

Questioning Consumerism: Instigating a Healthy Future through Sculptural Reflections

Jacob Wilson

Department of Art and Art History
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Research Advisors: Megan Wolfe, Matt West, Jackson Martin, Brent Skidmore,
Eric Tomberlin, Virginia Derryberry, Robert Tynes, Tamie Beldue

Abstract

Certain aspects of current society threaten to hinder a more positive future. Blinded by the glory of consumerism, a majority of humanity has lost touch with what could be considered *true* happiness and prosperity. Disconnected from the natural world, struggling with a lack of understanding and appreciation for the simplistic beauty of life, modern man has come to accept consumerism as an inadequate substitution. Excessive focus on boastful consumer products perpetuates harmful behaviors and fuels negative mentalities, ironically resulting in lower qualities of life. These products and services are offered in an attempt to provide entertainment and comfort. However, their rewards are hollow, rarely invoking more than fleeting moments of happiness and temporary escape, while real health and satisfaction are seldom found. As an ongoing dilemma, similar concerns have troubled art and academia for centuries; specific examples include the writings of William Morris in 1884, social historian Peter N. Stearns, and the artworks of contemporary artists such as Duane Hanson and Chen Wenling. Through sculptural ceramics, it is possible to express these current struggles while simultaneously suggesting solutions. Working with a fundamental natural element, such as clay, provides a satisfactory vehicle for the conveyance of this concept. By manipulating a simple organic material, forms are created that exaggerate and emphasize certain suggested objects of modern misguidance. In this manner the *pure* medium of clay reflects on truth and health, while the resulting content ironically addresses the opposite. Through this body of work that presents the absurdity of current behaviors, the intent is to stimulate a questioning of values while provoking humanity's realization of a desperate need for a better direction.

1. Introduction

Thanks to infinite curiosity and relentless exploration, the human race has managed to scramble its way to this current mile marker, the 21st century. What a difficult endeavor it has been to arrive at this plateau; such an accumulation of disheartening sacrifice has been endured. Although a wealth of information exists, this body of work focuses attention on certain aspects of current cultural predicaments, namely the rampant results of consumerism. Through evaluating the derivatives associated with consumption, an attempt is made to discern the actuality, if any, of their true benefits.

American culture specifically developed out of the honorable, and highly sought after, ascertainment of *freedom*. Somewhere along the way, these desires transitioned slightly to include establishing an ideal standard of living for the entire world. What originally began as a valiant quest for the pursuit of happiness has since experienced several junctures of derailment, the results of which provide a tainted offering of initial intent. Many thorough investigations into similar gilded promises of enlightenment, modernity, and consumerism are fully documented in Peter N. Stearns' publication entitled *Satisfaction Not Guaranteed: Dilemmas of Progress in Modern Society*:

Modern developments introduced some unanticipated new problems that emerged on the heels of the resolution or partial resolution of older issues. They also provoked some responses that have turned out to be inadequate and open to review. Both the problem generation and the false starts warrant exploration, for they all contribute to the sense of potential unfulfilled.¹

Stearns goes on to dissect the elaborate history of conditioning that has force-fed optimism to the public as it relates to advancements in quality of life. In short, modern man has been persuaded to believe that by partaking in the simple rewards that have been provided, one is able to experience one's own taste of "the Good Life."² However, these shiny offerings are not always the solid gold that they claim to be; they have been predetermined and marketed as profitable substitutions that attempt to satisfy the masses. These substances and services have been researched and engineered to produce a faux sense of luxury, a "sham wealth;" they have asked for humanity's labor, devotion, and indulgence while managing to still leave everyone wanting.³

As a result, current misguided mentalities of satisfaction seeking, stress relieving, and chasing the illusive American Dream, have landed this country in a position to consume anything and everything that it takes to find fulfillment. By being thoroughly programed to feed on the wealth of material goods and services that are provided (the so-called spoils of an exquisitely refined and enlightened first-world civilization), primary desires have been converted into an economy based on glorified indulgence.

