considered middle class to another that would be assigned to the lower class.

This teetering edge of acceptability in our society is where the surprise of comedy lies. To be more literal, so a pair of dolphins shooting out of a smiling sun is more acceptable than a broken dinner plate? That should be surprising when you hear it

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2 David Nihill, Do You Talk Funny?: 7 Comedy Habits to Become a Better (and Funnier) Public Speaker (Dallas: BenBella Books, Inc., 2016), 12.
phrased so black-and-white. It is also an example of how to use humor to discuss something more serious—after all, laughter is the best way to take medicine.

If taken at face value that laughter is the best medicine, would it not also be possible that one could use humor to discuss socio-economic topics? How can I introduce satire and playfulness in my work to discuss both personal and social issues? By using humor to speak on incisive socio-economic and cultural critiques, an intimate power is lent to the speaker and entertainer. Those who use humor, and use it well, act as cultural critics and barometers. Joanne R. Gilbert synthesizes this role:

By emphasizing and capitalizing on their marginality or “difference” from the mainstream, comics perform a unique and important social function dating back to the traditions of ancient fools—they hold up a mirror to the culture, showing us our (and their) frailties and foibles…

The cultural critique involved in a comedic perspective can be represented by observational and satirical humor. Concerning my own upbringing in the working class I can combine those forms of comedy with self-deprecation. By using an outsider perspective that Gilbert writes of—I can contrast privileges of class, particularly the aesthetics and “taste” of the upper and middle classes. The faction of observational

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humor that I employ is similar to how Jerry Seinfeld performs, by changing focus from “the big issues to the smallest of issues—the absurdity of things in our everyday lives that we accept and take for granted.”\(^5\) I speak through hand-lettering on my work, in an inferred Southern inflection as a self-deprecating ode to my upbringing in the South and as a means of siding with the blue collar classes; the humor I employ needs to be comically accessible and relatable to the working class, otherwise it is a distant sneer at those with means. By embedding socioeconomic issues with my personal, small-picture (like gas prices, movie theatre privilege, mantelpiece decorations), I am able to knock the “anxiety-producing shortcomings”\(^6\) of class down a peg and relate to an audience of my cultural peers. This task from the position of a marginalized status “may empower the powerless, may invert and subvert the status quo, and in doing so, may make the dominant culture uncomfortable.”\(^7\)

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8What Makes Fancy Good?—Class and Craft Dynamics

In the history of ceramics the most valued and “beautiful” were made of Chinese porcelain with cobalt brushwork; European makers created *delftware*, a stoneware

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\(^6\) Ibid, 60.

\(^7\) Joanne R. Gilbert, *Performing Marginality*, xv.

imitation with a white slip background and bulkier cobalt decoration. Clean lines and defined edges also reigned as highbrow and superior. The aesthetic tastes of the upper classes established value, purity, and craftsmanship with these processes and “whiteness” of the clay. If these elements are considered highbrow and in good taste, what can be subverted to tastes and values of the working class?9

The concept of sloppy craft is that art objects are purposefully made to look poorly made while in actuality are as seamless as “skilled” art.10 Sloppy craft emphasizes concept over advanced skill, process over refined product, and questions the reverence of craft itself.11 The deskill-ing of craft and forfeiture of using entirely fine art materials correlates to the socioeconomic issues between the classes. I chose to work within this framework and aesthetic because it is not highbrow; using craft-based materials such as ceramic, fabric, crayons, and rhinestones demystifies the preeminent role of skill in the fetishizing of “true craftsmanship”. Clay especially lends itself to sloppy craft as I can thoroughly alter the surface by pinching, stamping, and pressing the plastic material. I combine this with

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a ramshackle way of constructing, attaching marred and undulating slabs with multicolored slips that squeeze out between layers of clay. This disorganized appearance is unlike traditional or even industrial ceramics. It is not defined by pure whiteness or clean lines and edges, it revels in an uneducated and uninformed perspective; the mark of the hand is permanently left behind and ties the work back to myself.

