

ASSUMED IDENTITY

by

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ABSTRACT

I use personal experience as a way of relating to others, through objects both found and made, the shared experience of being human. There is a fascinating universality in the ways so many can relate to nearly any experience despite it being general or specific. My artwork is an exploration of humanness and the ways in which we experience enculturation and assume identity of self within cultures. By assume identity, I refer to the way we adopt historical identity. The uniform and the group was a way in which I was being given the means to act a certain way through uniformity. Through my artwork I seek to examine several systems that condition action in children as well as adults.

My artwork is an exploration of humanness and the ways in which we experience enculturation and assume identity of self within cultures. By assume identity, I refer to the way we adopt historical identity. As a young adolescent I joined the boy scouts and assumed the role that so many had filled before me. This notion of self as a scout became something I identified with closely as who I was not just a way to act. Later in life I observed that I was separate from the scout and that it was, for me, an illusion of self; only something created over time through culture and impressed up me. Enculturation is the process by which an individual acquires the characteristics, the ways of acting, of a group over a period of time (Webster). My experience of scouting was a form of enculturation. The uniform and the group was a way in which I was being given the means to act a certain way through uniformity. The Boy Scouts are one of many groups and systems that exist to teach people how to act in ways that are seen as appropriate, upright or necessary. Through my artwork I seek to examine several systems that condition action in children as well as adults.

My experience in these systems is personal but not unique to myself alone. We all have undergone conditioning of some form or another; it might have been subtle through play or more obvious through systems like the army. Aside from scrutinizing the systems present in my work I am very interested in how others react to the objects present, how their own experiences allow them to relate and engage the narratives that are present.

There is a very important distinction I make between shared experiences and sharing of personal narrative. I am a white male born into American western culture. Is this who I am or can I separate my ego from this label I am conditioned to identify with? I feel my ego is separate from experience. I can share experience with another but cannot ever see the world from another's point of view. This is why I cannot truly empathize with another, I can only assume their point of view and never physically experience it. I distinguish sharing experience and understanding another person this way from true empathy. As humans we can never know with certainty what another feels, we can only interpret and assume.

There are some who might look at my work and want to make it about me as an individual, view it as autobiographical, but I see that as shallow and very American. The desire to celebrate the individual and live on through anything from movies to music to art is, in my opinion, a very American and western idea. It is not with such intent that I wish the work to be read. I am in my work only in so much as I speak from my understanding. Guillermo Kuitca was quoted by Julie Belcove as saying: "I don't accept looking at art through the artist's experience or identity...I give so much credit to the work itself. It holds the elements, the truth, the story, the past, the experience. So we might ask it, 'Who are you?' and eventually I get a clue to me, but not the other way around." Experience can be separate and shared, and where that inevitable overlap between telling a story and having lived a part of it occur, one might see me in the work but I have no desire to foist my person as an individual on anyone. To ask if the

individual can be separate from the experiences that make them up may be a speculative and unanswerable question, but it is one that I am interested in asking.

Memory plays a large role in my artistic practice. I engage how we use it, access it, create physical markers for it and how we self-reflect to gain insight. Mike Kelly's understanding of memory and his explication of certain aspects of it visually reinforce conclusions I have come to through my own work. *Education Complex*, created in 1995, is a glimpse of how we experience a place and how the memory of that space changes as we change. It investigates how experience affects us but does not become us. Kelley's sculpture is a composite of memories of past buildings and structures he has lived in and been educated in (Whitney). Omitting forgotten aspects Kelley creates a composite structure, the buildings becoming a new and original space. He creates an amalgamation of memories that are something new and different. The result is a product of multiple partial memories, woven together into a new and separate result. This is how I envision my idea of self, an amalgamation resulting of the constant addition of information, experience and memory to an ever-growing amorphous conglomerate of function and dysfunction. The play between dysfunction and function within *Educational Complex* is both evident and missing from the work, it straddles a paradox. *Educational Complex* is a new environment that Kelly has never visited. At the same time it is comprised of spaces he has spent great amounts of time within. My own work *Untitled Scout Tent* is a representation of the interior space of a tent devoid of volume, the dysfunction of it as an object more pronounced. The tent is constructed out of sewn together scout packs, each of them owned by an individual and containing their own memory and experience. The

