

MANUAL DISENGAGEMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

Dysfunction is defined as abnormal or impaired function. To understand this we must first know the definition of function. To function is to work in a specified manner in order to accomplish a task. From here forward, utility will be used in place of function. With this prerequisite knowledge, dysfunction can occur, allowing an item to exist within the context of alteration and beauty prescribed for it. Tools are supremely relevant when considered with the framework characterized by use, which allows me to alter and manipulate them in ways that question the meaning of function and utility. Through the alteration of function and utility, I strive to let the viewer into my realm of modified tools that speak of work days past, labor at hand, and the value of a tool in today's society.

The development of basic tools enabled humans to accomplish tasks which were previously unachievable. Wielding a tool and using it to create empowers the maker in a way that allows for endless creativity and problem solving. The industrial revolution brought a solution to the societal need for cheaper items that were produced faster and in general, easier to acquire. This want inherently created a lack of direct need for the handmade, quality product that was a necessity in times past. In this sense the hand made goods were no longer the only option. Gone were the days of waiting on a singular craftsman to create a specific work for a client. Laboring over a piece for days if not weeks just to complete one piece. Many companies that employed highly skilled craftsmen were still thriving, though not as they had before. Tools and tool making has a very rich history deeply rooted in tradition and steeped in generational knowledge. Often, sets of trade specific-tools are passed down from generation to generation. These tools that are passed down contain a very rich history of use and making. The tasks that they have been used for show up in the scratches, dents, patina, and sometimes broken parts. It is this visual history that helps to identify a tool of great value and use to the craftsman. Without tools the human race would not have been able to develop to where we are now. It is this rich history of tool making and use that interests me and inspires me to create objects that comment on this independent history of tools and humans. Tools and tool making has informed my identity as a maker for as long as I have been able to create things. Fixtures and jigs to hold work in place, brackets to hold scaffolding together, and custom tongs to contain a hot work piece are just a few things that come to mind when I think about tool making. Since many tools are purely functional and thought

of with function before form, what happens when the tools are taken out of a functional context and placed into a realm where form and design are emphasized and take priority? I am intensely interested in non-utilitarian tools or representations of tools, which speak to the desire, technology, and the fetishized object. What happens when mass produced goods are taken out of their functional context and altered into a form that discusses society's disconnect with skilled craftsmanship as we surround ourselves with cheaply made, off-shore produced goods? The topic of dysfunction brings up the terms utility and non-utility. In order to have dysfunction, utility is first needed. Dysfunction is defined as abnormal or impaired functioning. To understand this we must first know the definition of function. To function is to work in a specified manner in order to accomplish a task. From here forward, utility will be used in place of function. With this prerequisite knowledge, dysfunction can occur, allowing an item to exist within the context of alteration and beauty prescribed for it. Tools are supremely relevant when considered with the framework characterized by use.

Most tools are very basic in nature and are ergonomic in their utility and use. When taking the basic utility away from a common tool, it exists without the previous use and takes on a new role that informs the viewer of the altered context developing around the tool. These contexts are beauty, non-utility and tradition. For example the natural movements of the arms and hands play a large role in the way a tool is developed. Tools work with these motions because it inherently transfers power efficiently through the tool and into the work. This conceptual context is the focus of my research and object making because it allows me to create non-utilitarian tools through research of functional tools.

My intent is to take away most, if not all utility of the tools I am working with and to alter these aspects in a way that makes the viewer or user question if it can in fact be used or if it is altered in a way, which prohibits any sensible action. The practical utility of the tool has been taken away in order to elevate the work that is associated with the tools in a way that is reminiscent of skilled labor and quality of the hand. For example, reference the long handled hammers, they seem as if completely useful albeit if fantastical.

Wielding the implements make apparent that using them would put the user in a very awkward position to the work that is to be struck. Placing the user in a completely different plane than the nail creates an awkward nailing position that encourages the hammerhead to slip off the nail consistently, subverting the effectiveness and causing damage.

I have a deep personal connection to the tools that I am working with due to my background in woodworking and metals. At a young age I started working with my dad and learning what specific tools are and how to use them to make things. My entire life is about building and creating with my hands. It is this notion that allows me to expand my thoughts into reality and conceptualize those ideas for others to enjoy and understand in the form of art. The tools that I make enable the viewer to gain a sense for the reason that I create dysfunctional items that embody today's disconnect with the handmade.