Interestingly enough, it is relevant to note that this experience is not uniquely modern or confined to American culture. This struggle is far reaching into a vast array of art and academic history, with one bold example being found in the writings of William Morris in 1884, entitled *Art and Socialism*.

I am talking of the merely useless things; but there are other matters not merely useless, but actively destructive and poisonous which command a good price in the market; for instance, adulterated food and drink. Vast is the number of slaves whom competitive Commerce employs in turning out infamies such as these. [...] All these are the slaves of what is called luxury, which in the modern sense of the word comprises a mass of sham wealth, the invention of competitive Commerce, and enslaves not only the poor who are compelled to work at its production, but also the foolish and not overhappy people who buy it to harass themselves with its encumbrance.⁴

As an innovator in the earliest stages of craft arts movements, Morris weighed in with powerful influence and lasting implications. His message warned of rapidly evolving industry and consumer markets, while numerous written works address the snares of false luxuries and the deadening quality of life that they would entail. Unfortunately, even Morris' impact was not significant enough, as those encumbrances have prevailed. Through unhealthy addictions to actively destructive products, such as "adulterated food and drink," alcohol, drugs, firearms, wealth, and lethargic entertainment, modern man has become enslaved by competitive commerce.⁵

It is becoming increasingly important to question whether this approach is actually providing prosperity for all of humanity or only for the select few who are calling the shots. Truth, peace of mind, health, happiness, and basic survival are dependent on beneficial growth. Gaining some understanding of the numerous unhealthy manipulations that exist is therefore vital in advancing a successful future. In this privileged moment of history, unlimited awareness is relatively attainable for all who care to acknowledge it. Now is the time to accept this encouragement, find our balance within the system, understand the many triumphs and shortcomings of the past, and adjust accordingly for the future.

2. Personal Experience

This specific body of work focuses on awareness as it pertains to corruption in our modern system of life. In looking at the particular aspects of this concept's expression, it is important first to analyze the personal influences that have informed the work.

Just as any child growing up in America I was unknowingly instilled with some misinformed mentalities of previous generations. However, it wasn't until I started working in the fast food industry as a teenager that discovering things for myself truly began. Being introduced to fry vats and char grills quickly familiarized me with the filth that they produced and triggered many concerns of what that filth was doing to my body; not to mention quality of product and cleanliness of preparation. I began to see this commercial industry's impact on the public as extra large diet sodas and triple monster burgers were served ceaselessly to processions of unhealthy patrons. A reasonable amount of social interactions involved with these exchanges were degrading and discouraging to say the

least. It is also noteworthy to mention the insufficient pay that is received for this labor, after an hour of slinging hundreds of burgers I had not even made enough to purchase one for myself.

The transition into finer dining didn't offer much of a change in perspective; however, it definitely provided a firsthand look at the ridiculous quantity of waste that is produced through food service. It is remarkable to see plate after plate full of food, with the exception of a few bites, go directly into the trash. Such an unbelievable amount of waste is generated in a majority of American eating establishments with little regards to recycling or biodegradable concerns.

At the end of the day, after dealing with unsatisfying work of this caliber, a good portion of my coworkers had only one item on their agenda and that was to get intoxicated enough to relieve the accumulated stress and relax. I became no stranger to this form of consumption as well. Not surprisingly, advancements through systems of education revealed that a majority of my peers and fellow students shared the same desires. After class it was time to cut loose and unwind. The consumption of drugs seems to play an initiating factor in countless American youths; the unifying qualities of recreational drug use claims to provide confidence in socialization, character building, and peer bonding. By the time I reached college university years the accumulated tolls of my own participations with drugs and alcohol, cigarettes, unhealthy food, and lethargic entertainment had fully unveiled their degrading reality. Worried about my environment, and myself, I began to seriously question quality of life.