cutting apart and sewing together of the packs was painful, an exercise in destroying the object that acts as a signifier for experience and creating something new. Each of the packs stopped being a marker for memory, by whatever individual that had kept them as representations of self, when they were sold. Perhaps the original owner died and whoever unloaded felt no connection to the object and it did not represent a memory to them. The packs may have represented sad memories that the owners wanted to divest themselves of. Whatever the origin of them, they have become something new, representative of certain experience but no longer representative of an individual explicitly. They do each reference in small ways their previous story, these parts of the whole, but they represent something new as well. The tent is now a new architecture, representing something connected to certain individuals, but also separate from them. I see it now as accessible to viewers as a marker for remembering their own personal experiences.

Static objects often serve as markers for memory and events in my life, unchanging reminders of how I was affected by experiences. There is at times a need to find an object that serves to identify a specific event and to help me remember how I was changed by it. The object that is used to mark a memory, the souvenir, is intended to be a fixed point and for myself there is a hope that this will lend stability to the memory. I see an interesting confusion in this process. I collect objects to serve as markers for memories of experiences that have changed me for better or worse. I feel that if I forget the memory, the change that occurred will be undone, the experience lost, and the idea of self that has been created will be compromised. The problem is this, I am not an immobile

being. I am always changing and shifting. I am continually being added to and subtracted from and then wearing out and dying. I might attempt to hang on to souvenirs that act to separate and compartmentalize experience, to make static and unchanging the memory, but it is a futile activity. The effect of experience on the self cannot be undone though it will be added to and subtracted from as I age. I am the product of my stories but each individual story is not who I am. The narrative happened to me, changed me, but is separate from my identity and can be experienced by others. For these reasons the identification of self with individual objects is unnecessary for me, they are explicative of an event but do not represent more than that event.

This is how I am thinking about my relationship to my sculpture and drawing, to the clay and the glaze that I work with to relate narrative. The stories I tell are about more than me, they are about being altruistic, about sharing experience. There is a wooden gun present in the piece *Untitled Boy Scout Pack*, I see it as iconic of how play is sterilized of violence and danger and becomes an adventure and exploration. The wood shotgun is an object my father made for me, something I love, but my connection to this object is not relevant to the experience that I am hoping others will connect to. This is an example of how the work is connected to me, but not about me, it is about my experience. The act of sharing is by its very nature personal but need not contain the identity of the individual that this personal experience was gained through. Our sense of the unique individual is not capable of being imparted. A separate person's identity of self can only be understood through empathy and shared experience. In this way we can assume each of us has a unique identity but not be certain.

I want to share the way I see our culture operate, the way I observe how we impress our culture upon the young. Culture is a way I see the collected group creating static markers for memory and impressing them upon each other. In this way I see culture as being an attempt at group memory. It allows a collection of individuals to pass on their vetted and accumulated ideas of right action within their group. Because we are always changing and seeing better ways of acting in regard to each other, I find importance in reflecting upon ways I have experienced enculturation. Through sculpture, drawing or whatever media suits the idea, I create markers and symbols that represent experiences I have undergone; how culture has been used to change the way I act in relation to others. I question the need to contain knowledge within these cultural boundaries. There exist myriads of examples that show how easily and flagrantly private groups can engender large numbers of children with their own agenda. It was not many years ago that Lionel-Porter was selling chemical lab sets for children that contained instruction booklets describing in detail how you might perform a magic of science show for family and friends. The booklet details how an aspiring child should have an assistant and should refer to them only as your slave, dressing them in a burlap sack and blackening their skin with a burnt cork (Lionel-Porter 20). This was a way in which a group was able to use a product to condition a way of thinking under the guise of play. Through play the act of dressing a friend as an African slave becomes innocent in its activity, but simultaneously has a possibility to cause damage. It is very directed toward educating young children to think a certain way toward a specific group of people. We know this to be an inappropriate way of action, but how do we prevent this instead of analyzing only

through retrospect, if we cannot make an objective assessment of a system, are we doomed to understand it's faults only through hindsight?