Hammers and axes are at the format for a large number of the pieces I create and the projects I work on. A hammer touches almost every piece of my work. The hammer is the ubiquitous tool of my practice, integral to the creation of my work, and therefore I chose to alter it in a way that would prohibit a user from completing any hammer-appropriate

task. The hammer is generally a tool of construction and progress and the axe is a tool of removal and shaping. The axe becomes a part of my work because of the base function it is created for, wood removal. Inherently the tool informs the user of its nature and intended use. Anatomy and physiology, as well as prior experiences, help the user determine how a tool might be used. Under ideal circumstances one can create anything that the tool is capable of facilitating. By conceptualizing work that involves tools, a layering process is exposed for the viewer to explore visually and mentally. With a mental space that is created for the imaginable use of the tools, it is important to note that artistic ego should be left out of the work. John Yau writes in *Some Thoughts About Richard Serra and Martin Puryear* that Puryear's work deemphasizes the "I" or artistic ego. Puryear's work strives to contain the utmost craftsmanship and content in order for the work to live on its own. The work should lack any sort of ego because it forces the work to stand on its own in a setting that provides visual independence. To further enforce this I believe that with strong works of art that are free of artistic ego or the "I," the viewer is enabled to leave any sort of mental baggage behind when viewing the pieces. Instead of the viewer thinking back to other pieces they have seen in a white cube gallery and relating them to the work at hand, they are encouraged through the work to create a fresh opinion.

Through my work the viewer must consider purpose and utility of the individual tools. A viewer who is privileged to hold the tools will experience the potential and determination of use will evolve in ways that influence the work. When we become accustomed to a tool's function and it fails, the tool is no longer of use to us in a

normative sense. In fact, the tool is often discarded and forgotten by the owner. In some instances this is because the user does not possess the required knowledge or skill set to repair the tool. What happens when the tool is created to have no function or the function is to purposely cause failure through the act of using it? Influencing and altering this idea of a “useless” tool is what I want to communicate to everyone who interacts with the work. Chris Gosden has done extensive research and writing on objects and the power they hold in society. His research paper “What Objects Want,” talks about how objects are interpreted in society and the interactions that are created because of this.

“Objects produced within a recognizable set of forms and styles have influences on the ways in which people make and use them. Such ideas take the concept of style and develop it in new directions. A commonplace archaeological thought is that artifacts are made within recognizable and repeatable styles, so that a pot or a metal pin for holding clothing, fit within a corpus of like objects, each similar to many others, but at the same time a unique combination of the characteristics of form and decoration that help define the style as a recognizable entity”. (Gosden p 194, *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, Vol. 12, No. 3, September 2005)

According to Gosden, if items (tools in this case) are created to be a part of a grouping in order to make them part of a recognizable entity they must contain recognizable and repeatable styles. Such styles can include similar form, dysfunction, scale, and material. Take for instance the hammers on the wall of a workshop or the tools in a bucket at a potter’s wheel. These similar styles lead the viewer to question the overarching meaning of the group and to ask, “What do these tools do?” Further, Gosden brings up this same question as empowering the items and giving them capacity.

“The simple everyday question “what does it do?” attaches a power or capacity to objects, although not necessarily will or intention. Objects that do things might

seem to take us into the realm of fetishism, totemism, animism or idolatory, attitudes to the world acceptable in children or non-Westerners, but dubious for sophisticated post-modernist actors to hold.” (Gosden p 196, *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, Vol. 12, No. 3, September 2005)

I believe that the tools displayed, through their design, influence the viewer to pose the question of the tools purpose. In this way, the tools presented are assigned an ideological and conceptual power in the space. This authority enforces the research questions I am asking, such as, “What happens when tools are taken out of their functional context and altered into a form that discusses a large disconnect with skilled labor and craftsmanship as we surround ourselves with cheaply made and mass produced goods, and to what end?”

A few artists that are working in the same realm of dysfunction are David Clarke, Gudjon Ketilsson, and Seth Gould. Gudjon in particular has worked heavily with tools and taking them completely out of the context of a purely functional tool by abstraction and addition of foreign material. The tools that Ketilsson creates have very abstract forms that do not reference any type of function or previously found form. It is this abstraction that draws the viewer to investigate the tools and notice a reference to the beauty of traditional craftsmanship and a generation of craftsmen past. To quote Gudjon, “I suppose that, by calling attention to what tools can do for us, or to what we do with tools, I’m also calling attention to what it is that human beings do at all. With their hands, certainly, but also what they might aspire to make or do in more general terms.”(Ketilsson, Gudjon, *Tools and Power: New Work by Gudjon Ketilsson*, internet.is/gudjonket/gudjonket/home.html, 2015) Ketilsson describes his tools as ways of influencing the viewers and playing on that inspiration to make something even though

the tools have no real or discernable function. Ketilsson's work can be described as non-tools because of the lack of function altogether in the sense that function implies a use to create something else. Although his work gives the viewer a perception of solid use and functional appreciation, they in fact have no discernable sense of function at all.

