

BEYOND THE WHITE CUBE

by

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of

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in

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

My thesis explores the role of pottery in the gallery versus in the outside world. My methods included manipulation of the gallery space, renovation of a bus into a mobile gallery and experimentation with larger wood fired vessels. This resulted in a thesis exhibition that was generally well received and resulted in some helpful insights into having a studio art career in Montana.

## RELECTIONS ON MY PAST

Growing up in rural areas has colored my expectation of what an experience with art can be. Trips to cities with museums were rare, and time to visit museums was in short supply. Art education in my grade schools was limited, and it was generally unavailable to me until college. Up until then, the art I was exposed to centered on the home and public places. The curation of the type of art I grew up with was generally based in utility or history, with the types spanning everything from pottery, ornamental home architecture, and church interiors to statues of Civil War soldiers. This contrasted greatly with my first trip to the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh during college, an institution initially funded by a wealthy individual. The museum is a place where the walls are white and not all art is representational. This experience was not enough to prepare me for my experience years later at Art Miami where the art was commodified and loud. Since then I have attended three years of graduate studies, and during this time my awareness of contemporary works in and out of the gallery has greatly expanded thanks to faculty, classes, conferences and visiting artists. These experiences were also paired with those I had in Italy and China where ancient grandiose art is a part of daily life and not separated from it. This is due to the age of those countries where works and buildings are far older than the United States. These are some of the factors that have shaped my view of art, its function in the world, and the production of my own work.

Going to an unfamiliar city where the new attractions are exciting while being in a strange place can be intimidating. While working for other artists, I saw that their work seemed at home in the studio, the place where their art was born and raised. When displayed in the white cube of the gallery, it suddenly seemed out of place. This notion influenced my own work tremendously, since I was not accustomed to the white space, and I was not making work appropriate for a gallery. I eventually concluded that this was not a flaw in my work or my thinking, but instead that these ideas (i.e., the role of art outside the gallery and the curation of personal space) were worth exploring.

## REFLECTIONS ON MY WORK

When preparing for a firing, I accept that there will be some loss. Sometimes the loss is due to a less than desirable aesthetic appearance and the piece can be re-fired or set aside. Other times the piece may crack or warp and can no longer be the piece I had envisioned. This used to be the end of the piece for me. I would consider it a failure and move on, but lately to me these pieces have begun to embody meaning worth investigating. While these pieces did not say what I intended for them to, they started to tell an authentic story that also spoke of me and my work in an unexpected way.

My family is from southwestern Pennsylvania, an area that was historically known for its crockery. Salt fired stoneware can be found everywhere there. While some pieces are still used in fermenting sauerkraut or beer, one can also see the stoneware used for storing umbrellas, decorating fireplaces, and acting as flower pots. Through age, these vessels have started taking on lives beyond those for which they were intended; their stories have been augmented by the way generations of people have interacted with them.

Over time, I came to realize that the salt fired stoneware pieces that I regularly saw were only ones that had been sold. The rejects, however, were not simply discarded. Rather, they were given a different life. They were integrated into the very fabric of the community by being used in the construction of walls, docks, and chimneys. The bottoms were broken out so they could be put head to foot in a line to make pipes, and they were even crushed and used to pave roads. They blend into and support everyday life as part of a local anomaly. This phenomenon can be seen around the world, as I have personally witnessed it in China and Italy as both a historical and contemporary practices. These

pots may not have turned out as their creators had desired, but they clearly cannot be denied.

Steven Young Lee refers to the reaction people have to his deconstructed work as “visceral” (Palmer, 2016)(<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/steven-young-lees-craft-make-perfectly-imperfect-pottery-180960648/>). His work defies the normal expectation of what a pot could or should be by purposely allowing the pots to fall apart in the kiln and become closed forms with their interiors violently exposed. As referenced by Glenn Adamson in *Peter Voulkos: The Breakthrough Years*, (Adamson, 2016) this visceral reaction can also be felt when one see the marks of violence left on a platter or stack by Peter Voulkos. His marks and deconstructions are intentional decisions, whereas mine are a product of the process that reveals a dichotomy of the different life a work can have whether it is whole or cracked. A whole pot seems at home anywhere except for in a gallery, while cracked vessels seem at home in a gallery and somehow create an honest dialogue about the whole vessels.