I am critical of a system that can be so readily accessed to provide enculturation with little oversight. The sculpture *Sluice Em* contains elements of this idea of play. We were told at a young age, while learning to hunt, that sluicing was unsportsmanlike behavior. Sluicing is the action of shooting a quarry at rest, be it on the ground in the water or out of a tree. I have removed the element of death and the danger of a real gun within the sculpture as well as re-contextualized the action of shooting birds at rest as an activity of play. This is a commentary on how easily we can affect those who are not aware of how an object is functioning upon them. Each day I walk into the gallery and see hundreds of rubber bands littering the floor and the ducks on their perches. The bands are shot from wooden guns that are plastered with the emblem of a 9mm handgun. Those who engage this artwork do so under the pretense of innocent play and I wonder as I watch if they are aware of how their participation may affect their psychology. I am wary of play because it subverts my need for awareness. The idea of play is one that comes with it an attitude of trust that one can engage a game without fear of attack or conditioning. This is why it can so often become a perfect vehicle for enculturation.

Many facets of my work appear in cultures outside of my own, however, it is important to me that I understand my own acculturation to specific systems of action. I find being aware of my own conditioning does not free me from it, but allows me the choice to act within it or outside of it. I question if this is a paradox of action, and if I can exist on both sides, can I exist within a system of constant enculturation without being

affected? This is an unanswerable question, but that does not mean it is not worthy of analyzing, as value creators we can make anything we desire worthy of consideration, even futility of action or non-action.

The presentation of my work throughout the space of the gallery is done with the intent of each object able to be talked around. Army ribbons hang opposite to Boy Scout merit badges, the two pieces in conversation and at the same time a reflection of each other. These colorful and vibrant discs and bricks evoke a sense of beauty but also contain narrative of hard work and possible danger. For myself they explicate the way systems of enculturation can be a mirror of one another in childhood and adulthood. In between the two of these sits a bayonet-training dummy, something I can imagine being used in almost any time period as used by soldiers to learn how to strike a blow. The training dummy sets upon a base in the shape of Fort Knox, where many others and I have been initiated into the culture of the soldier. The sculpture represents a timeless and unchanging psychology in regard to being ready to fight members of our own race. When I look at human shaped wooden target it represents a battered and unchanging target, a relic that has been passed through generations. It is rendered as it would have been for use in the field because I feel it's' purpose is to be itself, the base a nod to those who spent time at Knox.

As a veteran of a foreign war, I have been influenced by the violence and death that I experienced in Iraq. I was put in a position to engage my mortality more immediately and daily than many have the opportunity to experience. Much of the work that I create deals with mortality and the anxiety many people feel when confronting the

reality of death. Camus wrote extensively, as did many of the existentialists, concerning how a fear of the unknown contributes largely to aggression within the human psyche. These ideas began my examination of historical images of the soldier, eventually going back to the scout as a nascent military identity. I am interested in the fact that aggression persists in modern society, violence in any form but primarily the organized warfare of armies. What are the constructs that aid in this perpetuation of instinctively combative natures? If no construct, then can we do anything to alter or change our own psychology in regard to one another? The water can is an image I use to discuss the nature of the individual person, their body not their identity.

