

CUSH

By

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Summary of Project in Lieu of Thesis
Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida
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Regardless of age, class or culture, the human desire for comfort is universal. No matter how all consuming or fleeting, the ephemeral sensation of comfort momentarily insulates one from anxiety and unease. The catalysts for these passing moments are often related to our emotional experience of nostalgia or predisposed perception. The project in lieu of thesis, Cush, examines the use of form, color and design in functional pottery, and how these elements can be used to evoke a sense of comfort and ease that can be experienced by the audience both aesthetically and through use. The formal language of my work is suggestive of the comforting nature of physical intimacy, casual interaction, community and childhood.

Cush uses functional ceramic vessels to cater to the human desire for physical and emotional comfort and gratification. These vessels use visual language to reference memory traces relating to comfort. The primary device used to activate these memory traces is form. Generous volumes are metaphors for our own bodies, which signify the comforts of physical intimacy

while simultaneously referencing childlike items, such as toys and stuffed animals. Casually constructed, exaggerated pillow forms create a desire to physically interact with the work. Voluptuous forms awaken our preconceptions of volume and what it represents: the allure of vitality, sensuality, generosity and abundance. Generosity of form rather than economy of space, allows these vessels to evoke a sense of delight / fulfillment/ pleasure using colorful, casually constructed forms that suggest a sense of play and ease. The value of these vessels lies in their ability to provide a transformative personal experience through use, rather than to address needs of utility, necessity, or convenience.

PROJECT REPORT

Introduction

Regardless of age, class or culture, the human desire for comfort is universal. No matter how all-consuming or fleeting, the ephemeral sensation of comfort momentarily insulates one from anxiety and unease. The catalysts for these passing moments are not restricted solely to our present surroundings but include a lifetime of experiences that are activated by sensory interactions with our environment. A few notes of a familiar song send chills through the body as the brain connects the melody to a specific person, place, event or interaction. A familiar taste triggers a childhood memory, or the comforts of home. All of our senses are linked to a lifetime of catalogued experiences and predisposed sensory perceptions. As a result, our interpretation of daily interactions with our environment is shaped by this collective experience. The project in lieu of thesis, *Cush*, examines the use of visual language to evoke a sense of comfort and ease through the use of form, color and design in functional pottery.

A Personal Perspective of Comfort

Although each individual's experiences are personal in nature, there are many shared experiences that transcend class and culture. The formal language of my work is suggestive of the comforting nature of childhood/play, physical intimacy, domesticity and casual interactions within a community. My work uses visual elements inspired by these concepts to evoke a sense of comfort and ease that can be experienced by the audience both aesthetically and through use.

When reflecting on childhood, the concept of comfort is often directly associated with memories corresponding to play. When one observes children playing in their yards or on the street, it serves as a reminder of our own childhood. No matter if it was in the living room or my grandmother's back yard, as a child I was comfortable, happy and content to spend hours on end consumed in my own indulgent and carefree world. I was particularly skilled at digging in the dirt and constructing Star Wars forts from twigs and pine needles. When confronted with the combination of a can of Lincoln Logs and a few hours, I would show considerable promise as an aspiring junior architect or engineer. Within this protected environment my only responsibilities were "go outside and play" and "don't get dirty", I could rarely manage both.

In contrast to the ease found within this environment is my memory of getting lost in a department store for the first time. I was always told to stay close to my parents, but so many shiny objects and the lure of the toy aisle was too great. When I realized my parents were no longer in sight, I panicked. Just a few moments later, the panic eased as my mother took me in her arms. Within those few moments, I experienced both the greatest fear and the greatest comfort I had ever known. I was unaware at the time, but that day I experienced the comforting power of touch, which has become a reoccurring theme in my work.

The human sense of touch is indeed an amazing thing. As infants, we explore our world and connect to those closest to us through touch. As we mature we learn to communicate physically. The handshake, hug, caress, high five, pat on the back, or smack on the butt are a few examples of physical gestures that communicate. Our communications through touch can range from that of assurance to sensual, consoling to congratulatory. Many of these physical gestures are comforting in nature. Some of the simple physically communicative solutions to problems

we had as children still are effective as adults. Often when we encounter someone in distress or emotional pain, our knee-jerk reaction is to offer them the comfort of an embrace. Similarly, a shoulder to lean on can often provide more comfort than words can communicate.