## REFLECTIONS ON THE GALLERY

In *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, (O'Doherty, 1978)

Brian O'Doherty breaks down how a white walled galleries and modernists museums are designed to function. In the gallery setting, people are often asked not to touch the work, and while there is good reason for this, it made me think about the difference between art in the gallery and art outside of it. The white cube is a transcendent space, one in which the outside world is cut off in order to elevate the work inside to a venerated position, performing a function similar to that of a church or a courthouse. These spaces are intentionally intimidating and direct the motions and actions of the people inside of them. Works of art are put on large white walls away from other works to assert their individual authority over the viewer. To paraphrase O'Doherty, just as the gallery sheds the outside world by eliminating windows and unnecessary colors, so too does it ask the viewer to shed their identities at the door and to be an empty vessel for the works to fill. The role the gallery plays is important, but when one's work involves more senses than sight alone, this can be limiting to the viewer's experience.

My work initially conformed to the standards of the gallery by denying touch, but then embraced the senses by requiring time and repeated touch. Doing this meant that the gallery was no longer wholly appropriate for my work, so I sought out an alternative space that did not deny the outside world. Stepping out of the gallery, I had to decide how and with whom the work would interact (i.e., my audience). While statues and monuments are seen by many people, they can sometimes fade into the background of

daily life and get lost in the white noise. As such, I chose another option, which was to make work that is seen by fewer people. Those people, however, spend more time with the work and hopefully have more meaningful interactions with it, embracing the concept of quality over quantity.

“In classical modernist galleries, as in churches, one does not speak in a normal voice; one does not laugh, eat, drink, lie down, or sleep; one does not get ill, go mad, sing, dance, or make love. Indeed, since the white cube promotes the myth that we are there essentially as spiritual beings- the Eye is the Eye of the Soul- we are to be understood as tireless and above the vicissitudes of chance and change.” (O’Doherty, 1978).

I did this by creating fermentation vessels. Fermentation was chosen because of its worldwide ubiquity. Even though relatively few people may be able to see the work and even fewer may fully interact with it, the concepts presented are universal enough to be understood. When one is presented with a fermentation vessel, he or she must spend time with it in a way not required by most art. Fermentation requires cleaning, preparation, sanitation, and monitoring. This intimate interaction with the work can only be accomplished with time—a luxury that galleries are seldom able to provide. Fermentation asks the viewers to be more than just an eye, and instead they must also bring along touch, taste, and smell. This creates an immersive experience without the need for a large and elaborate installation. Imagine becoming this intimate with another work of art, such as the *Mona Lisa*. The vessels also become part of the users’ curated personal space, an intimate collaboration between an individual and those whose works the users chose to bring into their lives. Foods also bring the potential for community and conversation, and the creation of a dialogue is often a goal of art. The gallery

accomplishes this by making a space where the work can dominate the eye, which gives the work but not the viewer a voice. When a vessel is handled, there is a dialogue of form with the hand, and the hand responds in kind as the eye directs the fingers to bring it to the mouth or nose to sample either the flavor or aroma of the work inside.

This work also addresses my interest in the passage of time. In my eyes, my process is an indexical record of most steps of my process. Even if the viewers are not familiar with the ceramic process, they can still gain a sense of the handmade object. The objects themselves also imply use in a process in which time is an integral part of the product. Whether empty or full, my vessels indicate that they are the remnant of action, the residue of a process, and the relic of my thoughts.

During my time here at MSU, I have used events at the grad studio as a way to experiment with these thoughts and make observations. These events include one day shows, the Montana Clay meeting, the College of Arts and Architecture show, and the Wood Fire Symposium. My first experiment involved testing how much participation I could draw out of a viewer. I provided the viewers with a utility knives to see if they would cut what I had on display, and they did.