Much like Ketilsson's work, my work aims to evoke a sense of tradition and cultural connection in the viewer that inspires them to make and appreciate the base utility of the tools in the gallery that has been negated. For instance, plumb bobs are probably one of the simplest tools that many craftsmen use. At its base form, a string with a weight and point on the end, it can be used for many aspects of layout and construction as well as measuring and design creation. I chose to use the plumb bob as a form of lateral expression because of its simplistic yet highly functional nature. In taking the plumb bob out of its typical useful context of construction, I use it as a vehicle to tell a story that is a personal reference to the journey I have gone through in graduate school. The plumb bob matrix tells a story of interaction, contrast, conceptualization, complexity, disagreement, acceptance, and ultimately in the end, the correct point. The multiple plumb bobs strung upon the wall entangle each other and lead the lines astray through most of the piece. It is not until the end where the lines combine to enable one piece to hang true and show correct path and outcome.

The traditional coat rack is a tool in the household that I believe people overlook and take for granted. Something that has very little interaction and a singular purpose often gets forgotten. It isn't until the item is transformed and turned into a destructive object instead of a useful one that the user thinks twice about something that is used

every day. It is this re-design of utility to something that is completely useless in a utility sense that re affirms dysfunction as a hybrid mode of creation.

What is it that people do with their hands today? Other than artists and craftsmen how many people still work with their hands in a productive manner and make tangible objects that are of value in society? These questions drive me to create tools to consider the same questions. How can tools, and which specific tools can reference societies disconnect with making and physical labor? It wasn't long ago that almost every suburban household had the necessary tools to create simple projects when needed. Magazines such as *Popular Mechanics* and *Fine Woodworking* encouraged the weekend warrior to create everyday objects. One could go out into the workshop and create a birdhouse for the kids to enjoy or a nightstand for the bedside. We have evolved into Ikea flat pack assembly with throwaway tools that come in each package. Tools have influenced my work from the time I started to make art. The tools that I use to produce finely planished surfaces and intricately shaped sheets of metal inspire me and enhance my passion for beauty and coherence of material. The history and tradition of methodically using tools shows in the body of work that I have created as well as in the work of artists I have been researching. It is this notion of history, tradition, beauty and value that I want to convey.

Older tools quickly become antiques and are turned into displays for restaurants, shops, and home decorations. What does this say about the owner of the home or business? A reverence for skilled handwork and quality of production is how most of these displays read. A great example of this is the crosscut or two-man saw. Once a staple

for land clearing, logging, and even construction, it is now a decoration above the mantle or doorway. This implementation of tools as decoration also influences my work and how I create certain pieces. Considering modern tools turned into antiques and displayed as décor or art brings up interesting critical conversations. For instance, take the crosscut saw and replace it with a modern day chainsaw hanging above the mantle. Instead of a nice hand forged socket chisel displayed on a shelf as a memory of past labor, a Fein oscillating multi tool might take its place. Thinking about these juxtapositions and replacements inspire me to create traditional tools that are stripped of a functional use. In some instances the tools are subtly stripped of any utility and in others the dysfunction is completely obvious to the point of anti-utility. In the case of “Log Tennon Saw,” the size, shape, weight, and even the look of it can be convincing as useful or possibly a specialized and little known tool of the timber framer. I switch back and forth between creating tools that are blatantly useless and tools that are only slightly altered because it created a composition of items that keeps the viewer questioning the work and wondering the history of the piece. When I use history to describe the viewers questioning I refer to it as the viewer imagining that a subtly altered piece was a commonplace tool for a craftsman of years past. Every tool in the show comes from or is born from a history rich in creation and use, from the old hammer that was set aside for a later repair by the craftsman for lacking a handle to the saw that has been created specifically for the task of viewing in a gallery. In the later circumstance, the function comes from a purely visual use of display.

Jon Proppe, an Icelandic critic, writes of Gudjon Ketilsson's work, "Tools increase our power and allow us to bend the world to our purpose but at the same time tools direct our actions. Through the use of the tool we learn how to use it correctly but at the same time it is useless for anything else without the user. The tools that we have determine what sorts of problems we can solve and they also direct our decisions as to which problems we will attempt to solve." Influenced by Ketilsson's thought on "the tool teaches us to use it," I have created tools that confront the viewer and prompt them to ask what they will be able to do with what is in front of them. A large curved level with multiple bubbles might be the perfect tool for calculating the slope of an in ground, sprayed concrete swimming pool. Perhaps a double-headed hammer is just the right tool to drive an alignment pin back and forth between two steel plates to create a perfectly concentric and polished hole? It is questions like these that I want the viewer to infer for him or herself and bring up in casual conversation with other viewers.

In conclusion, stripping a highly functional tool of original function forces the user to infer their own opinion of how to use and to interact with the tool in a way that plays on the desire for use and functionality. In a way the tools will prompt the user to interpret the function of the tool and give it power by demanding an answer to the question: "What am I for?" My work functions on one level as a puzzle to be solved not only with the mind but also through an experiential activity of attempting to learn the way a new or alien tool functions. Tool making has a rich history of tradition and material conversation that inspires me to create tools that have a possible yet improbable use. By altering an item with specialized utility I strip the context in which it lives

culturally and place it in a realm where it speaks for itself and interacts with the space and user in a way that is unexpected and possibly even intrusive. I give them a new value in culture based on desire, nostalgia and aesthetics.

