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Breaking Wind

Todd William Pentico
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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Breaking Wind

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A thesis submitted in fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

By

Todd William Pentico
University of Central Missouri
Bachelor of Fine Arts, 2011

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University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

Mathew McConnell
Assistant Professor
Committee Director

Kristen Musnug
Associate Professor
Committee Member

Jeannie Hulen
Associate Professor
Committee Member

Leo Mazow
Associate Professor
Committee Member

Abstract

Breaking Wind is a research project and thesis exhibition composed of a series of ceramic objects in conjunction with paintings that explore the systems that dictate belief, the motives that drive curiosity, and biological connection to our surroundings. The work uses the context of the gallery and devices used in museums such as plinths, shelves, and wall text to reinforce the idealized and fictive into something believable.

In the work, *Breaking Wind* refers to a clumsy breakdown and rethinking of the seemingly simple natural phenomenon, wind. Wind is understood as a natural occurrence that has no origin or any innate visible characteristics, and only can be fully understood by theoretical explanations.

Using semi-logical fictive explanations and information sprinkled with a dash of “truth” the works attempt to blur the lines between belief and truth, science and art, thought and form. This corrupts understanding of the natural world around us and starts the beginning of a line of questions that cannot be answered.

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Introduction

Breaking Wind is a research project and thesis installation composed of a series of ceramic objects in conjunction with paintings that explore the systems that dictate belief. These systems are what motivate and drive curiosity through a biological connection to our surroundings. The work uses the context of the gallery as well as museum devices such as plinths, shelves, and wall text to authenticate or substantiate the idealized and turn the fictive into something believable.

In the work, *Breaking Wind* refers to a clumsy breakdown and rethinking of the seemingly simple natural phenomenon, wind. Wind is understood as a natural occurrence that has no origin or any innate visible characteristics. Rather, wind is understood by set of theoretical explanations.

Through a semi-logical, though mostly fictitious explanation, series of misinformation, sprinkled with a dash of “truth,” the works attempt to blur the lines between belief and fact, science and art, thought and form. This distorts the understanding of the natural world around us and starts the beginning of a line of questions that have no answer. The objects/experiments that are derived from this investigation end up being a reflection of my curiosity, my humor and the ambiguousness of the questions themselves.

Development

I spent my first year in graduate school experimenting with ideas that surrounded my experiences in the landscape that I was most accustomed: a mid-western, semi-industrialized, anything but idyllic landscape where I had previously spent a majority of my time fishing,

camping, and hiking. The practice of investigating my relationship to these places was an ongoing investigation that carried over from my pre-graduate work.

In my first semester I worked in a variety of materials and processes ranging from slip casting gas cans, to creating three-dimensional landscapes using industrial construction materials, to a life size elk trap for rabbits. In these early explorations I found that landscapes are fictional places that exist in an idea built and constructed by culture, both physically and metaphysically.

These first works protruded from the wall like a shelf holding abstracted hills and mountains made of ceramic enclosed by a frame. The compositions were formally designed based on idyllic landscape arrangement and notions of the pastoral found in imagery from calendars, magazines, and screen-savers. These reference images were selected for their ability to produce feelings of serenity without the sublime. Scale was a key factor in creating this state of ease by abstracting the body's relationship to the objects, thus allowing the viewer a subconsciously be able to hold the mountains in the palm of their hand.

In my second and third semester, the work started to move towards exploring discarded materials from the interiors of campus building that were being remodeled and that would have ended up in a landfill. Using the material information as a kind of language, I created assemblages that would play with notions of narrative and explore the duality of interior and exterior spaces. By this time in school I started to feel the pressure to push and explore more in the studio and somehow I forgot to spend time out of the studio. This removal from all things "natural" and being confined to a cave-like space with buzzing fluorescent lights and HVAC filtered air started to take effect.