My next experiments were more subtle. I would often use food as the catalyst for my experiments in the white gallery space, and the primary reason for this is that people often expect to find food at gallery receptions. As such, it was a medium that I could readily manipulate without drawing too much attention to the fact that I was doing so. My first experiment was to place the refreshments table inside the show area of the Waller-Yoblonsky Gallery instead outside of it. The table was set with some typical snacks, but

also with my cups next to the materials for gin and tonics to which people could help themselves. This served to give the viewer a chance to handle the work, consider the volume, and fill it as they thought appropriate, thus spending more time with it. I did not necessarily consider this arrangement a “piece,” but instead it provided a counterbalance and context to my other work in the gallery, which was based around fermentation vessels and placed on work tables instead of pedestals to deny the space I was in.

Another experiment involved removing the food from the gallery by placing it outside of the building that houses the gallery. Interestingly, doing so created a separation between the social aspects of eating and socializing inherent to a reception and the viewing of the work inside. The separation did not keep people away from the work. On the contrary, viewers separated the tasks of eating and viewing, cutting down on multitasking and increasing a focus on the task at hand.

In the course of my studies, I have realized that I need to take things in my practice further—white cubes are here to stay for the foreseeable future, but that not where I see my career being focused. They enhance the prestige and therefore the value of work, but they do not fulfill all of the needs of all art or all artists. It seemed to me that I needed an alternative space that is specifically for the use of art but is not a white cube, a salon, or a museum. My mind turned to the kinds of available spaces where I could work repeatedly and preferably with full ownership, so that I could retain my work after school. Being a person without much money, it quickly became apparent that I could own neither land nor a building anywhere remotely close to school, so I needed an alternate alternative space. Perhaps inspired by other mobile galleries, I decided that a bus as a

gallery would address some of the issues I was seeing with the white cube, while also being appropriate for Montana. First of all, a bus as a gallery does not cut off the outside world. Rather, it invites the outside in with its abundance of windows, potentially allowing the work inside to have a conversation with the world around it. It is easy to say that a bus can move and bring art to unexpected locations, but I do not think that effect can be overstated. Any disruption to what viewers expect from an art experience throws them off balance enough that they view the work with a fresh gaze, turning the experience from passive to more engaged.

Mobile galleries have existed for a while in a variety of platforms and for a myriad of reasons ranging from arts outreach in tractor trailers to private sales in camper trailers. In all of the documented cases I have found, mobile galleries generally operate in a way that a traditional gallery cannot, even when sponsored by a museum. Currently SAVVY Contemporary and the Bauhaus have teamed up for an international project against the neocolonial power structure, which will take place in a mobile space in the shape of a miniature Bauhaus. They will use this to place Western and non-Western work in a dialogue with one another while traveling to four countries. This is just one example of an established institution recognizing a changing world and that if they wish to address contemporary issues they must think outside of the cube.

The way art is displayed has evolved with humanity, and it is my belief that we're on the cusp of another change, especially as the modernist museum continues its decline. According to Lianne McTavish in *The Decline of the Modernist Museum*, (McTavish, 2003) the modernist museum came to power in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a response to the

previously popular salons. The salons were a place of study and a place to see and compare works that were previously locked away in the private homes of the dwindling aristocracy. In the salons, paintings were crammed in side by side from floor to ceiling with barely any wall showing at all. This was done so that viewers and students could directly compare styles and techniques for study. These spaces were neither egalitarian nor democratic for neither the works nor the public.

The modernist museum attempted to address this issue by creating a space where each piece had its own space where it could be appreciated on its own. The idea was that this would be a space open to the public, a place where the common person could go for enlightenment. While the intentions may have been good, the execution was flawed. Drawing most of their support from upper and middle-class patrons, the museums soon took on an air of colonial elitism. Non-Western works, especially historical specimens, were acquired through what are now considered questionable means and displayed in ways that objectified non-Western peoples. With this in mind, and considering the ever-expanding needs and variety of contemporary art, the white cube is showing its age. I do not know what the art gallery of the future looks like, but it must be adaptable, and perhaps it must realize that one institution cannot do it all. Therefore, institutions may need to become very specialized.

