Remnants

Ian Skinner

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“REMNANTS”

A thesis
presented for the
Master of Fine Arts
degree at
The University of Mississippi.

Ian Skinner
May 2020
ABSTRACT

I make objects that are the result of an exploration of material, form, surface and craft that elevate commonly seen elements found within both natural and industrial landscapes. Through the use of recycled materials and newly fabricated, industrial elements, I accentuate the inherent qualities of the materials to reflect the history and beauty of the objects in newly re-imagined compositions.

The work intends to create universal connections with a wide demographic of viewers through the utilization and augmentation of elements that we see every day, yet easily ignore or pass off as industrial refuse. The forms used in the final compositions reference structures, and periods of time, that we are all indelibly tied to. The works, much like the structures allude to the act of their former creation and eventual degradation.

Through this body of work, I present the viewer with remnants of how our day to day lives are laced with industrial elements, and how our memories are shaped by our interactions with them in the environment. The interplay between natural and human made structures, along with the way we unconsciously interact with them, provokes me to explore my relationship with them. By bringing such overlooked objects into a fine art prospective, I impart this same feeling of intrigue within these objects onto the viewer.
DEDICATION

My work is dedicated to my parents, Susan and Thomas Skinner, and my grandparents. Without their unwavering support and teachings throughout my academic career, none of this would have been possible.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my thesis committee Durant Thompson, Brooke White, and Virginia Rougon-Chavis for providing their criticism and artistic insight into my graduate work. I would also like to thank my previous instructors, mentors, and peers for being constructive architects of my artistic practice.
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My process, and the work that emanates from it, are heavily influenced by industrial structures, the landscapes they preside in, and the way in which we interact with each on a subconscious and conscious level. The objects created are an exploration of my environment, upbringing, and the forms that I am inexplicably drawn to. Our lives are laced with large monolithic structures that rival the wonders of the natural world. Bridges, ships, skyscrapers, water towers, blast furnaces, dams and the components that make them up are pinnacles of human ingenuity and willpower. Yet, in our day to day lives they become overlooked or even fall into disuse or disrepair, leaving their skeletons as reminders of a time past.

These anthropologic remnants, and the places they inhabit, have always piqued my curiosity due to their cycle of growth and decay. The reasons for their initial creation eventually become the reason for their destruction, and the cycle continues. They’re artifacts that exemplify humanities’ ability to adapt to new challenges. The processes used to create them, and the natural processes that seek to reclaim them, intrigue me. The things we leave behind, physical or intangible, natural or mechanical, are remnants of who we are and what we have done throughout time. These remnants are often lost in the immediate future only to resurface as objects of importance later.

Many times, these structures and processes are seen as blights on the land and are typically shunned. My implementation of reused components, and the creation of new forms
based off of these objects, is a way to elevate their overlooked or forgotten qualities.

Subconsciously, much like the way these structures impact us, I seek to preserve and display their inherent beauty to an audience that may overlook them and the skills that created them.

Trade skills, such as metal fabrication, casting, and woodworking, were once seen as proud professions, but have recently been relegated to a lower skill status by society. I was brought up in an environment of individuals that valued the knowledge of how to fix and do things themselves. This appreciation drives my subject matter, as well as my material usage, and the nostalgic feeling I look to reference within the work. Eras such as the Industrial Revolution and subsequent industrial booms, both pre and post-World War II, saw mass-production improvements, and made it possible for humans to create monolithic structures. These structures rivalled the grandeur of their natural counterparts through their scale, the longevity of the materials used, and the attention to detail taken to create them.

Remnants is my exploration of memories, materials, processes, and the compositions that epitomize our humanity through an industrial lens. By bringing the viewer face to face with re-contextualized industrial components, I bring into question the importance of their day to day encounters with objects that they would typically find no aesthetic value in.
CHAPTER 2
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND INFLUENCES

Growing up in Northeast Florida, I was exposed to a mixture of industrial and natural landscapes. The city of Jacksonville, my home town, while being one of the largest cities geographically in the United States, has a compact feel. The small metropolitan downtown area is corralled by large rail yards on one side and shipyards on the other. The St. Johns River runs through most of the city like the train tracks, and connects the south to the north and the west to the east. It eventually runs into the intercostal waterway which then spills into the Atlantic Ocean.

The city and the rest of its sprawling, suburban neighborhoods are shaped by these features. The land, water, and industrial settings are layered together repeatedly throughout the environment. They are a constant physical and subconscious reminder of our cohabitation. Living between them and being connected by them, one is faced with the abrupt contrast they have against one another.

The contrast and constant proximity of these features were my earliest connection with industrial environments. Experiences like the smell of a paper mill and a coffee roasting plant billowing over the river into my neighborhood in the mornings, and the sound of trains constantly rumbling down tracks just a few blocks away imprinted lasting memories on me. The shipyards, with their massive machinery, bridges, and old factories that scatter the riverfront, were all a rich source of fascination and inspiration long before I truly thought about making art.
Later, I started actively seeking out and exploring these places and the environments around them. My travels to places such as Richmond, Virginia and Birmingham, Alabama, brought my attention to a similar connection between industry, land, water, and the people that inhabit these spaces. Sloss Furnace National Historic Landmark in Birmingham is one such place that had a great influence upon my conceptual development.

