

CATCH

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A PROJECT IN LIEU OF THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF
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Summary of Project in Lieu of Thesis
Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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CATCH

By

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Play is a joyful activity. From an evolutionary standpoint, play, like sex and nourishment, offers far-reaching benefits to individuals and to society. Adults, children, and animals play to learn about themselves and the world around them. Play can make us smarter. It teaches problem-solving skills, reinforces social behaviors, and offers an opportunity for us to dream.

The intensity of Americans' drive to play is matched by the drive toward achievement. The slogan "work hard, play hard" suggests punctuating intense workweeks with equally intense leisure activities. The pace of this lifestyle culminates in physical, emotional, and financial stress. Instead of binge play, Americans would be better served by adopting playful attitudes to guide their daily lives. Research shows that success is related to play in humans. Among animals, survival is linked to playful socialization.

Catch is an installation of ceramic service ware that playfully narrates four phases of achievement (desire, chase, catch, and hoard) through the eyes of a squirrel. The squirrel serves as a metaphor for a goal-seeking, yet impulsive individual. The

ceramic forms, colored in candied pastel pink, orange, blue and green are composed of rhythmic bouncing lines, referencing the path of a squirrel as it scampers among trees. Voluminous three-dimensional forms serve as the playground for graphic narration. Each vessel form becomes the landscape where the squirrel enacts a particular phase of achievement. Ceramic acorns scattered throughout the installation display candy-colored and seductive glaze surfaces to represent each phase of achievement. The abundance of acorns (objects of desire) tempts and distracts the squirrel from the end goal: the golden acorn (a symbol of the prize).

Catch reminds the viewer of the value of a light-hearted, playful attitude in the life journey, an attitude especially needed during goal seeking. As a squirrel peers across a line of cups looking for the nut, human fingers seek out their own nourishment by roaming the topography of a plate.

Despite the adage “don’t play with your food,” ceramic vessels have historically served as objects of amusement. English fuddling cups and puzzle jugs make games of consuming liquids. Greek rhytons performed the dual roles of cup and facemask. Amid the strict roles of Victorian society, tables were abundant with majolica serving pieces displaying light-hearted decorative scenes. My ceramic designs continue this tradition of invention in form and surface, inviting the user to consider fresh interpretations of service ware. The interaction between user and object sparks a playful attitude.

PROJECT REPORT

Introduction

Catch, my project in lieu of thesis, encourages a playful attitude by narrating a story of achievement through the metaphor of a squirrel. Through displaying the narration of *Catch* on functional service ware in a fantastical woodland installation, I create for the viewer an experience and a memory of a playful story, which can be revisited through the intimacy of use.

In his book, “Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things,” Donald Norman explores the effects of human interaction with objects. He states, “a good way to bring fun and enjoyment to our lives is to trust in the skill of artists” (Norman, p 101). By using objects that give us joy, the urge to play can be sparked. Play, in turn, provides physiological and emotional benefits, which can aid in brainstorming and coping (Norman, p 104), potentially enriching lives.

Play

Benefits of Play

Play can be a joyful activity. From an evolutionary standpoint, play, like sex and nourishment, offers far-reaching benefits to individuals and to society. Adults, children, and animals play to learn about themselves and the world around them. Play can make us smarter (Brown, p 33). Current research indicates that play increases quality of life (Brown p 7, Burghardt, p 402). Play teaches problem-solving skills, reinforces social behaviors (Burghardt p 399), and offers an opportunity for us to dream. Individuals who engage in playful activities throughout the lifespan sustain benefits to the brain and to the body (Brown, p 71).

Research shows that success is related to play in humans. Positive psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi coined the term, “flow,” to describe the immersion one experiences when completely absorbed in an activity. Play, like flow, has been linked to increased creativity (Csikszentmihalyi 1996).

Defining Play

Because play is experienced emotionally and physically, like a gorgeous sunset, or delicious meal, it tells more through experience than definition (Brown, p 18). While an exact scientific definition of play has yet to be formulated (Burghardt, pp 6-7), many attempts at defining play share common properties: play is voluntary, primarily purposeless, pleasurable, repeated, un-self-conscious, improvisational, low-risk, and stimulates a feeling of immersion (Burghardt, p 382, Brown p 17). Many Americans define leisure as an acceptable form of play for adults, and because of leisure’s association with freedom, many mistakenly view leisure as a mutually exclusive counterpoint to work.

