

HOMEMADE HOME:
CREATING IN THE FACE OF THE NOSTALGIC IMPULSE

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Master of Fine Arts

by
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To my husband, Mike: The seed of this idea was sprouted and watered during our discussions about home, tradition, and creation. I am sure that neither the artwork nor this document would be what they are had it not been for your challenge, encouragement, and understanding. ...and dish washing...and dog walking...and studio moving...

To my parents: Rather than predetermine a path for me to follow, you taught me how to begin to weigh my numerous options, and in doing so, you equipped me not only for a productive education, but also for an honest adulthood. Thank you.

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INTRODUCTION

Nostalgia is a pervasive and widely accepted form of dishonesty. Throughout American history, people have made and collected objects, upheld traditions, and revered styles and forms of past eras with the aim of recreating or re-experiencing some past good, but omitting large portions of the history surrounding the sentimentalized object or idea. That nostalgia is an ongoing and thoroughgoing fixture of American life is not surprising, considering the comfort that many of its practitioners claim it yields. The promise of comfort in the face of the difficulty and isolation of individualism may even seem so appealing as to elicit a potent pang of nostalgia that is nearly compulsory. This initial nostalgic experience, if indulged, can become a practice of reliance on the familiar and denial of the unknown, for the sake of comfort. The cost of this perceived comfort, however, is the honesty required for self-creation. Idealization of the past, faulty remembering, and the blind acceptance of traditions all create the illusion of comfort and prevent an understanding of reality.

A nostalgic view of the past is alluring and begins with an impulse – an automatic affinity for something familiar, quaint, or old, which seems to root one in a better, past time. Among my own generation (those born in the late nineteen seventies and early nineteen eighties), the actual experience of cultural rootedness is rare. We have not inherited a satisfying means to connect with each other, with our ancestors, or with a binding culture, so we must fill in the blanks, either by self-creation or by the appropriation of ideas and methods from the past. The former of these options is an enormous, intimidating process, and the latter too often relies on an incomplete and

distorted source. Looking to a nostalgically remembered past, however, is not only socially accepted, but also designated as a perfectly American practice, built into our national history.

A root of Euro-American experience in this country is the occurrence of an important duality: desire for things known but past on one hand, and on the other, exploration and the creation of something new. The English colonists here sought new rights and a lifestyle better than the one possible in England. They created new settlements and structures, claiming land and resources that they wouldn't have been able to afford before. And yet, despite the glory of a new start, despite the settlement of a new place, they would not be "at home" here until this place greatly resembled England.ⁱ In 1665, the wife of an early colonist wrote that she "would not feel comfortable in Virginia" without an English garden at her home.ⁱⁱ

Throughout American history, every time that innovation takes place but is tempered by the revival of a past style or the use of an existing archetype, this duality is at work: In creating a new, national identity, Jefferson turned to Roman symbols;ⁱⁱⁱ Early modern, professionally designed homes echoed colonial building methods;^{iv} Pioneers braved travel westward but took with them quilts made by friends back home in the east;^v Survivors of the Great Depression later inhabited well-stocked, thriving homes but retained poverty-driven styles of cooking; A 1950s home well-equipped with newly-invented appliances was geared for a woman's completion of the same tasks carried out by at least two previous generations of women. The past seems a natural source for instruction to many people, whether or not its traditions and models actually serve a contemporary purpose. Americans embrace new technologies and thrive on exploration

of the new, but where a question of identity or morality arises, we tend to turn to the past for an example rather than explore numerous options and newly outline and create our values and our selves.

While it is possible that the following of past models as well as innovation served the development of our nation early in its history, this duality predicts a dilemma for contemporary Americans that much more disposes the individual to creative paralysis. Because we misunderstand the past and even our own memories, boiling them down to simplified models for “good,” choosing to turn to the past now also often means neglecting the drive toward true innovation and creation. Present-day Americans face this dilemma often, and given the American history of the two drives - drawing on the past and creating new things - it is not only a common experience, but also one that is widely and deeply understood. Turning to the past in the face of the dilemma is generally acceptable among Americans, even if the more creative option is not fully considered. For many, it is the era of our grandparents’ youth that becomes a source of easily accepted values that seem to us to have yielded good people and cohesive community and family. We know the mistakes of our parents’ heyday – we see more honestly that generation’s common goals, looking to improve upon them. Though a picture of the era of two generations before is somewhat accessible to us through our relatives (we gain a personal - beyond coolly historical - view of it), we have no experience of it. Our notion of that time is condensed to impressions of it, and we latch onto those impressions which contrast most with the problems of our own time. Where, for example, a young mother today may have little idea how her parenting could produce a polite and successful child, she “knows” that her grandmother instituted strict household rules based on societal

expectations of the time that dictated how a child should behave. The young mother may believe that the rules of a traditional household and a more conservative society removed the pressure for her grandmother to come up with effective parenting techniques on her own. The young woman faces the dilemma described above: She could synthesize her own methods after research of the thousands upon thousands of contemporary parenting resources, or she could turn to a picture of the past that seems soothingly simple and effective. She may not recognize the limited scope of her understanding of her grandmother's parenting. In her desire for a pre-fabricated answer, she is unlikely to consider the failures of the past model, or the fact that the societal context that supported that model is not only gone, but also starkly different from today's society.

This general nostalgia - the longing for a past time that seems better than the present - requires a reduction of the era remembered into symbolic, "good" features, which can be mimicked in idea or form. It either omits negative historical content or attempts to neutralize it. Though this widespread phenomenon creates the backdrop for the individual's experience, the nostalgic impulse may be better explained through more microcosmic talk.