The fascination and inspiration I have for these places was bolstered by the experiences, stories, and lessons of my parents and grandparents. They taught me the value of craftsmanship, tools, and material from a young age in a similar way to how they had learned. To them, self-sufficiency wasn't just being able to call a repairman. It was about knowing everything from general home maintenance and the inner workings of machinery to being able to completely build well-crafted, functional things from scratch. There was a sense of pride and reverence, not only in the work, but in the tools and processes that made each task possible. Every step in a job was to be thought about and the tools used were to be respected, cleaned, and put away in their proper place after the job was done. These experiences left me with an indelible appreciation for craft, material, and process. If I were without the means and had not pursued art school, I would have surely picked up trade work instead. In the end the work I make presents these teachings to viewers and explores, not just my own history, but our greater history as humans through the remnants we leave behind.

My personal and family history, my geographical upbringing, and the subconscious tendencies they ingrained are all present in this work. Our history as a race is depicted, or is somewhat explained, throughout the work to make it important to more than just myself. The found and implemented objects used in the works have a history all their own that includes their
connotation and denotation within the larger picture of humanity’s history. Thus, all of this affects the implied history of the final piece.
CHAPTER 3
MATERIAL, PROCESS, AND DESIGN

My work deals with the interplay between formal aesthetics, composition, and material usage. Tension and balance are created by utilizing formal elements of design in combination with natural and industrial materials. I focus on form, texture and craft to elevate commonly seen elements found within industrial settings, drawing influence from natural and industrial landscapes. Through the use of recycled materials, as well as newly fabricated elements, I form compositions that let the inherent qualities of the materials be accentuated. While looking to pair the found materials together in a resonant manner, I let the components guide the final composition of the work, such as in \textit{Mesh} [PLATE 1], which is composed of three found components.

Wood, cast iron, and steel have been traditional industrial building materials for centuries. I focus on using these materials to make the majority of my final forms. Other less common materials, which can be seen as more modern, are also present within the works. I use materials, such as foam and paper, to supplement the detail present in the other materials. In \textit{Socket} [PLATE 2], the interior of the form is lined with colored paper pulp to draw the viewer's eye into the piece. By combining these materials, I am able to focus on creating works that have multiple layers of detail. Some of these details aren’t readily visible to the naked eye in the same way that the hand of a skilled craftsman may not always be visible. Much like these hidden
details, many other materials are used in the creation of the works that are not readily recognized in the final forms. Regardless, the materials hold a similar personal value to the unseen details.

From the larger pieces to the smaller works, I try to be diligent in how each detail interacts with the other. In many ways, I obsess over these details and the way they make transitions throughout the compositions for the viewer to experience. In Lobe [PLATE 3], the repetition of circular forms draws the viewer's eye through the piece. The details can be obvious to the diligent viewer, but many times they are hidden, such as the hardware that holds part of Lobe to the wall [PLATE 4 and 5]. These details, especially the unseen ones, relate to the personal importance of craftsmanship and finish of the work. In the final product, I try to blur the line between newly created elements and the integrated or repurposed objects, as in Track 2 [PLATE 6]. By presenting these objects as art, I preserve them as artifacts of our industrial achievements. This furthers the conceptual importance of why we should consider these objects as art at all.

Texture is another layer of detail that draws focus to the object's surface. I draw inspiration for textures from the existing surfaces of the reused parts within my works, as well as the surfaces of abandoned industrial objects. The visual and physical textures I use reference an implied history, age, or previous use. While some of these textures imply a life of heavy industrial usage, others relate to a lesser used or more well-cared-for object, such as Web [PLATE 7]. Some surfaces are reconditioned to depict the care one would take with an object of sentimental importance, while others are scuffed and tarnished. I commonly pose these surface qualities against one another to emphasize their aesthetic qualities, as in Ductile [PLATE 8]. To encourage the viewer to question the importance of the object, I blend pre-existing textures with those that can highlight them. I achieve these surfaces through the intentional application of
paint, patinas, and sealants. The surfaces themselves have been addressed in a way that
accentuates the existing qualities of the materials or to mimic production defects, the natural
processes of decay or them being well-worn by repeated use. This contrast is most evident
between wooden and metal components within the work. Wooden components are typically less
weathered than their metal counterparts, such as in Ballast 2 [PLATE 9], to contrast their
properties.

The color pallets I use are an extension of the textures found throughout my works.
Earthy tones and a mixture of vibrant colors are an exploration of the industrial landscapes, their
decay, and preservation through intentional or unintentional action. Pivot [PLATE 10] is an
example of emphasizing and preserving the preexisting patina on the surface of a component.
Through layering vibrantly painted, machine components alongside areas of surface decay, I
draw the viewer's eye through the work and bring attention to certain areas of detail. The
hardware used in Lobe and Web are two such examples.