The can is slip cast in clay, the clay is both strong and hard, but simultaneously fragile and weak. This has been my observation of many vets as they return from war, strong when they left to face war, but so easily broken and defeated upon an attempt to reintegrate into society. The imagery upon the cans is that of scouts having what may be their first interaction with weapons, they are excited and intrigued by the sense of adventure and danger contained within the object. I have placed the scout image on the can because the water cans are unbroken, not yet exposed to the possibility of being a soldier or fighting in a war. The images of the young scouts are appropriated from Boy's Life Magazines. I loved Boy's Life magazines as a child. I devoured the images pictures and stories as readily as any eager scout. Only now as I look back at them do I see the formative nature of the imagery and stories, I still smile at the memory but there is a jaded aspect to this understanding.

Opposite the cans, on the far wall hang a scout and army uniform in half and sew together up the back, this is a representation of my experience that I share as it was. I am, to repeat what has been stated, not interested in the individual or personal story of a single person. The work stands on its own as a testament to human experience, not everyone's but still accessible and understandable. Each separate piece is engaging others in a way that would be sullied by any celebration of ego or self. The uniforms are framed by their accompanying pack, loaded for travel and ready to be carried into an adventure or into a war. This sculpture represents how I always sought adventure and excitement, as a boy as well as a man. This feeling of innocent adventure embodied by the scout pack, with its bandoleer of merit badges and its wooden gun, is a feeling many of my friends and I shared growing up. This notion is one that finds comrades throughout much of our history, in Thom Sawyer, Huck Finn, Peter and the Lost Boys as well as so many others. I smile when I think of these childhood adventures, no need to reclaim them, only a desire to share that remembrance of childhood. The Boy Scout pack is exempt of the serious and more responsible content contained in the military ruck farther down the wall. The packs and the uniforms are a simple correlation between the innocent and serious tones that these experiences became for me.

This exhibition is my way of relating to others, through objects both found and made, the shared experience of being human. There is a fascinating universality in the ways so many can relate to nearly any experience despite it being general or specific. It is my opinion that my identity and my experience are not unique to me, it is more than likely there have been many individuals that have posited throughout human history that

have shared a very similar if not identical history to myself. I find some comfort in thinking I might not be the only one forced to have had to live as me. The human experience is shared by all of us. Guillermo Kuitca is one of many artists working outside the U.S that share this idea of repressing the autobiographical nature of working through personal experience. Friends call him cagey when they attempt to elicit more personal aspects of the work (Belcove). In the same way I have been told I keep my cards close to my chest when discussing concept and content within my art. Julie Belcove writes of him that though biographical explication is an approach he cannot dismiss entirely, it is one he finds particularly American and “ultimately superficial”. I embrace the paradoxically inaccessible and simultaneously universal stories I am living. In a meaningless universe we find value in what we choose and create our own personal realities and rules to live by. I strive always to maintain my awareness of my conditioning, that I might have choice.

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Merit Badges, ceramic, glaze, 2015 6'x3'in



Army Ribbons, ceramic, glaze, 2015 6'x3'in



Yellow Ribbons, ceramic, glaze, 2015 5'x1'



Gun Museum Can 1, ceramic, glaze, 2015 2'x1'x6"



Gun Museum Can 2, ceramic, glaze, 2015 2'x1'x6"



Gun Museum Can 3, ceramic, glaze, 2015 2'x1'x6"



Gun Museum Can 4, ceramic, glaze, 2015 2'x1'x6"



Scout Can, ceramic, glaze 2015 2'x1'x6"



Deflated Can, ceramic, glaze, 2015 2'x1'x6"



Shot Can, ceramic, glaze, 2015 2'x1'x6"



Target Dummy, mixed media, 2015, 6'x4'x3'



Dinnerware, ceramic, wood, graphite, paint, 2015 4.5'x2'x2'



Scout Ruck, ready-made, 2015 2'x2'x2'



Army Ruck, ready-made, 2015 2'x2'x2'



Untitled M16 rifles, ceramic, graphite, wax, 2015 4'x3'



Sluice Em, ceramic, wood, flock, ready-made, 2015 size varies



Untitled Tent, sewn found objects, welded steel, 2015 4'x2'x2'