For the individual, "home" is the setting for the formation of identity. A person's first experience of comfort, his first feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment, and his first notion of "self" take place in the context of the home, with all its inanimate contents. Hannah Arendt wrote, "Men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table."^{vi} So the individual identifies with a place (house) and all its contents and associated sentiments (home). When, as our society dictates, a young person leaves

home, his self-creative drive is active and he desires exploration and distance from childhood and the childhood home. This freedom, however, is overwhelming and uncomfortable. When he can do anything and be anyone, the options for potential action are endless, and he does not know how to act. There are no clear instructions for self-creation. Looking for direction, he will inevitably and perhaps unintentionally turn to the source of his childhood identity, where he knew (or thought he knew) what was “good” to do and what was “bad,” where he could follow instructions and be rewarded, and where he was surrounded by familiar things. The honest adult may, for the rest of his life, feel the drive for creation and exploration while at the same time wanting to “discover” home and be comfortable as during childhood.

That the desire for the known is persistent, especially in the face of opportunity to be completely creative, does not relieve a person of the drive to self-create. Furthermore, the indulgence of nostalgia is inhibitive to the self-creative project. Self-creation is an active synthesis of information that an individual regards as true, but nostalgic living is based on a false picture of the past. Certainly, the competing desires to “be back home” and to discover are common, and when faced with a choice between the two, many will choose to try and appropriate existing models rather than discover new ones. The past, however, and even our own memories, are not reliable enough sources that they provide us with a complete or useful model. An honest look at nostalgic living will show it to be inadequately informed at best, and at worst, quite blind to the realities of contemporary life.

I, like so many members of my generation, feel the lure of nostalgia. Lacking a complete or satisfying model for life, we face the choice between daunting freedom and

binding but incomplete past ideals. We do not begin adult life with a strong sense of purpose; we believe that we must discover it. Life goals have not been laid out for my generation, but we can imagine a world in which they would have been. For example, having experienced little hardship, we lack the notion, held by many of our grandparents and even our parents, that we must work to offer a “better” life to our children someday, and yet we can see how such a notion might make major life decisions, such as whether to have children or what job to pursue, much easier. This sort of past model, which contains instructions for life (whether implicit or explicit), gathers appeal as we notice our lack of direction in early adulthood. Traditions, such as guidelines for husband-wife etiquette and recipes for family meals, are another form of nostalgically appealing instruction. The following of conventions and traditions was nearly required of our grandparents, was generally expected of our parents, and, despite the freedom of my generation, is still quite accepted among us.

I am like most other members of my generation in my desire for direction, but I am set apart by my unwillingness to pretend to find it in the past. Though indulgence of the nostalgic impulse and the blind adoption of traditional behaviors may be accepted by previous generations and even by my peers, I recognize the failures of the past, the imperfection of memory, and the incomplete nature of most traditions. Despite my affinity for objects and ideas that embody an imagined, “better” time, I strive to base my actions and values on an honest understanding of the real world, and not on an inaccessible ideal. My sculptures show both the lures and the problems of nostalgia, leading my viewer from recollection and recognition to an acknowledgement of the failures of memory, tradition, and thus nostalgia.

THE PROBLEMS OF NOSTALGIA

Though the simultaneous expression of nostalgia and innovation throughout history and within individual experience may seem to imply that the two are compatible, in fact, they are at odds. The desire for honest and original creation spurs action, while the longing for comfort holds one still. Innovation generates new things, while nostalgic remembering desires what no longer exists.

For some people, the turn toward home in the face of autonomy is where the formation of adult identity stops.^{vii} One can remember traditions and tasks carried out by parents and grandparents, and simply copy those procedures without question of their worth or relevance. One can surround oneself with knick-knacks from the childhood home, convinced that those objects comfort or provide connection. Among people who are nostalgic in this way, a common misperception about nostalgia is that it is simply and harmlessly fond remembering. In fact, dishonesty by omission is still dishonest. No home is perfect, not even to a satisfied child, and no era is free of ills and injustice. To live in sentimental reverence of the past is to skip over important lessons and to condense life experience into a “representative” image or phrase. This idealization, while it may seem pleasant, prevents the remembering individual from recognizing the need for new thoughts, and leads to a stagnancy of the self-creative drive.

The first problem with nostalgia as discussed here could be called “the problem of omission.” Omission of the “bad” is required for idealization of the past. When it comes to depiction of nostalgia, some current artists indulge the temptation to see a past era (probably either of their grandparents’ youth or of their own early childhood, as it is

incompletely remembered) as not only better than the present, but as the ideal deliverer of comfort and goodness. This sort of artist is one who paints his hometown with glowing streetlights shining on perfectly untouched snow in the downtown streets, or a row of house fronts with blooming rainbows of planted flowers lining stone-paved walkways. This rosy-lensed approach may produce a beautiful picture of the world, but it blatantly avoids depicting, dealing with, or commenting upon reality. Making honest work *about* nostalgia means that the work must not simply *be* nostalgic.

Glass sculptor Susan Taylor Glasgow utilizes imagery and text in her work that call up a “better” era, while exaggerating the goodness of the past depicted in order to comment upon the fraudulence of the nostalgic ideal. She says, “I am intrigued by 1950s imagery and the false perception of simpler times.”^{viii} Given the complicated nature of the present-day abundance of freedom, “simpler” is easily conflated with “better” when it comes to the judgment of a bygone era. Glasgow calls into question the assumptions of a viewer who might be quick to see the 1950s as without troubles – a sweet and simple time.