By taking classes that criticized troublesome American diets, receiving education on what it was to be conscious of personal intake and intelligence, I began to imagine positive potentials for my future. Through reexamining belief systems based on insufficient, watered down, information received through primary education the wheels were set in motion for a re-visioning of my entire existence. In short, I came out of a mindless, consumption-induced, new age coma and found the light at the end of the tunnel. I still find it amazing how powerful these influences have been, and still are, on my life and the lives of everyone who battles this beast of consumerism in our modern times.

3. Artistic Expression

Through sculptural ceramics and applied mixed media it is possible to create works that facilitate the questioning of modern culture. Rendering forms that are essentially realistic with certain illustrative qualities imitates modern-day culturally understood references and establishes those associations with relative ease. Through attempting to replicate such provocative displays of empty material stimulus, as in *The American Dream* (fig.1), the ability to inform and encourage various structural components is accomplished. Exaggeration, for example, serves as a very important quality in the delivery of my intent. By presenting various products of consumer culture in a larger than life representation, a greater voice of power and weight can be transmitted. These forms extend beyond a complacent barrage of stimulus to grab the viewer's attention. Stressing content in this manner is intended to engage the audience's questioning of an object's importance, while also sparking a consideration of their own involvement with those items.



Figure 1. Jacob Wilson, *The American Dream* (with detail), 2015, Painted Ceramics, 31 x 18 x 18 inches.

A crucial focal point of this concept becomes *value*. It is important to consider the value that is placed on consumer products. Such misplaced adoration and support allows them to function as solutions to strife. What actual value do they provide; what is their true benefit? Irony in my work becomes relevant when value is considered as it relates to my medium of choice. By creating representations of consumer goods out of earth or clay, metaphorically, their true benefits are being equated to that of consuming dirt. Not to mention all my forms are hollow, which pushes this satire even further.



Figure 2. Jacob Wilson, *Misfortune* (with detail), 2015, Painted Ceramics, 30 x 15 x 15 inches.

It is important to recognize and analyze personal participation in this system that seems to function as a distraction from truth. Awareness in regards to these matters appears to be on the rise and gaining momentum. This acknowledgment of our current system's failure is another detail that can be accentuated through sculpture. Creating forms that sag and warp, in comparison to the rigidity of their referenced objects, alludes to the deterioration and collapse of structure. Compositions that appear to be imbalanced and asymmetrical stress the instability of these material idols. By encouraging the viewer to consider this vulnerability, additional questioning is also raised in regards to these products' control. This visual stimulation is intended to trigger an effect that cascades the audience through an internal blame game. Do we have control over the influence, or does the influence have control over us?

Through the course of history an ongoing pursuit for capitalist market supremacy and economic dominance has produced an intricately refined science of advertising. Unfortunately, the conclusions of this research have shown, time and time again, that humans are easily fooled, gullible, and can be whole-heartedly convinced and manipulated with relatively little persuasion. The proposed propaganda doesn't even have to be fact; it only has to be presented that way. This is a sad realization, but it is commonly known and abusively exercised to corral the uninformed for any number of reasons. In modern advertisement we find the influence of research developments that specifically focus on stimulation. Advancements in the science of food and drug technologies continually produce useful information detailing the range of effects that stem from various sensory perceptions. These determinations are then incorporated into marketing schemes with the hopes of producing successful brand development. Very similar tactics are used in the creation of art; in order for a piece to be successful, certain formulas of aesthetic appeal must be attained.

With this in mind I consider numerous aspects of my own artistic process, specifically color and the finished appearance. When dealing with pieces that represent these products of manufactured stimulus, it becomes almost expectation for them to adhere to the same levels of exploited color theory and psychology seen in advertising. By hand painting similar vivid colors that are easily relatable for the eyes of programmed consumers, less effort is required to bridge the gaps of sculptural content. It is desired for the work to achieve a blend of provocative and exaggerated advertisement, while showing a devalued and unhealthy side of addiction. Therefore, it is also important for personal preference, and in support of the concept to render these forms dingy and dull. To produce this effect all of the forms are typically washed in a watered-down black solution at various stages of coloring. This artistic choice further enhances the underlying theme of deterioration and alludes towards the demise of our failing consumerist dependencies.