I started experimenting and researching with this feeling of indoor confinement. Breaking down the differences between these spaces and what was outside, I began playing with natural and artificial stimuli such as light, sound, air, and object (image) to create immersive sculptures or pseudo-installations that might affect the psychological state of a viewer. The effects caused by this removal were the subject of a branch of study of psychology called ecopsychology, a term coined by Theodore Roszak in his 1992 book, *The Voice of the Earth*. Later in 2005, Richard Louv attributed these symptoms to disorder he called Nature-Deficit Disorder.¹

No Need to Leave Home

In a series of works during the third semester, I created a installation of three ceramic sculptures that became a simulation of the average living room set; the table, television, lamp, and couch for viewers to use while reflecting on the other objects. Each sculpture was based on iconic American natural attractions. The goal was to explore where these places combine the simultaneous information of personal memories and experiences from family vacations as well vast amount of historical and contemporary information. Picking at the characteristics from the personal and cultural, I wanted to gain understanding of what makes these places so infamous and infuse this into the work.

The piece, *If your coffee table was Old Faithful, your skin would never dry out*, was built as a multi-functional coffee table that harnessed the power of a humidifier. The work was an effort to evoke the feeling similar to Yellowstone's Old-faithful (fig.1). The three hundred year old geyser is the park's central attraction and is named "Old Faithful" because of its semi-predictable discharge every 45-125 minutes.

¹ Kostelanetz, R. (1978). *Esthetics contemporary*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books.

I visited Yellowstone National Park in the summer 1997, and even at that early age I can remember a feeling of disappointment due to the overly high expectations built up prior to the experience's climax. The expectation was incongruous with the experience; a contradiction existed between the fictional (possibly historical) portrayal of wild, untamed and mysterious eruption presented through culturally manipulated information and the reality of first hand experience. The most powerful stories were those told by family members. The reality was that "Yellowstone" was a place that could only survive as an idea.

So I created a coffee table simulation of Old Faithful with a press-molded representation of a geyser and a humidifier that would visually shoot water vapor into the air. The humidifier was set on a timer that turned it on every sixty-nine minutes, the average range in predicted time of eruption. The geyser portion under the table was made from a mixture of concrete and fiber over wire mesh that allows the form to look as if it is protruding through the carpet. This technique is used in the creations of theatrical props by amusement parks, stores like *Cabelas*, and national parks' visitor centers. This piece was a play on the artificial experience that the national park system had created and the naturally occurring phenomenon that had been packaged into an object for easy consumption. Even though the actual geyser was not artificial, the experience was anything but natural. The outcome of the work is similar to that of the actual place and experience, some hype, some waiting, and some mystery—all leading to something lacking. The humor I find here is in the similarities between the two objects and it became a precedent that returns in my later work.

Candidacy

During the candidacy semester I continued to investigate cultural definitions attributed to natural or wild places and how they affect a person's psychological and physiological states. I

started trying to unpack the rhetoric of “wild” and “natural.” The two terms seem intertwined and dependent on each other. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines *wild* as uncontrolled or unrestrained, especially in pursuit of pleasure and *natural* as existing in nature and not made or caused by people: coming from nature.²

I began to see the use of these terms as always changing due to the fluid nature of cultural information and its ability to hyper-evolve. In response to this research, I created set of work that played with the creation of a belief able to alter the viewer’s perception of mundane objects that exist in the everyday such as holes, grass, sky, light, and rocks. The story was born from scientific understanding of natural materials.

In one of the works, I combined a scientific and a mystical understanding of rocks. On the scientific side, I pulled research from the solar panel industry. I used the technological theories of transforming light into electricity (energy) by use of panels of silica (the primary ingredient of sandstone). The other side of the hypothesis that I was creating was from a spiritual or mystical paradigm, such as the spiritual use of crystals to heal all types of ailments. Though this area of research is unfounded, I find it interesting how these theories parallel each other and that theories of crystals being able to transmit energy were developed before the invention of solar panels. The piece that came out of this combination was *Battery Rock* (fig. 2).

Battery Rock included a sandstone rock wired to a pair of handles that vibrated when gripped. The rock was collected out of the White River System in northeastern Arkansas that I had passed a multitude of times while fishing. This area is the river’s point of origin and the portion closest to being called wild or unmanaged. The rest of the river consists of series of dams that are managed by the US Army Corps of Engineering and used for electricity. The rock

² Merriam-Webster, Inc. 2003. Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc.

was partly selected ~~de~~ due to the region of the river, but also because of its orientation to the sun and the type of rock. For most of the day it had premium access to the sun's rays, thus theoretically absorbing vast amounts of energy.