Glasgow places her discussion of idealization within a domestic context, as the home is nostalgically seen as the seat of comfort and simplicity. The sweetness of her imagery so dominates each piece and is so exaggerated that her viewer must question the authenticity of the past-reverent message that, at first, seems to emanate from each piece. Examination of a sculpture will reveal the sarcasm with which she transmits outdated aphorisms.

The imagery of the glass-cake sculpture, *Bluebirds of Happiness* (Figure 1), is blatantly devoid of negativity. Her “cake” is representative both of activities within the

home and of the home itself. Through a window in the cake and past pulled-back curtains, we see a bluebird-woman kneeling happily in front of her oven, checking a baking cake. The Bluebird of Happiness, traditionally a small, glass figurine given as a housewarming gift, can be seen as a symbol of residents' desire for tradition and joy within their home, and more generally for the old-fashioned home in which the object might be found. Glasgow's kneeling housewife-bird embodies tradition and simple joy, as do the bird-women atop the cake. "Sweetness" runs through every aspect of the design of this sculpture, from the glass, "chocolate" icing to the smiling bluebird-women to the ribbons that hold the object together.

In this sculpture, as in most of her work, Glasgow deals with the problem of omission in nostalgia by carrying the absence of negativity to an absurd extreme. Even a nostalgic viewer who has no qualms with displaying a childhood knick-knack as a reminder of "the good old days" might recognize a problem when confronted with the extreme sweetness and absurdity of a frilly, glass cake-home. It is clear that Glasgow's domestic scenes are not depictions of real homes, and the forced recognition of their imaginary nature is what leads her viewers to understand the dishonesty of nostalgic idealization of the past. Furthermore, the comparison of an individual viewer to a character in this scene lends understanding of Glasgow's message: Though the housewife-bird looks quite happy to be kneeling in front of an appliance on the kitchen floor, a contemporary viewer is aware of the oppression that has been associated with a woman's work at home. This viewer will be conscious of an aversion to the gender roles of the 1950s, and is prompted by Glasgow to think about those roles in contrast to roles of the present-day.

The use of nostalgic imagery is tricky for the thoughtful artist. Glasgow, for example, had to be sure that her sculptures would be seen as containing scrutiny, rather than being just pretty knick-knacks. The line at which most viewers will cease to see sweet imagery as simply being sweet and will cross over into an understanding of commentary is difficult to place. The omission of the negative must be combined with absurdity, non-functionality, deconstruction, sarcasm or another signal to assure that the viewer does not mistake critique for the artist's approval of nostalgia.

While Glasgow's sculptures push nostalgic idealization to a recognizable extreme, my own work is more a balance of remembered comfort (and associated nostalgia) and non-functionality, emphasizing a gap between reality and what we remember. (See Figure 2.) My viewer recognizes elements of a form or surface as familiar, but also sees that the form as a whole is not a satisfying reconstruction of the item to which it refers. Those aspects of a piece that are familiar to the viewer will line up with an idealized memory of home (Figure 3), while those aspects that are askew, distorted, or opposing the item's normal function (Figure 4) should remind the viewer of the oft-omitted imperfections of the past, memory, and nostalgic thinking. Put another way, I include a reference to a household object, but omit those qualities of the reference that would make the object functional.

Perfection and imperfection are perhaps my most basic, visual terminology for depicting both nostalgia and its dishonesties. Stereotypical perfection and neatness are apt representatives of the idealization, familiarity, and perceived goodness associated with nostalgia. On the other hand, inaccessibility, unreliable sources, and incomplete transmission of the past are the flaws of nostalgic thinking that undo its purpose, and

these flaws are expressed as physical imperfections and distortions of form. Each piece in the body of work discussed here has elements that will be recognizable, or familiar, to the viewer. These are the cleanly depicted, neatly polished, “perfect” pieces of our memories of home. Counter to these nostalgia-evoking components are those qualities that separate my sculptures from the actual comfortable place and experience we call up when we think of “home.” These are the “imperfections:” that the overall form seems distorted, that the sculpture could not effectively serve as the food, dish, chair, lamp, or rug to which it alludes, and that the item does not retain the comforting qualities of its referent as it sits in a cool, white gallery. (See Figure 5.) The qualities that make my sculptures incomplete or distorted (imperfect) versions of household items are the signal to my viewer that nostalgia is flawed.

If omission of the negative is one myth of nostalgia, another flawed notion of it is that it allows the retrieval of fond childhood experiences – that it serves a real, comforting function. In truth, memory is unreliable and the scenarios, places, and objects of old memories are just as much imaginary content as real, past things. What is a memory, but an image in the mind – an *imagination*?^{ix} We are not directly linked to our past; we access our experience of an absent time and place through the intermediate process of remembering. As discussed above, “fond remembering” disregards the negative components and connotations of a past event, place, or thing. Even beyond omission, which may be to some extent a conscious effort, extend inaccuracies of memory due simply to failures of the adult mind to retrieve information completely and exactly. “Home,” as experienced by a child, is irretrievable for the same person as an adult, even if the site or objects of the home can be physically revisited. The difference of

time and psychological maturity creates a barrier between the child's mind, which lays down a memory, and the adult's, by which the memory is called up. Add to the scenario the physical separation of an adult from the childhood home, and remembering is complicated even further. The sculptor Allen Topolski describes failures of memory when explaining his own work: "The mechanism for recollection becomes increasingly inadequate when put to use repeatedly and the likelihood of its contamination with 'inaccuracy' increases with its distance from the inceptive moment."^x