Figure 3. Jacob Wilson, *Empty Pockets*, 2015, Painted Ceramics and Mixed Media, 16 x 8 x 6 inches.

Other additions to my finished works include the incorporation of actual consumer goods, either in their original form or as waste products, as seen in *Empty Pockets* (fig.3) and *Breathtaking* (fig.4). These objects are also manipulated with various surface treatments to allow cohesion with sculptural components. To display or assimilate our culture's waste into an artistic process is a concept of personal interest and probable future experimentation. Innumerable possibilities exist for the use of trash as an artistic medium.

Through structural decisions and mechanical components it is also possible to explore functional aspects of sculptural ceramics in relation to the general standards of the medium. Being a practice that still entertains an ongoing struggle between functional vessels and sculptural objects, it becomes exciting at times to walk that fine line. By constructing, for example, vessels as fountains, sculpture as vessels, or functioning lamps and other mechanics, it becomes possible to add yet another layer of depth to the conversation.



Figure 4. Jacob Wilson, *Breathtaking*, 2015, Painted Ceramics and Mixed Media, 25 x 19 x 6 inches.

4. Medium of Choice

Historically, art has played an enormous role in the flow of human evolution through its function as a translator of emotions, ideas, beliefs, and desires. Such an extremely useful tool continues to serve and influence modern developments through an endless array of artistic mediums. Choosing to focus on ceramics as a base medium is important when its' role in the foundations of three-dimensional art is understood. Existing as one of the oldest and purest forms of sculptural practice, ceramics continues to maintain its position as a fundamental building block. The simplistic beauty of clay, being essentially dirt, is a material that typically goes unnoticed and is possibly the most widely under-celebrated element. However, it is the foundation, it is the stage with which our entire experience takes place, and it is quite literally, the earth beneath our feet. Incorporating this element into art is an act of reverence all to itself, and to then use the material, as a conveyance of message and inspiration is yet a step further. Going even beyond that, to realize how the manipulation of clay relates to our own personal life experience is probably one of the deepest levels of association that can be made. The ceramic process engages all of the natural elements, earth, fire, water, air, and spirit; it is the involvement of every aspect, the culmination of these elements that reflects the complexities of our own existence. As humans we too are conceptualized and conceived through life's endeavors. We are shaped and molded, sculpted by the external force that is being alive. We are cut, separated, combined, stretched out, dried out, heated, cooled, stressed and tested against all odds. The metaphor is bold, beckoning to be acknowledged; it is important to understand what it takes to make us, what it takes to break us, and the value of every detail along the way.

Using a sculptural medium that embodies such depth and weight to juxtapose and reflect the glorification that is placed on consumer goods is appropriately fitting. By transforming a healthy natural element into an unhealthy over-celebrated object of indulgence, a more complex intention is revealed.

5. Influences

Although there are countless artists that I have yet to discover whose inspiration may move me to even richer developments in my own artistic exploration, I have found several talented individuals whose work speaks to my current concept. One of these influential artists is Chinese master sculptor, Chen Wenling. Classified as a Neo-Realistic Contemporary artist, Wenling's use of exaggeration, color, and presentation helps me to gain perspective in my own attempts. Being able to convey subtleties in an artistic message is personally desirable. Wenling's work occasionally makes very blatant stabs at conceptual intent; however, his approach still successfully results in powerful visceral responses. By depicting a majority of his figures as pigs, with pigs, or expressing a swinish quality, the viewer can automatically determine his intended statements towards the gluttonous animalistic instincts of humanity. The same can be said for his method of rendering the figures in a variety of fleshy tones; through these techniques Wenling is able to provoke a sense of sinful observance from his audience.⁶ It is important to notice the strength and power in his sculptural conversation. Power and abundance can easily reflect the recent advancements of his native China, which has seen an explosion of dominance in nearly every aspect of modern culture. Such a profound inflation has sparked a large variety of opinions on the matter; Wenling's interpretation is made obvious in his work that speaks with a voice of warning about these distractions. Power and progress directed in the wrong way may not produce benefit to the overall picture, but it can produce danger for humanity's future. To note that China's adoption of Western culture walks a fine line between success and disrespect of their traditional past is an opinion that can provoke many examinations of American cultural standings.