Play and Achievement

This was no time for play
This was no time for fun
This was no time for games
There was work to be done.

--Dr. Seuss from *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back!* 1958

Paradoxes of our American culture include our view of work and play as dichotomies. Both are important to Americans. Work and profit are the cornerstones of our capitalist society, but many individuals view a playful approach to life as the ideal. The intensity of Americans’ drive to play is matched by the drive toward achievement. The slogan “work hard, play hard” suggests punctuating intense workweeks with equally

intense leisure activities. If not balanced with healthy choices for recreation, the pace of this lifestyle can culminate in physical, emotional, and financial stress.

Play's opposite is not work. In fact, the two can overlap and can be interchanged, sometimes mistakenly (Bowman, p 62). Profiles of a golfer who hurls his club across the field in a fit of miserable anger and the office worker who makes a light-hearted game out of filing reports do not coincide with common definitions of play and work. Play expert, Stuart Brown argues that the real opposite of play is depression or monotony (Brown, p 126).

When humans adopt playful attitudes to guide their daily lives, they can attain work/life balance (Hartung, 2002). To have a fulfilling and productive life, one needs to engage in mental and behavioral play, which aids in the satisfaction of accomplishment (Burghardt, p 402).

Play in Animal Behavior

Much of the research on play, particularly play behavior in animals, is anecdotal. Although play in animals can be observed and often proven, play lacks one solid scientific definition to apply to both human and animal behaviors. Because we cannot ascertain the mindset of animals, humans unavoidably anthropomorphize while labeling animal behaviors.

Animals can be observed engaging in spontaneous play, either in social groups or individually, perhaps with an object. Bob Fagan, an expert in animal play behavior explains (during an interview in Brown, p 32) the value of animal play in survival as “pretend rehearsal for the challenges and ambiguities of life, a rehearsal in which life and death are not at stake.”

Because humans anthropomorphize the behaviors we see in animals, we might label a squirrel's quick, staccato movements as playful, when in fact the movements are biologically based (Gurnell, p 76). The squirrel is an ideal metaphor for playful behavior because of these anthropomorphic qualities.

The Work

Catch is an installation of ceramic service wares including cups, plates, a jar, and candy dishes that playfully narrate four phases of achievement (desire, chase, catch, and hoard) through the eyes of a squirrel. The hand-drawn, anthropomorphized squirrel in black and white serves as a metaphor for a goal-seeking, yet impulsive individual. The absence of the squirrel drawings and the placement of the wares in relation to the viewer in the first and fourth phases of the installation, allows the viewer the chance to step into the role of the squirrel.

Strategies

The functional ceramic service ware in *Catch* aims to spark a playful attitude in the viewer. Through the installation, I create an experience and memory of a playful story, which can be revisited through the intimacy of use. My strategies include color-coding, graphic narration, and spatial design of grouped vessels.

Color instantly conveys meaning (Eisman, p 6). Because we have an associative memory of color (Eisman, p 13), the phases of achievement within my installation design are color-coded. This emotionally contributes to the readability of the narration and to the formation of memory in the viewer. I selected de-saturated colors of medium value to reference the candied pastels of my own childhood memories of growing up in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Stuart Brown suggests that people can regain a sense of play by visualizing an experience where the qualities of play were felt (Brown, p 153). Brown describes that through imaginative play we “(capture) a pretend narrative and (combine) it with the reality of one’s experience” to gain a better understanding of the world we live in (Brown, 36). *Catch’s* relationship to comics through graphic narration creates a sense of accessibility. The black and white drawings are easily read and understood, employing exaggeration, humor, and metaphor; and facilitating the viewer’s ability to capture the narrative of the squirrel and apply it to his or her own life. According to Wil Eisner, comics are frequently used to instruct the reader in a humorous and entertaining way by using exaggeration and visual analogies (Eisner, p 140).

Imagery is sequenced like a scene in a flipbook or filmstrip to give a sense of movement across grouped forms. Images also appear in sequence across the wall space. The squirrel appears running through the air. This is achieved by placing sculptural platters into sequence and planning rotations as though the squirrel is turning as it runs toward its goal.