Assembled sculpture has a special aptitude for treatment of the process of remembering. Found objects, especially objects with an evident history of their own, are retrieved by an artist in a process that mimics that of memory. Memory selectively calls up past objects, places, and events, giving the rememberer portions of accurate imagery, which are combined with invented aspects and arranged currently in the person's mind. Likewise, an artist like Topolski or myself selects items that embody or represent the past, and then combines them with original designs, resulting in a product that is new but contains some reference to the past. Topolski says, "...One contingency for an object's selection is its ability to maintain, throughout the creative process, vestiges of its former function. It needs to maintain visual traces of its earlier state. I strive to emphasize function – but function made ambiguous or negated."^{xi} In both Topolski's work and my own, the old, reassembled selections remind the viewer of the past, but the overall non-functionality, strangeness, and newness of the sculptures show a disconnect between a memory of an object and the remembered object itself.

Topolski's sculptures are pseudo-appliances with the sleek look of "convenience" inventions of the 1950s. For example, *Houseware* (Figure 6), an enameled-yellow form

atop its matching stand, seems vaguely like a countertop kitchen item. It is crafted like a true appliance, so that the viewer believes it to have a specific use before even attempting to identify its function. This is a process common to the viewing of much of Topolski's work: One sees the item as familiar, functional, and even representational of an era, but then fails to discover its purpose, even after close, prolonged investigation. Topolski carefully aligns reassembled parts, surface polish, and configuration of the overall form in order to allude to a type of functional object, but is sure to avoid the item's identification by the viewer. *Leezure-Life* (Figure 7) is another example. This item even has an electrical cord running from its tub-like, chrome body, further feigning functionality.

The process through which Topolski guides his viewer teaches the viewer about the process of remembering. He reminds us that a vague sense of familiarity with an image should not be mistaken for an accurate or useful retrieval of the past. His familiar-seeming constructions stand for our mental assemblages of recovered portions of memories combined with invented parts and purposes. He "...addresses the means by which we fabricate memory and the futile pursuit of that which cannot be regained."^{xii}

In my own work, the simultaneous appearance of found objects and invented forms is a reference to my experience of the conflict between the desire to turn to nostalgic memory for comfort and the knowledge that the past cannot be accurately recaptured. The past is not absent from these sculptures, but is inaccurately rebuilt through them. As a nostalgic individual attempts to utilize past models and traditions, I use existing objects, and as one cannot completely reconstruct the comfort of the past, my reconstructions are not functional domestic items.

When my found objects are disassembled, altered, rearranged, and incorporated with parts that I construct from scratch, they become components in strange, precarious new items. (See Figures 8 and 9.) If found objects represent the small portion of a memory that is an accurate image of the remembered thing, then the finished sculpture stands for the overall imaginative product of remembering. Though the entire form refers to a specific memory, it will never function, physically nor emotionally, as did the actual object of the memory, in the past.

A quality common to Topolski's work and my own is the physical combination of seeming old and looking new. Topolski utilizes found parts but smoothes all finished surfaces and seams and applies flawless enamel coats and polishes, eliminating any implication of wear or use. I also build from found components, refinishing hard surfaces and combining them with new upholstery fabrics (of vintage look or design) and homemade bread. (See Figure 10.) In both cases, the finished object stands for an assembled or invented mind-image, and newness is an important sign of that invention. In my work, I think of newly made parts as filling in the blanks of memory. These new portions are added onto an assembly of existing items in a manner representing the imaginative reconstruction by which we complete the incomplete images of our memories. The inaccuracy of this reconstruction is represented by distortion of form and a look of being "out of place." (See Figure 11.)

Bread works interestingly in the role of the "new" component, but newly baked bread has a very different effect than new upholstery fabric or refinished wood. Unlike all of the other materials in the body of work discussed here, bread is perishable. It draws attention to its own age, and thus to the passage of time. Just by being intact and

moldless, my loaves show that they are fairly recently baked. If the refinished and new surfaces on the sculptures leave some doubt as to whether a component is found or created, the bread is clearly newly created. The forms of the loaves, so unlike the shape achieved by use of a standard pan, add to the evidence that this bread was newly sculpted to fill a space in the sculptural form. (See Figure 12.)

Newness of a component part also emphasizes the separation between the overall sculpture and the kind of antique of which it reminds the viewer. As work that uses nostalgic imagery to comment upon nostalgia runs a risk of being perceived as straightforwardly nostalgic, an object that looks old in an attempt to comment upon something remembered may be barely distinguishable from an actual antique. Newness signals a current conversation about memory, and non-functionality helps to form a critique of the process of recollection, assuring that the viewer's experience does not end with the sense of familiarity with the object, but continues into a better understanding of the problems of nostalgia.

Put more concisely, nostalgia requires remembering or a perceived connection to the past and seems to promise comfort and easy instruction. Remembering is a faulty process, both because of the inclination to idealize the past, and also due to a less conscious failure of the mind to accurately retrieve a complete picture of the past. Because nostalgic remembering does not actually deliver contact with the past,^{xiii} nostalgia also fails to really offer the comfort or direction it seems to promise.

The nostalgic individual will not always long for an idealized (inaccurately remembered) childhood. Perhaps just as common is the belief in a generally better, past time, as discussed in relation to "the problem of omission." Both the longing for a better,

simpler era and the desire for the securities of childhood often stem from an effort to know how to live rightly without needing to create one's own rules for living. When engaged in this effort, a path to easy, assumed-right action is the following of tradition.