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Yau, John, "Some Thoughts about Richard Serra and Martin Puryear." *Hyperalergic.com*, November 16th, 2010



1. Gallery Shot



2. Gallery Shot



3. Short Hammers- Wood, Steel, 2015



4. Conjoined- Line, Aluminum chalk line, chalk, 2016



5. Stuck- Wood, Steel, 2016



6. Utility Knife- Cast Copper, Cast Bronze, Stainless Steel, Brass, Razor Blades, 2016



7. Full Circle- Laminated Poplar, Steel, Brass, 2016



8. Full Circle- Laminated Poplar, Steel, Brass, 2016



9. Tenon Saw- Sheet Metal, Forged Steel, Lacewood, Brass, 2016



10. Curved Axe- Steel, Laminated Poplar, 2015



11. Level 1- Laminated Wood, Brass, Alcohol Level, 2016



12. Cut Rack- Oak, Cast Bronze, Steel, 2016



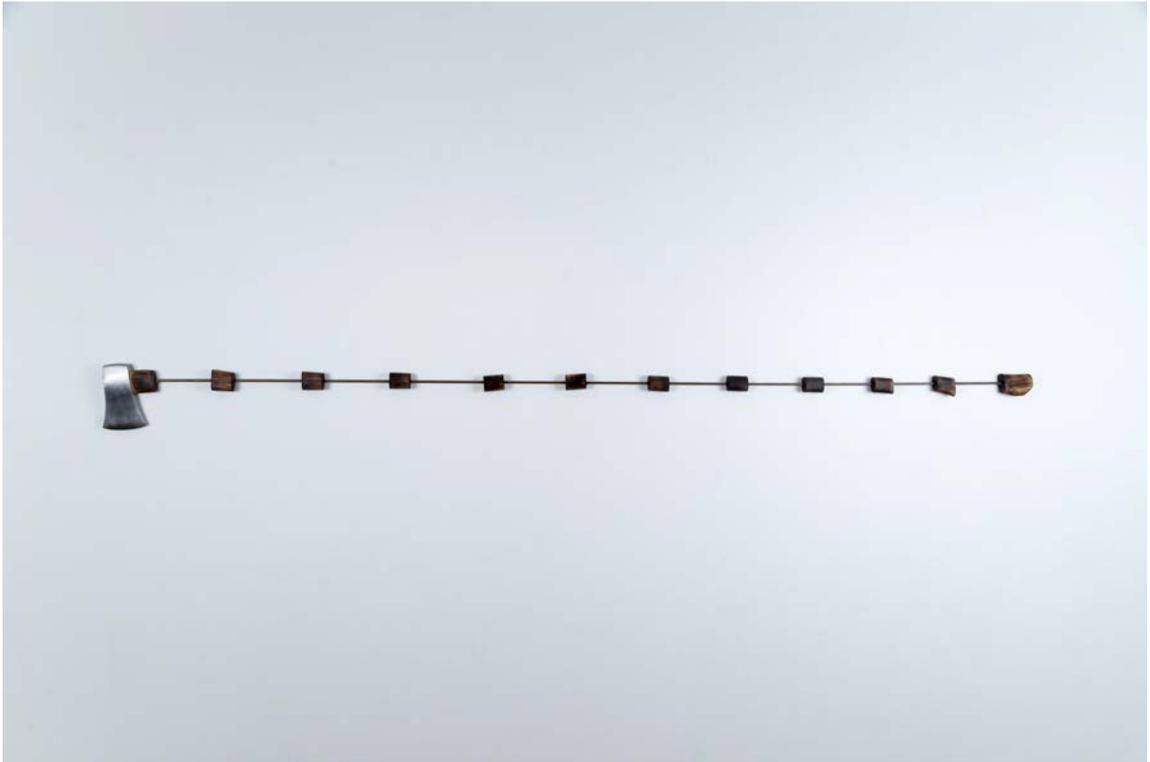
13. You Hammer- Laminated Poplar, Steel, 2016



14. You Hammer- Laminated Poplar, Steel, 2016



15. Level 2- Laminated Wood, Alcohol Level, Ipe, 2016



16. Segmented Axe- Wood, Steel, 2016



17. Self Destruction- Steel, Pine Log, Axe Handle, 2016



18. Non Utility Knife- Cast Bronze, Brass, Steel, Razor Blades, 2016



19. Plum Bobs- Masons Line, Brass, Titanium, Steel, Bronze, 2016



20. Plum Bobs- Masons Line, Brass, Titanium, Steel, Bronze, 2016