"This materiality borrows the image of pig, a symbol of both wealth and desire in Chinese society and magnifies the Chinese social problems in daily life at the vantage point of social criticism, satirizing the features of China when entering a crazed age of material consumption. To man, the pig is a kind of dumb animal that only concerns itself with eating and in turn, is eaten by man. In this sense, this "post-pop" language of Chen is an attempt to replace the capitalistic pop culture with a folk language. Therefore, God of Materialism (fig. 5) is an allegory of the scientific gene as well as a satire and criticism of the limitlessness of a society of material desires."⁷

The questioning of where certain values went astray, and what the desires were that led them there, is something of relevant concern. Wenling grapples with this concept throughout the majority of his art and even more layers of interpretation are yet to be explored.



Figure 5. Chen Wenling, *God of Materialism*, 2008, Painted Fiberglass, 78.7 x 143.7 x 99.2 inches.
<http://www.chenwenling.com>.

Sculptural works of the late Duane Hanson (1925-1996) very closely relate to my own observations of the *American Dream*. Taking a more direct approach, by focusing on the true appearance of modern-day Americans, Hanson is able to capture the physical image of humanity's unhealthy lifestyles.⁸ Rather than concentrating on what we consume, Hanson's art centers on what we look like as a result of our consumption. His figures range from pudgy, stuffed into ridiculous clothes and burdened with material baggage, to sickly, dirty, old and discarded. Hanson's devotion to capturing every detail of reality includes body hair, bruises, veins, and hangnails. His process involves casting from live models and reproducing this information in bronze or fiberglass resin.⁹ Hanson's work accurately portrays the difficulty at which bodies move through the many obstacles of modern culture, providing a successful representation of accumulated wear and tear. The intended message of his collection produces a shocking realization when confronted with the true image of America's current appearance. Through this body of work efforts are made to achieve a similar reaction by focusing on the vices and mentalities that are creating such negative results. In Hanson's case the audience becomes the art; more specifically the condition of this audience wholly informs his artistic expression I find this extremely inspiring in relation to my own work.

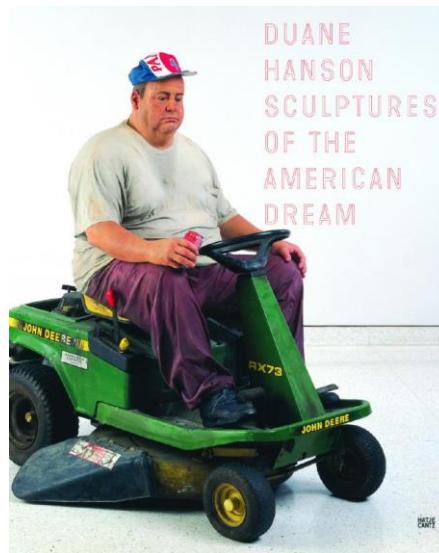


Figure 6. Duane Hanson, *Man on Mower*, 1995, Bronze Polychrome with Oil, Lawn Mower, c.62 x 34 x 60 inches.
," http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/duane_hanson.html

Another influence, with an intriguing spin on the subject, is the work of Chad Knapik. His approach concentrates on humanity's toxic relationship with the natural world by artistically conveying a misplaced respect for nature. Powerful and vivid images include works such as *Syringe* (fig.7) in which a combination of painted and sculptural elements depict an anatomy diagram view of a large syringe needle puncturing flesh in the foreground. Instead of the automatically assumed syringe full of toxic drugs Knapik substitutes a blissful nature scene and raises curiosity towards his suggested intent.¹⁰ Why induce poisoning of the body through harmful drugs? What amount of dissatisfaction is entertained emotionally, or within ones' environment, that enables succumbing to these atrocities? What is not good enough about the natural state of existence and whatever happened to being high on life? Knapik's offering of a fresh injection suggests a need for the recovery of humanity's far digressed mentalities, as well as a revamped appreciation of self and environment. Other provocative collections from Knapik focus more on destructive and disrespectful relationships between humans and nature. Finding the misuse and continual disregard of our wondrous surroundings to be shameful and in desperate need of attention, Knapik strives to invoke greater awareness in his audience.