As important as physical touch is, we live in a culture that places more importance on personal space than physical interactions. Political correctness and a litigious culture help keep us at an arm's length from one another as we interact. While many European countries greet each other with a kiss on the cheek, the standard American greeting is the outstretched hand. Although the comfort and desire of physical interactions remains, our culture has made them less accessible through social standards that involve distance from each other.

In a close-knit community of friends one sees these social standards become relaxed. While etiquette still plays a part in social interaction, within a social community the atmosphere is more comfortable than in the general public. Individuals can let their guard down and behave in a manner that might not be an appropriate interaction with a stranger. A pat on the butt in a close social community could be interpreted as a playful gesture. The same gesture in more reserved or professional environment could be grounds for sexual harassment or battery. The relaxed physical nature and close personal spaces of social communities creates a comfortable and playful atmosphere when contrasted with the personal distance required for formal interactions.

In addition to having a more casual social structure, individuals in close social communities share a sense of belonging within a collective peer group. The sense of comfort that is associated with being a part of the collective whole is shared equally by each member that contributes to it. If you will, imagine arriving to a party alone and realizing as you walk in the

door you aren't acquainted with a single person in the room. The anxiety of this situation contrasted with the sensation experienced as one enters a room of close friends, illustrates the comfort associated with an intimate community. The ease of interaction within such groups can feel as comfortable as being in one's own home.

The home has always been associated with comfort and intimacy. It is a space to which we retreat to relax, entertain friends and share private moments with family and friends. The objects we choose to fill this domestic landscape have a direct relationship to our perception of that space, our identity, and the emotional ways we use the space. The objects themselves come to hold a similar sentimental value assigned to the homes in which we live.

I have an appreciation for mid-century modern furniture and over the years have been fortunate enough to collect a number of pieces. The quirky yet sophisticated designs associated with the era draw me in through their playful sense of optimism that transforms the spaces they occupy. Designers such as Charles and Ray Eames, George Nelson and Eero Saarinen designed home furnishing that provided a different experience than traditional furniture of the time. Their graceful lines and saturated colors lend a quirky sophistication to their environment. Over fifty years later these designs read as contemporary and fresh as when they were introduced.

These personal interpretations of comfort provide a point of departure for my work. The visual language used in *Cush* simultaneously references the concepts of childhood/play, physical intimacy, casual interactions within a community and domesticity. The project creates a personal transformative experience for an audience by redefining domestic objects through collective personal experiences. The value of the vessels exists in their ability to elevate each

passing moment through association with suggestion of memory traces of play, comfort and touch, rather than to address primarily the needs of utility, necessity, or convenience.

The Work

The project in lieu of thesis, *Cush*, is an assortment of functional ceramic vessels presented in a crisp, contemporary environment. As the title insinuates, these vessels possess a plush and playful demeanor. The



Fig. 1

noticeable seams and taut volumes suggest these forms are casually assembled then inflated. Everyday utilitarian items such as tumblers, trays, plates, bowls and vases, as well as service oriented pieces such as platters and large scale servers are simultaneously quirky and seductive. Subtle surfaces accented with saturated fields of color contrast sophistication with lively. The landscape of the installation is birch pedestals and wall shelves bracketed by colored wall treatments. The fields of color surrounding the wall shelves echo the surface treatment in the work while the birch shelving units allude to interior space of the domestic.

The assembled nature of a Lincoln Logs construction, the softness of a relaxed thigh or forearm, or the playful sophistication of an Eames cabinet, are but a few points of reference for the personal perspective in the project in lieu of thesis, *Cush*. The functional vessels featured in

this project represent a formal interpretation of the collective experiences many people associate with comfort. The casual forms, sort surfaces and painterly colored accents are vehicles which connect the viewer to these experiences.