Traditions carried out by family members, or even those of which an individual is simply aware, seem to offer a means of connection to the “better” past and to the guidance of other people. Most traditions, however, have their roots in an instance of necessity or even hardship: Comfort foods, made primarily of flour and fat, were necessarily conservative during the Depression; Quilts, pieced together from various scraps, allowed for recycling of fabric when new could not be bought; Canning and curing were the only means of sustenance in the winter for self-sustaining farms.^{xiv} Now, many of the necessities that bore American traditions are gone and the same hardships are rare among my generation. The binding sense of community that seems to accompany tradition, whether it actually existed in the past or is only imaginary, is also absent. With neither their necessary cause nor a cohesive group to carry them out, “traditions” are only actions. A common misconception is that these actions automatically connect us to others in a community (either of past generations or of our peers) and remove from our lives the isolation of autonomous adulthood. On the contrary, community these days must be created, not retrieved. Nostalgia, being both past-focused and incompletely informed, does little for this creative process.

Important to any depiction of nostalgia are the criteria by which a remembered object becomes an object of nostalgic desire, and an allusion to tradition may be the most important of these criteria. It is not every object in the childhood home that lingers into adulthood memories, and not even every remembered item is an object of wistful

longing. The novel by Susan Warner, *The Wide, Wide World*, sheds light on two negative qualifications of a nostalgic object, and hints at the role of tradition in forming value for an object. While the main character's childhood has left her with several sentimental, nostalgic objects, time later spent in a "country" home and a mansion, respectively, offer her neither comfort nor connection: "Whereas Fortune's home is marked by its paucity of comforting objects, the Marshmans' home is noteworthy for its surplus. While Fortune's objects lack meaning because they are purely functional, the Marshmans' things preclude affect because, rather than helping maintain memories or relationships, they are valuable in and of themselves."^{xv} The nostalgic object is not usually an item of pure utility (though it will often serve some domestic purpose), and it is neither usually inherently precious. The object will likely be related to a scenario in which the nostalgic individual felt connected to or guided by loved ones, or it will embody an idea of a time during which people were connected and sure about how to live.^{xvi} Traditions so often either require inanimate objects or yield them; an object itself can be "passed down," as can the knowledge of the method for producing an object.

When one sets out to represent the inadequacy of disconnected, traditional action, tradition must be symbolized carefully so as not to simply praise or utilize a bygone method. This is much the same difficulty as is found when utilizing sweet images of the past to critique idealization, or in making "old" things in order to comment upon memory. Objects that are constructed following a passed-down technique can come to embody the technique by which they're made, but this practical sort of inheritance is subtly different from the passing down of currently useless procedures in hopes of achieving a psychic or spiritual connection to a group. In order to communicate a

critique of empty tradition, a traditional appearance must stand in for the useless sort of traditional behavior. In order for that to be clear to a viewer, the traditional-looking component may be accompanied by an overall non-functionality or absurdity. The “tradition” must look to fail to deliver useful information.

The questioned sense of familiarity, as discussed above with respect to the problems of memory, will also come into play with the use of symbols of tradition. If looking at an image, surface, or form can produce a sense of familiarity and then a longing for the familiar when one recognizes its actual absence, then seeing a seemingly traditional item and then realizing that it is not useful in the traditional way might cause a viewer to recognize the absence of those things we expect tradition to offer us: community, connection, and direction.

Alteration of “traditional” forms is the means by which the furniture-sculptures of Danish artist Nina Saunders achieve their strangeness and allude to a failure of tradition. Her best-recognized work consists of upholstered, chair- and sofa-like objects whose distortions inhibit their potential use as actual furniture. *Confession* (Figure 13), for example, is a stuffed, leather armchair that, but for its unaccommodating width, would seem to belong in a comfortable study or even a family den. It seems just old-fashioned enough to be associated with childhood memories of the artist’s own generation, especially considering its medium-green hue. The sculpture quite blatantly refers to an armchair, but given both the fact that it cannot be sat upon like an armchair and that the piece is exhibited in a white-walled gallery and not a wallpapered den, one sees that its purpose is to comment upon a notion symbolized by the armchair, and not to be an armchair. *Pure Thought IV* (Figure 14), another leather-upholstered armchair sculpture,

also prevents its own use (this time with an enormous swelling of its back into the space normally occupied by a sitter), removing it from identification simply as a chair and causing the viewer to consider the contradiction between an inviting, familiar form and its inaccessibility as a source of comfort or reprieve. The critic Penina Barnett writes of this work, “Nina Saunders' sofa and chair sculptures contain [a] contradiction in their play of opposites: beauty / revulsion; comfort / discomfort, homeliness / alienation: the swelling is like a symptom of something wrong.”^{xvii} The disconcerting side of the balance often struck by Saunders is more heavily weighted in *Woodland Trust*. (See Figure 15.) As with the other works, a traditional, perhaps antique chair is recognizable right away, but the viewer's sense of familiarity with the furniture item is quickly eclipsed by the distortions Saunders has made to the familiar form. A taxadermied deer head also refers to an old-fashioned home - this might be hung above the mantel in a traditional den - but is displaced, disturbingly, to the inside chair-back. A seeming crippling of the chair leaves it tipped into a “pool” of carpeting. Familiarity is in question when viewing all of these works. Saunder's viewer will both identify with the object and associate it with a sense of the past, but must reconsider the function of the piece on acknowledging its strange, distorted, and broken qualities.