Figure 7. Chad Knapik, *SYRINGE*, 2011, Acrylic and clay polymer on canvas, 33 x 45 x 3 inches.
<http://ck1.bigcartel.com/products?page=3>

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, education gained through navigating the elaborately entangled snares of consumerism, as well as having the opportunity to respond with an artistic expression, has set the stage for a lifelong pursuit of promoting healthy growth. Developing awareness is crucial, but it is the ensuing action from being informed that holds the key to a positive future. Seeing this vision to fruition has awarded many treasures of knowledge and experience. Through challenging the boundaries of assumed limitations, I have experienced a taste of what it means to continually advance my technical knowledge and skill. It is important for me, now that this statement is complete, to acknowledge it as a defining moment in my life. Moving forward from this point, leaving these idols and addictions in the past, is a hopeful declaration of progress. The related text and influences associated with this undergraduate research have provided a narrow window to the immense topic of consumerism and its effects. The history of humanity, as it relates, is continuously being written through our current endeavors; making educated and thoughtful decisions is absolutely necessary for optimal growth. It is important to maintain a state of open-minded exploration, overcoming obstacles as they appear, while learning how to fulfill creative expressions. The moment that we choose to remain in our comfort zone of understanding, and reject the possibilities that come from opening new doors, is the moment that we sacrifice our true pursuit of all that life has to offer. Once again Stearns clarifies this thought:

“This is why it is not at all too late to take hold of the reins of modernity, using the analysis of recent history as a partial guide, and shape it in ways that might work better for us than present patterns do.”¹¹

There is still yet a wealth of information and experience to be gained; modern American culture has only seen the beginnings of what lies ahead. The art of humanity is resonating stronger than ever, we are capable of great things. It is time that we stop selling ourselves short and embrace the gift of existence, and each other. I would like to see for my future as well more collaboration and cooperation, not just through the arts, but also in our hearts. I would like to bring my sculptural skills into designing and creating communal parks, gardens and public spaces, to help encourage this revival of overall health. Every individual needs to come to their own understandings of what is actually happening, and decide how to conduct themselves accordingly. Hopefully, through art and expression I can help to facilitate this and benefit our current moment of exciting history.

7. Acknowledgments

The author would like to express gratitude to the entire UNCA Art Department Faculty for their continual support and consideration. A special thanks goes to Megan Wolfe and Matt West for all of their shared wisdom and technical knowledge. Another special appreciation in regards to developing healthy artistic roots goes out to Jenny Mastin, for expanding upon ceramic possibilities, and Shane Mickey, for inspiring collaboration and possessing true character.

8. References

1. Peter N. Stearns, *Satisfaction Not Guaranteed: Dilemmas of Progress in Modern Society* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2012), 5.
2. Pi Li, “On the Gaudy and the Tawdry: A Double Exposure,” “Text,” <http://www.chenwenling.com>.
3. William Morris, *William Morris on Art and Socialism* (London: Courier Corporation, 1999), 4.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Zhu Qi, “Fable of Chen Wenling,” Wangjing, China, 6 March 2006, <http://www.chenwenling.com>.
7. Huang Du, “What is Made-in-China Fantasy,” 31 August 2008, “Text,” <http://www.chenwenling.com>.
8. Duane Hanson, “Artist’s Profile,” http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/duane_hanson.html.
9. Ibid.
10. Chad Knapik, “Products,” <http://ck1.bigcartel.com/products?page=3>.
11. Peter N. Stearns, *Satisfaction Not Guaranteed: Dilemmas of Progress in Modern Society* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2012), 5.