The scale of an object is often described in terms of its relationship to the human body. Human scale is frequently a means for interpreting size relationships within our environment. The body as a source of familiarity and comfort creates a direct relationship between form and viewers/users. My pots are composed using generous volumes that suggest fleshy areas of our bodies such as the folds of a forearm around a bent elbow. The softness of these forms invites the viewer into interaction. When holding a

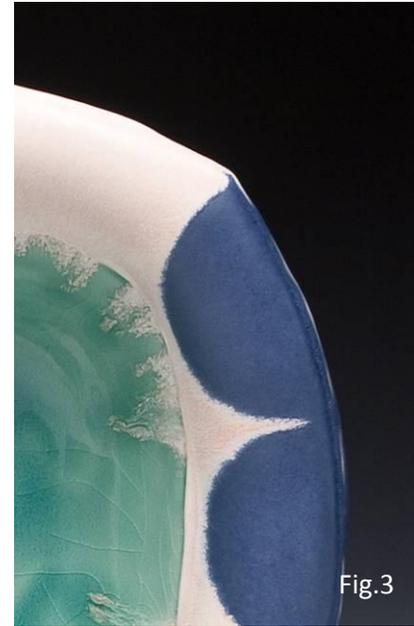
serving bowl, your hands feel the gentle curves of its plump rim. The taut volumes behave similar to a mass of flesh yielding to gentle pressure. In your grasp, it's impossible for these exaggerated



Fig. 2

volumes to go unnoticed. The forms appear to be captured at the peak of an inhalation, lending them a welcoming presence of generosity and abundance. This sense of abundance of the design raises the awareness of the viewer/user bodies in relation to the vessels. For instance, when grasping the basket's inflated handle, the exaggerated sense of proportion causes the hand to feel as if it were that of a child grasping a handle designed for an adult. These quirky volumes gently remind the viewer/user to be attentive to each passing moment, by requiring them to reinterpret the sense of human scale.

The influence of the body is also apparent on the surface of the vessels. Soft matte glazes have a sensual tactile quality that welcomes touch. In areas where the base glaze has a thicker application, a soft pink mottling occurs, giving the surface a rich depth. Our own skin shares these qualities. The tone of human skin is the product of light reflected from a thin layer which reveals beneath it the subtle color of tissue and veins. In my vessels the form and surface merge to provide similar layers of information as



glaze breaks thin on elevated areas of form and pools in recesses. The soft exterior glaze is contrasted by the high gloss glaze applied to the interior spaces of forms. This surface contrast is a point of interest and a physical reference to contrasting surface qualities of the body's interior and color.



While the vessel designs allude to the physical nature of the body, they simultaneously reference playful childhood objects such as stuffed animals and inflatable water toys, additional sources upon which the work draws. The inflated

volumes joined by large seams lend a lighthearted quality to the forms. The highly visible seams present in my vessels and design vocabulary are evidence of the building process and also are suggestive of constructive play. A childhood spent constructing model cars and airplanes or making objects from Tinker Toys, Lego's, and Lincoln Logs, has influenced the fresh manner my work is assembled. This seemingly loose construction style allows the work to appear

relaxed yet refined. The seams are used as linear accents that contrast the buoyancy of rounded forms.

The relaxed demeanor of the work is similar to casual interactions one experiences within a close circle of friends. A set of cups nestled within a pillowed display is an acknowledgement of the value of these collective relationships. These close personal relationships are relaxed, informal, and rewarding. Being a part of this community provides each member a sense of



Fig.5

comfort and belonging. The carrier/display unifies the five pieces and illustrates the importance of the individual's contribution to the group. The decoration of each cup is dependent on the other for completion. Color shapes and linear accents allowing these pieces to unify one other and transcend the sum of their parts. This

glazing strategy as metaphor is a reoccurring theme in my work. *Plate Composition, Five Cups, and Companion Serving Bowls* are designed in a similar manner. Implied completion of motif and color within groupings of pots reinforces the importance of the individual. Each individual is needed to complete the whole.