Those sets of “opposites” listed above in description of Saunder's work are also relevant to my own sculpture. I create a picture of a nostalgically remembered sort of home by depicting the kinds of objects that would appear in a traditional household like that of my grandmother. I create visual opposition to the familiarity of these objects by negating their usual function, distorting their proportions, and rearranging their components. One of the four chair-like forms in this body of work is precariously

balanced and slightly undersized, so that it is clear to a viewer that sitting in it would tip it over. (See Figure 2.) The seat of another “armchair” form protrudes past its stand, while the leg that would support the front end is disconnected from the rest of the form, so that normal use would tip it forward. In the cases of the other two chair forms, the overall shape and size seem normal, but the would-be comfortable upholstered surfaces of the seat and chair back prevent comfortable sitting. The back of one of these items (Figure 5) is adorned with golden bird forms (references to the Bluebird of Happiness figurine) that take the place of upholstery buttons, but would uncomfortably poke the back of a person who tried to sit in the chair. The other of these chairs (Figure 10) has a bread seat “cushion” and bread rolls in place of the upholstery buttons and tacks, so that sitting in the chair, in addition to being uncomfortable, would destroy much of the form. The “chairs,” then, are useless given the traditional sense of the function of a chair. The arrangement of their parts prevents their use, and the combination of their nostalgic look with their non-functionality shows the futility in looking to nostalgic memory or an idealized past for real comfort or instruction.

This distortion or rearrangement of components serves also to negate the functions of rug, lamp, and dish forms within this body of work. The material of a rug, which should be flat against the floor in order to be walked over, rises into mounds and even appears high off the ground on some pieces. Rug-ness may have only two criteria: being constructed of a sturdy material and being flat. The material of my found rug makes it recognizable, and its non-flatness makes it non-functional. (See the bases in Figures 2 and 8.) A floor lamp, whose primary purpose is to light up, is the recognizable referent of several of the tall, floor sculptures in this body of work, though these forms

cannot themselves be lit. Instead, a lamp-like base builds to a small, flat surface on which sits another form. The table-like surfaces of two of these lamp/pedestal forms eclipse the “shade” component that normally houses the light source, and throw that portion of the form into shadow when they are lit from above. (See Figures 16 and 17.) The light is displaced from its normal location under a lampshade to the highlight on the small sculpture atop the lamp/pedestal. Dishes, which serve as the pedestal tops in many of these sculptures, are made non-functional by their precarious inaccessibility, especially where they are stacked in between other components in a tall or spindly form. (See Figure 18.)

Throughout this exhibit, the sculptures and their parts refer to household fixtures or traditional forms, but do not serve a traditional domestic purpose. For each of these types of forms – chairs, lamps, rugs, dishes, and even food – I have displaced or replaced components, rearranged the physical hierarchy of parts, and removed or altered the qualities that give the form its usual function.

While, I, like Nina Saunders, use era-specific, traditional furniture forms to symbolize tradition itself, the use of bread in this body of work is its strongest allusion to tradition. (See Figures 10 and 19.) The process by which bread is made is a set of passed-down instructions that a viewer understands. The bread exists because those instructions were followed; the viewer can assume that, in essence, a traditional process yielded the bread. The finished loaf of bread houses the tradition that produced it. These particular loaves, because of their irregular forms, can also be assumed to be homemade. The in-home process, along an idea of the old-fashioned lifestyle that included frequent, from-scratch bread making, are reminders that bread belongs in the home and is strongly

associated with its comforts. Where the furniture forms in the exhibit achieve scrutiny of tradition through their non-functionality and precariousness, the bread components do so by being distorted and displaced versions of traditional loaves. The fragile bread forms are interspersed with metal, wood, glass, and cloth to become parts of decorative items and sconces that seem to belong in a living room or den. They are not served, as usual, but are oddly displayed. (See Figure 20.)

In the body of work shown here, the past, the familiar, the remembered, and the object of nostalgia are represented by components with a particular set of physical qualities. These components refer to a past era by seeming to be antiques, by implying a traditional method of construction, and/or by adhering to a color scheme recognizable as having been popular before. They also refer to the home - the site of the perceived, lost comfort - by being recognized at first as items that belong in a traditional, domestic setting. These components are the means for my viewer to identify with the objects initially and to be reminded of a notion of home and comfort. My distortions of the familiar components in these sculptures, as in the work of Topolski and Saunders, leads the viewer to an awareness of the absence of any actual comforting quality, and thus a recognition of the futility of longing for the familiar but inaccessible nostalgic ideal.

PERSISTENCE AND IMPORTANCE

Even for a person who recognizes all of its problems and points of dishonesty, nostalgia can be an annoyingly persistent impulse. Though it seems clear that originality and honest exploration lead to a true formation of the adult identity, that one commits to this type of honesty does not mean that the pull toward home will diminish or retreat. Part of the complexity of life experience is that such opposing desires - exploration versus comfort, action versus stagnancy, intellectual honesty versus sentimentality and idealism - coexist in the mind. My sculptures and their component parts work together to depict the concurrency of my opposing drives - the creative effort and the nostalgic impulse - and to represent a phenomenon experienced by many people of my generation. Nostalgia is widespread and is at its most attractive when an individual (or generation) lacks direction. I encourage recognition of the downfalls and problematic nature of nostalgia, while admitting its existence as a part of the experience of individuality and adulthood.