Fabric materiality has the same malleable nature clay possess and has the added connotation of fashion consciousness. I use a thick mesh in bright colors, metallic and shiny gold lame, and A-frame ribbed cotton (also known as “wife-beater”) fabrics; all three are reminiscent of cheap work and decorative elements. Embroidery too is seen as a hobbyist’s choice and has ties to a do-it-yourself decorative aesthetic and true Americana sensibility. ¹²

Embroidery artist Darrel Morris in The Object of Labor: Art, Cloth, and Cultural Production speaks of the same alienation between the classes. Instead of using fine arts materials he uses a

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¹² Heather Rosenbach, #1 Ribbon, 2019, embroidery and fabrics, 4 x 2 ft., figure 3.
traditional craft material to express his woes at the inaccessibility of joining the American middle class as well as the distaste for beautiful or tasteful artistry from the working class. His outsider status from the work offices of the middle class is shown in *I mean this* recreates the dynamic of power as seen through the lens of class and masculinity.  

16 Rosenbach, *#1 Ribbon*, detail, figure 6.
Methodology—It don’t have to be good, it just have to be right

Before beginning the making process in clay, I sketch out rough forms of objects I deem “fancy” or recognizable to a popular audience. Round-face clocks, petite cutlery, stanchion posts are what I consider fancy objects, objects that belong to a class above the masses and myself. More recognizable forms are prison posts, french fry baskets, mosaic, nautical stars, and poker chips. Sketches start with literal representations that are erased and redrawn to distort their given form and functionality of the original object. _They’ve Never Been Hungry Before | I Want It More_ is based off the shape of a round-face clock someone would place on their fireplace mantle. However where the clockface would reside, I void the space. The void is entombed in a fluorescent orange glow, a much different resonance begins.¹⁷

I divide my construction process into two manners; one is to create works using a series of slabs and the other by using thin coils. To start a piece with slabs, I sketch the form desired on paper and take rough measurements, I begin a plan drawing on clear plastic sheeting. The clear plastic sheething is a preferable material to draw upon as paper easily wrinkles underneath the clay, warping with the water content. Plastic is much easier to smooth and is resilient if additional copies need to be made, and can be easily flipped to create

¹⁷ Heather Rosenbach, _They’ve Never Been Hungry Before | I Want It More_, 2019, ceramics and paint, 15 x 11.5 x 5 in, figure 7.
a reverse image. The drawing on the plastic is itself a sketch, given the malleable nature of clay I often “sketch” or alter the surface in the third dimension that I cannot easily record on plastic.

For most of my pieces I start with twenty pounds of clay, wedged into a solid lump. I wedge and slam clay into such a large mound so that it is homogenous and without air bubbles. This clay I move onto a raw canvas surface and pound into a rough, thick slab shape using a French baking rolling pin. The aim is to strike the clay at approximately fifteen degrees from the flat table surface. Immediately after contact I twist the rolling pin ninety degrees clockwise to release the wooden surface from the indented ceramic surface. I repeat this process until the slab is between two and three inches thick, rotating the slab in ninety degree increments and once flipping over. By changing the direction in which I strike the slab I push the clay particles in multiple directions, creating a stronger bond. A stronger bond makes for a slab that won’t rip when moved or run through a slab roller. Using the same rolling pin, I roll atop the clay to compress and smooth the strike divots; compressing the clay also aides in slab strength. I use a Brent slab roller to progressively squeeze the slab thinner in quarter-inch increments. The slab is run through the slab roller until it has reached a desired thickness of one-half or one-quarter inch.

The slab is smoothed with medium and soft ribs on one side to rid the slab of the canvas texture. Drywall is laid atop the slab and then the free remaining canvas is wrapped along one side of the drywall. Using tension, I flip the slab one hundred and eighty degrees mid-air, now with the drywall beneath the clay. The canvas is removed and smoothing the other side begins.
With a smooth surface I lay the prepared plastic drawing on the slab. Because it is a malleable surface, I can easily trace the image by indenting the slab. I use a dull pencil or Sharpie marker to trace over the original drawing. When the image is fully indented and plastic sheeting removed, I carefully cut into the clay with an X-acto knife, avoiding grog chunks and nylon fiber build up. Within the depth of the clay I occasionally scar the depth to create a fluttering edge; this can be seen on Conjoined Dolphin Cardholder and 2nd Place Underdog.¹⁸

The slabs become a series of planes to attach that fit between another. Some slab units are manipulated with heavy pinching or for deeper divots, by punching the clay with my knuckles. There is consideration when it comes to what surfaces shall remain smooth or pinched—if I am going to use plenty of text I will choose smoother surfaces as it will be more legible later on. In They've Never Been Hungry Before, the front and back of the object are smooth to provide the best surface possible for underglaze script. The sides are left heavily knuckled punched where I can add large images that are legible even in pockets of shadow.