So I captured the rock for display in the gallery. The rock's energy was tapped by two six gauge wires made of stranded copper (capacity of 220v/60amp) allowing maximum conductivity. The wires led to two gold handles made from electric toothbrushes, so when held they would vibrate, notifying the user that the energy exchange was in action. The resulting product was a humorous experiment that tried to answer questions I had about the importance of being connected to the environment.

Historical Context

In the beginning of graduate school I researched the early industrial period in America, trying to understand how artists of this era perceived the newly altered landscape and how it influenced their practice. Early practitioners, such as the Hudson River s artists, have been using pictorial narratives that seemed to be speaking about industry, spirituality, and man's place among the land in much in the way I had been thinking about landscape. Directly influenced by 19th century Romantic landscape painters such as Thomas Cole, Asher Durand, Thomas Moran and George Inness, in my early work I was following the rhetoric of using cultural material for potential symbolism. The compositions that came out of this research were less romantic and more ambiguous—a sort of humorous antithesis of what they had done.

Contemporary Influences

In his project, *Certain Principles of Light and Shapes between Forms*, at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art, Michael Jones McKean installed a series of pumps, a rainwater recollection

tank, and pressure lines leading to nozzles. The installation/device created temporary rainbows above the building at programmed times of the day for short durations. This recreated an image that is a never changing, “visual constant”. “It is an image that exists simultaneously as a here-and-now event, but also as an ancient thing—our ancestors saw this identical color band in the sky. It’s an image burned into our collective being.”³ The work is a type of spectacle that uses a natural occurrence for its ability to create wonder. This amazement might be the same feeling that prehistoric humans felt. This type of wonder comes from an inability to fully understand its complexity. It’s an image that is only simple at the superficial level.

The way the rainbow was presented at the Bemis is quite different from how the Neanderthals would have seen them. McKean altered the image’s natural state. The rainbow exists as an artificial vision, but not as material transformation. The material is still refracted light through water just as if naturally occurring, but the experience is still seen as artificial because the image is created by machines and is controlled. The experience can be seen as a spectacle or a false experience. I would ask if you have the power to control an experience and it is reproducible as well, does it lose the ability to create wonder and do the viewers become disenchanted?

Exhibition: *Breaking Wind*

The exhibition, *Breaking Wind*, is an accumulation of the ideas and enquiries that I have been working towards previously and still seem to be pursuing an answer to: questions like, “What is the importance of the natural environment and why is it important that places get

³ Frank, P. (2012, May 1). Michael Jones McKean To Build Rainbow Over Bemis Center For Contemporary Arts (PHOTOS, INTERVIEW). *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved March 17, 2015, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/23/michael-jones-mckean_n_1539378.html

preserved or protected?” And, “How does the perception of a place through reproduction and cultural information alter experience?”

The works in the exhibition consist of series of objects and paintings that illustrate and merge a fictional alternative origin theory of wind with a list of the United States’ most famous rocks, such as Delicate Arch and Mount Rushmore (fig.3). The convergence of the ephemerality of wind with the tactile and physical characteristics of rock, is used as a metaphor for the polarity of art and science, as well as ideas about the internal nature of the physical environment. Thinking of wind as elusive and virtually unattainable—an object without origin, the spirit and breath of something—is a metaphor for art, the essence of nature, as well as the instability of natural systems. Rocks or mountains are solid, stable, unmoving. They are seen as a constant, or even as truth.

Even though wind is invisible to the eye, the theory of how wind works is perceived as fact. Another reason that I want to explore wind is due to its timeless, non-visible image that can be visualized only by seeing other materials under its physical influence. It is a curious thing to try to understand the barely seen (depending on your definition of seeing). Wind theoretically has been a naturally occurring phenomenon that predates time. This timelessness brings about questions of how it affects a person and if it is a necessary stimulus for the human psyche. Do we lose psychological stability when the wind element is absent? I like the idea that there are parts of the environment that are so ingrained into the DNA of people that they have become a necessity.