Though the problems of nostalgia have been categorized above and portions of the body of work discussed here deal with different aspects of both the experience of nostalgia and the recognition of its failures, every piece contributes to a gallery environment in which the viewer can reflect on familiarity, absence, memory, and honesty. I have limited my use of both color and found objects in order to create the overall appearance of a certain décor, to create unity in the gallery, and to more strongly refer to one type of home (one that is traditional and comforting but imaginary). My own very early memories have been the initial source for my palette; I can remember being, as

a young child, in the home of my grandmother and feeling comfort and security. I cannot completely remember the place, but certain objects stand out in my memory: the wood finish of the furniture legs, the amber-glass knick-knacks, the green, braided rugs, the upholstery arm-protectors on the armchairs. I treat this sort of memory as a symbolic source for the objects of nostalgic longing. I find objects and use colors and surfaces like those I remember, but it is my assembly of these things that carries my critique of nostalgia. The familiar components are estranged from their referent place and purpose. The symbolic visual combination of familiar, recollected parts and a strange, precariously assembled whole is the common characteristic throughout the exhibit.

I believe that my viewer will identify with these objects, in the way that one can identify with a dining room table, just like Grandma's, seen in an antique mall. This initial identification spurs a quick, nostalgic impulse, as the viewer tries to remember the referent of the familiar thing, and then experiences a sense of the absence of that (referent) object or place. The nostalgic sentiment is then eclipsed by the strangeness and newness of the present sculptures. The removal from the realm of objects that might actually have been owned, inherited, or experienced is the signal for the viewer to consider the role of reality with respect to nostalgic remembering. Put another way, the viewer should recognize the *unreality* of the remembered ideal, and arrive at recognition of the dishonesty and futility of nostalgia. Ultimately, I want to cause a sense of dissatisfaction with the nostalgic experience, tempered with an understanding of its compulsory nature.

Nostalgia is extensive through contemporary American society. That it is common, coupled with the fact that it pervades our national history, means that most

Americans are comfortable with it – they accept it as a practice and lifestyle. My viewers’ awareness of the pitfalls of nostalgia, even though the impulse is persistent, might mean that they decide to forge through an investigation of their potential actions despite the inclination to fall back onto what is familiar. A thorough evaluation of one’s options leads to more honest decision-making, and may actually mean that an individual actively builds community or defines “good family relationship” rather than trying to call up a bygone, connecting tradition, or that one develops a personal notion of what is good, rather than relying on the assumed good of the past. When we carefully consider what it is for which we really long - connection, community, identity - we can set out to honestly achieve those things, rather than pretend we already have them and continue to be unfulfilled. When we cease to accept pre-existing ideals, we can take responsibility for our own fulfillment.

Importantly, consideration of the nostalgic experience as a widespread symptom of lack of connection and direction can lead an individual to a realization that he is not alone in his isolation and indecision. Rejection of traditions and of idealist notions of home are steps to self-creation, but that process can be lonely. The knowledge that others experience the same can make it a little less so. Though we may currently lack the direction and connection that we, nostalgically, imagine to have existed in the past, our common ground now is the individual quest for identity, and that may be the closest we have to an American sense of culture.

ⁱ Dell Upton, *Space: Parish Churches, Courthouses, and Dwellings in Colonial Virginia*, From Eggener, K., ed. *American Architectural History: A Contemporary Reader* [New York: Routledge, 2004], 73-92.

ⁱⁱ John Michael Vlach, "The Plantation Landscape," From Eggener, ed. *American Architectural History: A Contemporary Reader*, 97.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leland Roth, *American Architecture: A History* [Boulder: Westview Press, 2001], 108-109.

^{iv} Roth, *American Architecture: A History*, 243-248.

^v Roderick Kiracofe, *The American Quilt: A History of Cloth and Comfort 1750-1950* [New York: Clarkson Potter, 1993].

^{vi} Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958].

^{vii} This is not to say that the person will not "identify" with other people or with aspects of his own past, but rather that intentional formation of the self, aside from childhood securities of thought, does not take place (or happens to a much lesser extent) when the individual person chooses comfort over development.

^{viii} www.taylorglasgow.com/about

^{ix} Though the word "imagination" is often used to refer to the mental capacity for creating images, it can also describe the image created in the mind. See usage in Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001].

^x Allen Topolski, "Extended Statement," Rochester University, www.courses.rochester.edu/topolski [accessed January 10, 2008].

^{xi} Topolski, "Extended Statement."

^{xii} Topolski, "Extended Statement."

^{xiii} I use "contact with" to mean "actual experience of" or "true sense of," as opposed to the vague sort of "connection" to the past that one might claim to gain by remembering.

^{xiv} There exists a notion that a group of people can be bound to each other through the common experience of hardship. It is very difficult to say whether this notion has merit, at least for a person who has never experienced adversity along with a cohesive group.

^{xv} S. Quay, "Homesickness in Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World*," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* [Vol.18, 1999], 39-58.

^{xvi} In either case – whether an actual event is remembered or a better past is envisioned – it is not important to the formation of nostalgic longing that the event may have not actually occurred, or the era may not have existed as it is ideally imagined. For an object to be a nostalgic object, it must simply be associated with a notion of a better time or place that is now absent.

^{xvii} Penina Barnett, "Materiality, subjectivity and objection in the work of Chohreh Feyzadjon, Nina Saunders, and Cathy de Monchaux," in *N. Paradoxa* [Issue 9, January 1999].