Installation

Color-coded to represent each distinct phase, the ceramic forms in candied pastel pink (desire); orange (chase), blue (catch), and green (hoard) are composed of rhythmic bouncing lines. The lines reference the path of a squirrel as it scampers among trees. Voluminous three-dimensional ceramic forms serve as the playground for graphic narration. Each vessel form, containing two-dimensional and three-dimensional references to landscape becomes the scene where the squirrel enacts a particular phase of achievement. A ten-foot tree, rendered in low relief and two-dimensional line,

holds acorns high above the viewer's head and spans the corner of the installation. Ceramic acorns scattered throughout the installation display candy-colored and seductive glaze surfaces also representing each phase of achievement. The abundance of acorns tempts and distracts the squirrel from the end goal: the golden acorn, which serves as a symbol of the prize.

Desire: Treat Servers

The first phase in *Catch*, "Treat Servers" (fig 1), displays a voluminous tree-like two-tiered candy dish and a shallow dish with a nestled golden spoon. These objects of desire are perched on a shelf just above eye level to appear beyond reach. Golden acorns, referencing candy, sit atop the dishes. The viewer catches a glimpse of the shimmering treats from across the room, but the prize remains elusive as the viewer approaches. The "Treat Servers" are colored in a sugary pink pastel, with modeled acorn adornments. Associated with the sweet tastes and smells of candy (Eisman, p 24), pink is strategically used to create a feeling of desire in the viewer. The high placement of the candy dishes is seductive but offers little reward, arousing a sense of curiosity and motivated desire.

Chase: Cups

The cornerstone of the installation is a ten-foot tree, fabricated and rendered using styrofoam and plaster. This low relief tree-form aesthetically ties the phases together through a combination of two-dimensional line and three-dimensional limbs. Strategically placed colored acorns hang from the monochromatic grey branches placed at key intervals on the walls (fig 2). The tree serves as a shelf for five cups, which narrate the "Chase" (fig 3a). The first cup shows a two-dimensional squirrel wistfully

looking across a line of cups (fig 3b). Orange, the brightest and warmest of the colors in the installation, arouses a sense of movement appropriate to the “Chase.” In addition to energy, orange is associated with fun, whimsy and childhood (Eisman, p 63). An orange bouncing line traveling from one cup to the next shows the potential path of the squirrel as it reaches the prize, a three-dimensional golden acorn hanging from a branch (fig 3c).

Catch: Plates

Sequential images on four plates tell the story of the squirrel catching the acorn. The viewer follows the squirrel as it reaches for the acorn, catches in mid-air more than he can handle, and victoriously tackles a larger-than-life nut as another looms in the air above him, tempting and taunting him (figs 4a-d). The placement of “Plates” on the wall restates the bouncing line seen throughout the installation and the work (fig 4e). The pace of the installation slows with the blue of “Catch.” The medium-toned blue indicates calm and satisfaction (Eisman, 63).

Hoard: Acorn Pile and Hoarding Jar

As the viewer traces the implied line of “Plates,” the eyes are directed toward a swirling pile of acorns, which lead to a tree-stump pedestal holding an acorn jar (fig 5, 5a). The acorns, color-coded to represent each phase of the installation, are methodically collected and categorized, leading the viewer away from the wall to a pedestal in the shape of a tree stump. Surrounded by smaller acorns, a green acorn jar sits on top of the stump. The hoarding jar is colored green to represent abundance and greed (Eisman, p 45). Hanging from a branch of the tree stump is a single golden acorn (fig 5b). The placement of the golden acorn, a symbol of the prize, on the opposite side

of the collected acorn pile, and still connected to the tree, indicates that it has not yet been picked. The squirrel's hunger for the prize is not quite satiated and the quest will remain incomplete.

Influences

Despite the adage "don't play with your food," ceramic vessels have historically served as objects of amusement. English fuddling cups and puzzle jugs make games of consuming liquids. Greek rhytons performed the dual roles of cup and facemask. Amid the strict roles of Victorian society, tables were abundant with majolica serving pieces displaying light-hearted decorative scenes. My ceramic designs continue this tradition of invention in form and surface, inviting the user to consider fresh interpretations of service ware.