While formal design elements drive the final compositions of these pieces, texture, color,
and minute details are used to accentuate the implied history of the industrial components. The
usage of these remnants is in line with the readymades of the Dadaist movements. By
aesthetically altering these objects and displaying them in a gallery setting, they are redefined as
artistic artifacts of the industrial era
CHAPTER 4

CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

This body of work is a personal exercise in craftsmanship, process and materials to explore the relationships I have with industrial settings. I reference my history, which is a portion of the greater human history, through a lens that uses memories and experiences to justify their importance to other people.

There are two veins of conceptual development that I usually go through. The first possible method is where I start out with a highly conceptual idea of why the work matters. I then make a piece to fit the debates that may follow. The second of which is where I meticulously make an object that is aesthetically pleasing to myself, and in some way builds upon my craft skill set. While the first is still rooted in producing a well-crafted final object, this is typically my least used method. I have an ingrained distaste for this method, because of what I see as it being a crutch for artists that lean on concept more than the physical craft within their work. This is a highly divisive idea that makes me cringe at myself because of its classist implication, but nonetheless, it is still present.

The second method of developing concept is therefore my preference. It allows me to focus on the production of a highly crafted object while allowing time to contemplate the implications of all of the materials, forms, and processes used. Not that the first way doesn’t do this as well, but it is merely a personal work preference. In the end, I feel it results in an object of craft that one can look at as simply an object of solitary enjoyment, or pose deeper conceptual
questions about the nature of its history and existence. I let the viewer decide which or both, as opposed to trying to force a conversation.

These objects could be considered art or just seen as some piece of industrial waste. Much like photographic work of Hilla and Bernd Becher, who sought to preserve and emphasize the artistic qualities of disappearing industrial structures, my placement of these objects within a gallery setting leaves the viewer to question why these objects should be considered art. The Dada artists of the early 20th century pushed the audience to question the validity of what should be considered a fine art object in a similar way. Marcel Duchamp and John Chamberlain’s works shifted the line between high and low art through their use of salvaged materials. Through placing them in this context, I ask why we should or shouldn’t see other common industrial components and environments from an artistic perspective.

By removing these components from their industrial landscape and placing them in a gallery setting, they are redefined. As such, the ambiguity of these newly redefined artifacts is a part of their conceptual purpose.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

We all come into contact with industrial structures, yet their aesthetic quality is often overlooked. There is a common connection created by salvaging remnants from these landscapes. My exploration of memories, materials, and industrial compositions allowed me to create this body of work titled *Remnants*.

The implementation of found objects from our industrialized landscape in my work emphasizes their original design aesthetics. Tension is created through the contradiction of the objects’ initial function in industry and its current presentation as a fine art object. The found and implemented objects used in the works have their own history that contributes to this narrative. The anthropologic importance of their stories is interwoven throughout who we are.

Through elevating these objects, I explore questions of how we engage with the industrial environment that surrounds us. The relevance of these mundane, overlooked, or forgotten objects is emphasized to viewers who wouldn’t consider or see their importance on a regular basis. By re-contextualizing these objects through a fine art perspective they are transformed, showcasing these remnants of our past as artifacts to be valued.
*Mesh*
Cast iron
2019

[PLATE 1]
Socket
Cast iron, steel, paper
2020

[PLATE 2]
Lobe
Steel, wood
2020

[PLATE 3]
Lobe (hardware detail 1)
Steel
2020

[PLATE 4]
Lobe (hardware detail 2)
Steel
2020

[PLATE 5]
Track 2
Cast iron, steel, wood
2020

[PLATE 6]
Web
Steel, wood
2020

[PLATE 7]
Ductile
Cast iron
2019

[PLATE 8]
Ballast 2
Cast iron, wood
2019

[PLATE 9]
Pivot
Cast iron, steel, wood
2019

[PLATE 10]
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VITA

Ian Skinner is a sculptor from Jacksonville, Florida. He received his Associate’s Degree from Florida State College in 2012, and proceeded to obtain his Bronze Casting Certificate from the Wooden Boat School in Brooklin, Maine in 2013. He went on to receive his BFA from the University of North Florida in 2016 with a concentration in sculpture. In 2017, Skinner was accepted to pursue his Masters Degree at the University of Mississippi. He has participated in shows, residencies and conferences across the country. In 2017 he was the acting Chair of Demonstrations for the National Conference on Contemporary Cast Iron Art and Practices (NCCCIAP). Skinner also completed a visiting artist residency through Sloss Metal Arts at Sloss Furnaces in 2018. He has worked with numerous public sculpture programs such as the Yokna Sculpture Trail in Oxford, Mississippi and Sculpture Trails Outdoor Museum in Solsberry, Indiana, where he currently has works on display.