Figure 1
Bluebirds of Happiness
Susan Taylor Glasgow



Figure 2
Home-Made Home #6



Figure 3
Detail, *Home-Made Home* #6



Figure 4
Home-Made Home #19



Figure 5
Home-Made Home #23



Figure 6
Houseware
Allen C. Topolski



Figure 7
Leezure-Life
Allen C. Topolski



Figure 8
Home-Made Home #21



Figure 9
Home-Made Home #5



Figure 10
Home-Made Home #3



Figure 11
Home-Made Home #8



Figure 12
Detail, *Home-Made Home #8*



Figure 13
Confession
Nina Saunders



Figure 14
Pure Thought IV
Nina Saunders



Figure 15
Woodland Trust
Nina Saunders



Figure 16
Home-Made Home #1



Figure 17
Home-Made Home #9



Figure 18
Home-Made Home #4



Figure 19
Home-Made Home #25



Figure 20
Detail, *Home-Made Home #13*

Gallery Views of Sculptures

April 7-31, 2008



















A NOD TO OTHER MOVEMENTS

Though an historical look at the past will be better informed by reliable sources than personal remembering, the two processes may share the tendency to boil down an era (or movement) into a few simplified and supposedly representational qualities. In talk about movements in art history, this condensation allows description of a clean transition between eras and practices, but often at the expense of a thorough discussion of the more complex historical theories of art.

Dada and Surrealism are especially susceptible to this simplification, perhaps because of the numerous and sometimes conflicting manifestoes written by their original practitioners in explanation of their theories. Both movements involve claims that extend beyond the art world and into the realms of politics, psychology, and language. These notions are not easily summed up. Though I do not wish to attempt to condense the theories or practices of either Dadaism or Surrealism here, I neither wish to fully explain them. Rather, I will limit the scope of my description of these two related historical movements to two very narrow main topics, which, in a general sense, inform my own sculpture and are thus relevant to the topics of this paper: 1) The notion that a work of art is more importantly an idea than a created object; and 2) The meaning-driven use of the “found object” in fine art.

As Dada took shape in Zurich around 1915 among artists who were wearied of heroic notions of both war and art, Marcel Duchamp, in New York, was simultaneously developing his idea of an “anti-retinal” art, countering the claim that art need only “appeal to the eye.”¹ In a 1917 act that would be called both “anti-art” and “a Dada

manifestation,” Duchamp submitted, as his entry for the New York Society of Independent Artists exhibition, a urinal, which he signed “R.Mutt” and entitled *Fountain*.ⁱⁱ Though *Fountain* was not the first appropriation of a found object as art by Duchamp, his written response to the rejection of his piece by the Society may be his first statement of an important belief: that an *idea*, more than beauty, more than skilled use of craft, and more than any physical characteristic or function of an object, is the essence of a work of art. He wrote that “Mr. Mutt” had chosen the object: “He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object.”ⁱⁱⁱ Though many Dadaists claimed that, by exhibiting appropriated objects, they sought the destruction of art itself,^{iv} the long-lasting effect of their found-objects’ entrance into the gallery-art world was diminishing importance placed on evidence of the artist’s hand in construction of a sculpture. Intellect had been recognized as a tool of the artist – perhaps his most important tool – and its use allowed selection, appropriation, and the assignment of meaning to designate objects of fine art. This prerogative still belongs to the artist, even where the early spirit of Dada is entirely absent. An object found and chosen for exhibition, with meaning either assigned or simply recognized by the artist, is today widely regarded as evidence of artistic skill that is as valid as physical evidence of a mastered craft.

Following the first appearances of found objects in the gallery, objects began to be selected, not only to show that an artist held the power of selection of art object, but for the ideas already housed in the particular objects – for the implication made to a viewer by an object with which the viewer would have some previous experience. Of

this more meaning-driven appropriation, Meret Oppenheim's *Object (Le Dejeuner en Fourrure)* (1936) is an early example.^v The implicit sexuality, revulsion, and absurdity characteristic of much surrealist work is possible because of the implications already held by the found components of the piece - the teacup, spoon and saucer, and the fur with which they are covered. Because Oppenheim could assume something of her viewers' experience of the found components, she was able to combine them to intentionally evoke the feeling of revulsion and the sense of sexuality that would come with raising a furry cup or spoon to one's lips. It is also important that in combining her found teacup, spoon and saucer with another component, she rendered them non-functional, at least in their traditional sense. Like Duchamp's "ready-mades," objects whose everyday function is negated or counteracted as they are displayed cease to function in their old roles and assume new meaning as elements of commentary. Often, in the work of Oppenheim and in much contemporary artwork, this new role of the found object is to comment on its traditional, former role and the viewer's associations with it.

As a sculptor, I rely rather heavily on both the intentional choice of found objects and the meaning that those objects will have for my viewers. Because my predecessors staked out the right of the artist to appropriate and assemble existing objects, I can, without much controversy, utilize items that will be recognizable and meaningful to my viewers, rather than recreate them and lose some of their nostalgic power. My ability to predict viewers' reactions to my found objects allows me to combine, alter, and reconstruct them to control their meaning and communicate a specific idea.

Though the more radical and political sentiments of Dada and Surrealism are quite absent from my own work and ideas, I am indebted to the men and women who first

saw the need to redefine the artist's prerogative and to shift the focus of art viewers from form and craft alone to idea. I can say honestly that I choose the materials and forms that I feel are the very most appropriate to the concept within my artwork. That my set of potential materials extends beyond the traditional paint and bronze is quite important to that effort, and is due, at least in part, to the advances in thinking about art that took place during the Dadaist and Surrealist movements.

ⁱ David Hopkins, *Dada and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004]: 2-8.

ⁱⁱ Hopkins, *Dada and Surrealism*, 10.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kenneth Coutts-Smith, *Dada* [Studio Vista, 1970]: 71.

^{iv} C.W.E. Bigsby, *Dada and Surrealism* [Methuen Young Books, 1972]: 33-34.

^v Washington University, St. Louis, www.madsci.org/oppenheim [accessed March 3, 2008].

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VITA

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