I am drawn to contemporary ceramic artists who use two-dimensional surface as a conceptual strategy to embellish a usable and tangible three-dimensional form. Kathy King uses text, imagery, visual pun and humor in her underground comic-inspired ceramic works to convey a personal narrative. King's surfaces embellish and complete the three-dimensional forms. Her palette is mainly black with white and highlights of color. Kevin Snipes employs a seemingly contradictory primitive sophistication in his urban-inspired drawings on geometric boxes. He treats two sides of the form conceptually separate, often explaining dichotomies or opposite forces on front and back.

Conclusion

Catch reminds the viewer of the value of a light-hearted, playful attitude in the life journey, an attitude especially needed during goal seeking. As squirrels peer across a

line of cups looking for the nut, human fingers seek out their own nourishment by roaming the topography of a plate or candy dish. Through experiencing the narration of *Catch* on functional service ware in a playful woodland installation, I create a memory of play, which the viewer can continue to experience through the intimacy of use. The interaction between user and object sparks a playful attitude.

APPENDIX

Figures



A



B

Figure 1: *Desire: Treat Servers*. A) Installation view. B) Detail.



Figure 2: *Catch*, Installation View

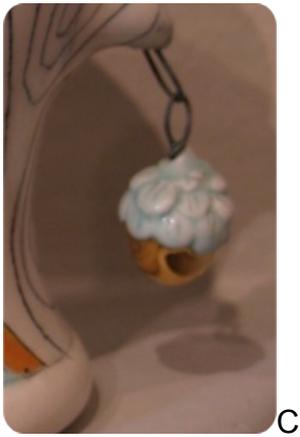


Figure 3: *Chase: Cups*. A) Installation view. B) Detail. C) Detail



A



B



C



D



E

Figure 4: *Catch: Plates*. A) Detail. B) Detail. C) Detail. D) Detail. E). Installation view.



A



B



C

Figure 5: *Hoarding: Hoarding Jar and Acorn Pile*. A) Installation view. B) Detail. C) Detail.

Technical Statement

Clay Body

I used Val Cushing's Cone 6 recipe for porcelain from Julia Galloway's website (<http://www.juliagalloway.com/alchemy.html>).

EPK Kaolin 35

Tile 6 Kaolin 15

Nepheline Syenite 23

Flint 22

XX Sagger Ball Clay 5

Bentonite 3

Building Methods

I constructed the plates and other horizontal forms by rolling out ¼ inch slabs over bisque hump molds. I create the feet by using plywood drop molds of various sizes and shapes. Cups and the jar were wheel-thrown and altered with hand built additions. The acorn on the last cup in the sequence was hand-modeled and attached with nichrome wire. Acorns were wheel-thrown or slip cast from a wheel-thrown original. Acorn petals were stamped and hand-applied and then carved with detail lines.

Surfacing the Greenware

I created patterned lines of the bark through the mishima technique by using an exacto knife and inlaying Amaco Velvet Underglaze in the lines. The excess underglaze is wiped off with a wet sponge at the bone dry stage. The drawings are rendered on paper then positioned and transferred to the ware with transparency film. I create an underpainting with watered-down Amaco Velvet Underglaze. The drawings are completed through a combination of sgraffito and brushing on more underglaze in areas.

Surfacing the Bisqueware

Sanding is necessary to remove the excess underglaze from the areas of mishima. Areas of color are achieved by painting between the lines with colored commercial underglazes. I use a combination of colored glazes first then clear glazes on the forms through spraying or dipping. Painter's tape, latex wax with Murphy's Oil

Soap, or transparent contact paper masks off the unglazed areas. Forbes wax with Acrylic Medium masks the glazed areas.

The work is fired to cone 6, with a 30-minute soak at maximum temperature and a controlled cooling of 100 degrees an hour until 1850 degrees.

The golden acorns were lustered with Hanovia Bright Gold.

Installation Methods

I created the low-relief tree, tree stump, and wall shelf by using 2-inch blue Styrofoam insulation board, sur-formed and plastered. Plywood supports were adhered to the back of the wall-hung forms. I painted the plastered surfaces with latex interior house paint. Tree leaf shapes were cut from craft foam and painted with latex interior paint.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Originally from small town Nebraska, Chandra DeBuse completed her Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology in 1995. She worked for ten years at a nonprofit shelter for abused women and children before deciding to pursue a professional career in the arts. She studied ceramics at Penland School of Crafts and the University of Nebraska before beginning graduate studies at the University of Florida. Chandra currently lives in Gainesville, Florida.