Breaking Wind contains a series of ceramic sculptures that function on multiple levels. They illustrate a fantastic possibility that wind comes from the mountains, each displaying this in a different way. One is a simulation of Delicate Arch in Arches National Park which, at the push

of a button, the viewer activates a fog machine and the fog rises out of a hole in the middle of the arch (fig.4). This image portrays a visible wind and how the arch might have been created. Next to the button is a bicycle horn, which if honked forces sound and air through the hole and creates a smoke ring—a phenomenon that was extremely mysterious to me as a child. This simple amazement plagued my conscience, and in the unknown that it evoked, created a deep-seated curiosity for possible solutions. I later learned that a smoke ring can be easily created with a box, a plastic bag, and some smoke. Once I understood the physics of the phenomenon, it lost its power.

The fog ring in this work is employed for its ambiguous nature. It can be seen as a donut, or a halo of light (if looking from certain angle). The pun here is blowing smoke, a phrase used when someone is not being honest or covering up the truth. There are images on the Internet that still bring amazement, ones that portray the occurrence of rings above mountains. There is a simultaneous disbelief and hope for the possibility. My curiosity drives me to research further, but if I chose to stop investigating, the deeper insight would not break the fantastic. Like in the Moran painting, the use of fog comes from the genre. The fog is a device that adds mystery by the act of blurring information.

In *Moran Painting*, an altered reproduction of Moran's *Chasm of the Colorado*, I wanted to investigate the decisions and devices used in the creation of romanticist paintings (fig.5). I choose this particular painting because it has a range of interesting devices being used, such as fog, rain, size, frame, and perspective. The actual painting is absurdly large, allowing the viewer to enter the space. Paintings like Moran's and other images were being used as propaganda for the westward expansion. The railroad was the prime benefactor. Moran's works not only

promoted travel but also the protection of these places in the form of National Parks⁴. In the original work, Moran creates a scene that is in flux and on the cusp of a thunderstorm. One side is lit and peaceful, and the other is dark and unpleasant. This duality and battling of forces is a constant driving force in my work. It is perplexing how the image remains both inviting and repellent, beautifully horrid.

Belief leads to disenchantment

Belief and disenchantment are underlying themes that enter the work through research and are driven by a desire to understand how visual and rhetorical information manipulate our perception of place. This inquiry started with a recent trip to Ireland. Prior to the trip, I had done extensive research trying to get an understanding of the place along with prior knowledge of Ireland's importance in the migration of brown trout to the United States. This research that consisted of videos, images, and stories created an origin story of epic proportions for a fish that is prized in the fly fishing community. It was this belief of a mythically pure, more colorful, and oversized strain of brown trout that lead to its disenchantment.

With this experience I wanted to manipulate beliefs by adding fictional information until they become slightly blurred. The start of the research comes from foggy, unclear social information derived from my internet research and past accumulation of knowledge learned during middle school. Working with this information, I blended these social truths with fictive ambiguities to play with institutionally driven beliefs. This usually results in a humorous blurring of "truths," showing their unstable nature and leaving room to wander in some wonder. It's the wonder that I am most interested in recreating or finding (lost due to information seemingly fixed in nature).

⁴ Robert Allerton Parker, "The Water-Colors of Thomas Moran," essay in *Thomas Moran: Explorer in Search of Beauty*. (East Hampton, N.Y.: East Hampton Free Library, 1958) 78.

Smithson often writes about place and how it is internalized, manipulated and changing. He writes, “The earth’s surface and the figments of the mind have a way of disintegrating... Various agents, both fictional and real, somehow trade places.... one can not avoid muddy thinking...One’s mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion.”⁵ The erosion of mind is an act of fiction manipulating actual place into idealization, which for me can only lead to un-fulfillment.