When I hear the phrase “the comforts of home”, I visualize an interior space. In this imagined space are objects and furniture that make this environment specific to the people that occupy it. We surround ourselves with the things that we find beautiful and intriguing. This environment is a reflection of our taste and reveals how we define our domestic space. In my home I have several pieces of mid-century modern furniture. I am drawn to this era because it challenges the way we think about furniture design. The playful yet sophisticated nature of these



Fig.6



Fig.7

unique designs has directly influenced my work. The field of dots on the interior of my plates and bowls directly reference the dots of an Eames Storage unit. The low relief motif seen on *Five Cups* is appropriated from a fabric pattern created by Ray Eames. These patterns reference domestic space and the comfort it provides. In my surface designs these patterns add a “modern” motif that lends a sense of sophistication to the playful softness expressed within the forms.

When considering color, I look to mid-century abstract expressionist paintings for inspiration. I am specifically intrigued by Mark Rothko for his ability to generate an emotional response through arrangements of color in space. Using his work as a point of departure, color breaks the surfaces to define form and groupings. Using a soft neutral color as a ground, the placement of color fields calls attention to areas of physical interaction between user and object. Color and shape define the architecture of the vessel or add an element of surprise in strategic areas by contrast with the neutral ground. These color fields redefine the form and add a playful demeanor to the work.



Fig.8

The project in lieu of thesis, *Cush*, draws on a collective of personal experiences that influence form and surface design on ceramic vessels. This work utilizes the concepts of a playful childhood, physical intimacy, community and the domestic to suggest emotional comfort. The translation of these experiences into visual devices results in functional pottery forms that

provide the viewer/user with a playful and comforting experience through physical use of a domestic object.

Technical Appendix

The vessels of *Cush* are hand built from rolled slabs. Paper patterns, compound drop molds and low relief stencils are used in combination to alter the slabs prior to assembly. The work is then bisque fired to Δ08, glazed and fired to Δ6 with a controlled cool.

Paper Patterns

Paper patterns are used to create shapes that are stretched and folded to create volumetric forms, structural additions such as feet, or decorative accoutrements. A single pattern or multiple patterns can be used in combination to create a single form. The patterns are drawn on paper, cut out and quickly assembled using tape. This form serves as a preliminary maquette for the final form and is a good indicator if changes in scale or proportion need to take place. After the paper maquette is constructed the patterns are used to create the clay equivalent. Once the clay piece is made, final adjustments can be made to the pattern to achieve the correct scale, profile, proportion and fit.

Compound Drop Molds

The compound drop mold uses multiple drop molds simultaneously to create double walled inflated forms. The molds are constructed of sheets of blue foam insulation. The sheets are glued together to achieve desired thickness. Paper templates are used to determine size and proportion of the object to be made. Once dimensions are set the templates are drawn onto the foam, cut with a band saw and reassembled with tape. The molds are then ready for use. The molds can contain many pieces. For example, a small dessert plate is made up of three parts, the

bottom plate, the rim and the foot. To make these three parts is a four piece mold. Mold 1 is the profile of the plate. Mold 2 is the size of the rim. Mold 3 is the circumference of the service area of the plate. Mold 4 is the circumference of the inside of the foot. To make the bottom of the plate a soft slab is placed in mold 1. Slabs rolled to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch are gently pressed in place by a pouncing pad (a bag of sand wrapped in cloth). To create the rim molds 1 and 3 are used. The negative space between the molds is used to form the rim. The foot is made with molds 2 and 4. After the clay reaches a stiff leather hard state the slabs are removed from the molds, the pieces are cut out and assembled.

Low Relief Stencils

To achieve low relief surface designs, paper stencils are used. The desired design is drawn on thick paper stock or poster board. The design is cut out with an X-acto. Negative space will create the desired design. After the slab is rolled to the desired thickness the stencil is laid on top and rolled into the slab. When the paper stencil is pulled away the low relief design remains. The embossed slab can then be used as a paper pattern construction or in a compound drop mold.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Chris Pickett received his Bachelors of Fine Art from the University of Tennessee in 2001. In the years between undergraduate and graduate school, Chris established a studio in Chattanooga, TN and worked as a studio assistant for Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts and Peters Valley Craft Center. Chris received his Master of Fine Arts from the University of Florida in the summer of 2011.