I see this work as something that will continue after my thesis is finished. I've been told my work often plays a supporting role to my surroundings, and indeed I think it does. There is a space that's neglected between fine art and the rest of the world where art builds a high tower without enough of a foundation to stand on its own without teetering

and without being constantly in a tenuous position dependent on the whims of a fickle financial market. I believe my work would help to shore up the art community in Montana by creating a bridge between the everyday person and art giving interactions that show art is more than a white cube with signs that read “do not touch”.

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1. Tori with a Tumbler on the bus.



2. Bus Interior Installation 1



3. Bus Interior Installation 2



4. Bus Interior Installation 3



5. Gallery Exhibition 1



6. Gallery Exhibition 2



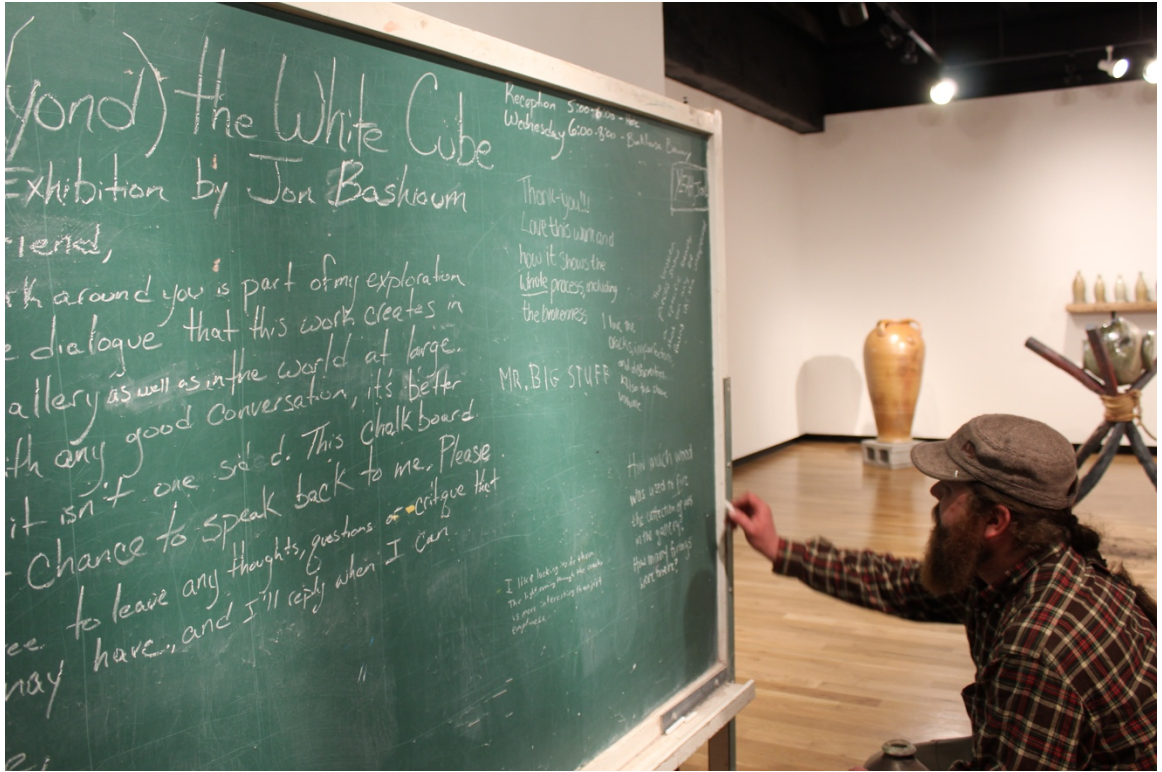
7. Gallery Exhibition 3



8. Gallery Exhibition 4



9. Gallery Exhibition 5



10. Gallery Exhibition 6



11. Gallery Exhibition 7