In the piece *Plymouth Rock*, I reproduced the famous pilgrim-landing marker. The rock replica is approximately 1/30 the size of the original (fig.6). The only link to the “original” rock is the color and the date engraved (1620). The original cannot be authenticated and some historians actually believe the site of the pilgrims’ landing would have been further east on Cape Cod.⁶ In the work, I play on the ability of rocks to move as well as our inability to authenticate the rock. *Plymouth Rock* is attached to a motor, so when a button is pushed, the rock rotates. The work is simple, but the simplicity leaves possibilities for multiple interpretations. I am also referencing the moving rocks in Nevada. These rocks in the middle of the deserts leave trails in the sand and are a phenomenon that has multiple theories. None of these theories have been proven.

The mystery in the phenomenon is perplexing and mystifying, which creates curiosity and wonder—pure enchantment. This is a rare occurrence when something so simple remains unanswered. It is role of science to answer all the questions of the world by shining

⁵ Kostelanetz, R. (1978). *Esthetics contemporary*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books. p. 244 (Smithson is “a sedimentation of the mind” highlights the entropy of the physical and idealized landscape)

⁶ Weinstein, A. (2011, May 8). TOP 12 MOST FAMOUS ROCKS IN THE UNITED STATES. Retrieved November 11, 2014, from <http://listosaur.com/travel/top-12-most-famous-rocks-in-the-united-states/>

metaphorical light upon the unanswered (the enchanted). In modern thinking, science is a system of reasoning that collects information (observations) and derives meaning. Reason provides stability for information to transform information into “fact” and all questions can be answered. As Schopenhauer puts it, “Nothing is without ground or reason why it is rather than is not.”⁷ This statement is probably indisputable but I think that when questions are answered, we lose something just as important: wonder.

Object-erience is natural

First hand experience is the primary way of understanding the natural. A simulation is a reduction of the external. It is a kind of transformation of primary to secondary. This transformation is the traditional way of creating art, for example, plein-air painting. This way of experiencing has been replaced with secondhand experience, understanding the world through representations or simulacra.⁸ This is what I would call “Object-erience”, experience through objects. Using these simulacra, I wanted to further dilute and continue the degradation of natural places. One of the elements most alterable is color.

The use of color in this work plays with notions of natural and artificial color. The colors I used were photoshopped from photos presented online. Once extracted from the picture, I matched to the closest Valspar house paint. The experience of color that is from a primary source such as an orange hue reflecting of a rock during a sunset would be considered natural. But the color cannot be said to be natural by definition. The color is seen through the eye of a viewer. The eye is an instrument that alters and allows the person to receive and translate the

⁷ Schopenhauer, A. (1974). *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Reason*. (La Salle, IL:Open Court)

⁸ Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

information. The color therefore has been processed and transformed from its original state, to a less pure one.

Humor

The humor present in most of the work acts on two levels. One being humor's ability to undermine and cover or suspend the gravity of serious situations. In the past, humor has been criticized in the arts for its superficiality and for looking unserious. I think humor is the best way of adding lightness and pinpointing the inconsistencies in serious matters. In the 2011 *Scripps Annual Exhibition*, Seckler writes, "The ceramists in the 2011 *Scripps Annual* have demonstrated a deft hand, using humor to elevate their works. Humor adds depth and, in many cases, clarity. The melding of technique and content here is worthy of our reverence not our scorn."⁹ The other way humor is used is for its ability to call attention to the truth of circumstances. This often happens by juxtaposing absurd objects or images that superficially look like dumb one-liners, but can lead the viewer to interesting perspectives.

⁹ Seckler, Judy. 2012. "Clay's Good Humour." *Ceramics: Art & Perception* no. 87: 13-17. *Art Full Text* (H.W. Wilson), EBSCOhost (accessed March 16, 2015)



Figure 1: Todd Pentico, *If your coffee table was Old Faithful, your skin world never dry out,*

2013



Figure 2: Todd Pentico, *Battery Rock*, 2014



Figure 3: Todd Pentico, *Breaking Wind*, 2015



Figure 4. Todd Pentico. *Delicate Arch*. Stoneware, wire, latex, fog machine. 2015



Figure 5. Todd Pentico. *Moran Painting*. Acrylic on Canvas, foam, resin, glitter, gold tape. 2015



Figure 6. Todd Pentico. *Plymouth Rock*. Earthenware, latex. 2015

Biography

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