¹⁸ Heather Rosenbach, 2nd Place Underdog, 2019; ceramics with paint, glitter, and candles; 15 x 8 x 9 in, figure 8.
My other method of making utilizes coils, entirely made by hand. I use about a pound of clay and squeeze it out into a rough baguette shape. I then gently roll the coil along a cement (or non-stick) surface until the diameter is under an inch. Holding one end up I begin by pinching with my thumb along the surface to flatten the coil and add dimension. The coil is then sliced into particular measurements.

Like slab-work, lattice-work that uses coils is also drawn and planned out meticulously. Each cut piece from a coil is correlated to a blueprint with exact measurements and dimensions. As there are as many voided spaces as clay units, I have to prepare with what height I can cut and build at a time; the wetness of the clay also is an issue, I need the clay wet and plastic enough to squeeze and roll but stiffer for cutting and reattaching. I will work in a series of coils, until there are about eight to ten ready for cutting; by the last coil pressed the first should be stiff enough to slice.

Coils are sliced using an X-acto knife for thinner coils or the straight edge of a metal rib for thicker coils, both use a downward motion like slicing butter. Coils are arranged in stacks by height, any excess from cutting is re-wedged to use for a later coil. Some of the wetter, later produced coils are used as rings placed horizontally at a chosen diameter and are the connecting planes for vertical, cut coil pieces. All ends of the coils are scored with a serrated rib or pins, along with their placement matches on the horizontal band. For a cleaner look I will use water as the adhesive between the two clay units, for a sloppy craft look I will use varying colorful slips. The slips are dolloped the starting band or once attached, the tops of the cut coils. When I press the cut piece or next band down, the dollop of slip oozes outward and down, creating a “splooge-y” and cascading slime effect.
After the construction phase I bisque fire my work to $\Delta 04$ ($1924^\circ F$). For mosaics or tile work I will glaze fire at $\Delta 06$ ($1828^\circ F$), and for sculptures I will fire up to $\Delta 6$ ($2232^\circ F$). I fire my flatter work at a lower temperature due to the earthenware clay body it is made of, and the work is all finished with a clear glaze that is not necessary to fire much hotter. Sculptural work is fired to $\Delta 6$ for resiliency through fully vitrifying the clay body, and many of the glazes I utilize gloss over well at this higher temperature. To withstand the high temperatures of the kiln I use mason stains and underglazes as colorants to the bisque surface. Using these materials I hand-letter, paint figures, and add designs to pop out on the ceramic surface.

The images I choose to paint on the surface are motifs of lowbrow culture, what one might find watching trashy American reality television, poorly done tattoos, and pop culture imagery such as gold stars, foliate renderings, and American vehicles. I choose fonts and hand-letter them onto the smooth surfaces of my work. I use DaFont, an archive of freely downloadable fonts, to select fonts that have particular associations. In *American Dream Byproduct*, I use a Coca-Cola type font to convey a sense of Americanism, commercialism, and capitalism. This may not be as literal to a viewer but underlying associations with the font are subconsciously consumed. In *They’ve Never Been Hungry Before*, I use the “Birds of Paradise” font to convey a sense of middle-class snobbery—the kind of font that would be featured on an upscale 80s upper class steakhouse.

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My Δ6 glazes are all glossy but vary in opacity due to colorants or opacifiers added. The majority of the colored clears I have are based off a recipe from Michael Sherrill and it adheres with zero to minimal crazing on my clay body (unless overfired). I use mason stains to color the glazes to unnatural colors. Mason stains are composed of silica based pigments mixed with high temperature frits in order to create a stable color. This is significantly different than natural colorants but the range of colors widely extends beyond earth tones. A base white I use is very glossy but fully opaque, I use this when I have planned to not underglaze the surface or am using predominantly sloppy colored glaze-work, or wish to show the lattice-like form more simply. For some pieces I under fire the glaze to create mattes, as seen as the “party hat” shape of 2nd
Place Underdog. By underfiring my clear glazes I do not have perform more significant testing and color matching to create matte counterparts.

Special firings are performed for self-glazing, once-firing earthenware and to luster-fire gold details and decals. In order to make special elements like the gold (yellow) stars and the gold chain as featured on American Dream Byproduct, I make every batch fresh due to the high alkaline content from soda ingredients. The slip is poured onto plaster bats, dried, and wedged. Very thin coils are rolled and cut, then bent to form links, slip and scored to close. To finish, the chains are gently placed on a test kiln shelf, with no overlapping (each chain requires its own shelf). The chains are then fired on a fast bisque-fire schedule. After much testing I have found that this self-glazing clay fires much more stable when in a smaller kiln versus a full size.

Gold luster is applied after glaze firing all work and takes on the surface quality of the glaze. Decals are applied to the glaze surface much like a water-based tattoo for skin. Both are fired quickly to Δ018 (approximately 1300°F). No matter what stage in the glazing process, all colorants in slips, underglazes, glazes, are rigorously tested in test kilns prior to being used on full size work. By observing test samples I can determine if particular glazes operate at their peak performance under slower or faster firing, holds at a final temperature, or produce off-gassing. While finished pieces may appear to have been constructed without care or consideration, they are in reality thoroughly planned and tested to achieve the aesthetic sloppiness.

Post firing processes include crayon drawings, the rough surface of the ceramics allows for messily rendered and child-like play to come forth. Additionally, neon acrylics, rhinestones, and glitter are used to push the boundaries of “good taste” and ugliness;
adding a playful gaudiness to the finished ceramic piece. Altogether my work features lowbrow aesthetics compounded by a maximalist concept.

![Image](image_url)

Fig. 10 Installation photo, the pedestal, 2018-2019, multimedia.  

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Audience—The Power

The classic comedic tool, *clash of context*, is a perfect example to describe the tricky nature of to whom and where my work is exhibited. The clash of context is defined as, “the forced union of incompatibles…[taking] something from its usual place and sticks it where it doesn’t fit in. A hooker in a convent is a clash of context.”²² The exhibition took place at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art at the State University of New York at New Paltz campus; this museum is part of the highbrow, “good taste” art world, contrasted with my work that takes part of an entirely lowbrow aesthetic. This physical juxtaposition itself could be read in a humorous manner—that art of its nature is deemed acceptable to the white space. However, I believe my work resonates in the farthest directions—most with those who share the same identity, who are in on the joke, and those of the middle and upper classes, perhaps feeling alienated and dis-identified in their own short-comings.²³ My work is ultimately an inside joke for the working class and a moment of reflection to those of high status. If the viewer does not feel the cultural resonance I feel, their disassociation with the work may act as valuable entertainment; after all, a laugh is a laugh.²⁴

Fig. 11 Right: *A Rainbow Like Southern Poetry*, 2019; ceramics, paint, rhinestones.²⁵

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Conclusion
The class dynamics of working class America are deeply personal but with the strategies of humor I deliver a poignant critique of our society. To subvert the power status of the upper and middle class, I use craft and non-fine art materials to exemplify sloppily appearing ceramics and soft sculpture as heroes of the lowbrow aesthetic. My art-making process is at odds with what is deemed “in good taste” and rightly so. Lowbrow and garish pieces are cozied together in American Macaroni\textsuperscript{26}, an MFA thesis exhibition to deliver a fully maximalist experience.

“The reason comedians do what they do is to try and control why people laugh at them.” —Harry Shearer\textsuperscript{27}

Fig. 11 American Macaroni installation photo, 2019.

\textsuperscript{26} Heather Rosenbach, American Macaroni installation photo, 2019, figure 12.
Bibliography


https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O77966/bowl-greek-a-factory/.


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Opening Reception: Friday, May 10, 2019 from 5pm to 7pm
Exhibition Hours: Friday - Tuesday 11am-5pm

Heather Rosenbach

MFA Thesis Exhibition

Location: Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, State University of New York at New Paltz
Alice and Horace Chandler & North Galleries, 1 Hawk Drive, New Paltz, New York 12561
Phone: 845-257-3844 Website: www.newpaltz.edu/dorskymuseum

American Macaroni