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# **Casting a Glance**

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degree of

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## **Abstract**

Due to their constant presence and habitual use, domestic objects are usually overlooked. We simply do not notice the things with which we are most familiar. The act of seeing is also taken for granted, even though it is neither as accurate nor dependable as is commonly believed. Rather than being based solely on perception, our reality is constructed from previous information and memories.

My practice identifies objects that are often invisible within the domestic environment in order to provoke an act of noticing and rediscovery for these hackneyed household items. I utilise a slip casting process to create indexical representations of banal objects. A cast object is a naked rendering of the original, a sanitised imitation, and a foundation from which to explore materials and their inherent properties.

Seductive in its silence, timelessness and fragility, the material qualities of unglazed white porcelain emerge in the firing process. The heat of the kiln transforms the slip cast; overtly recognisable forms are subtlety altered to create unique shapes. These new shapes are reminiscent of, and allude to, objects within the repository of the everyday. While referencing the everyday, the porcelain objects function as a quiescent form, inviting viewers to consider the complex narratives that are embodied within the things in our world.

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## **Introduction**

Over the past decade I observed my children as they encountered their domestic surroundings for the first time. These naïve interactions renewed and enriched the value of our household objects. The red enamel colander, for example, that doubled as a fire-fighter's helmet. This revealed a child's ingenious ability to perceive an object without being restrained by the knowledge of its designated function. Without knowing the specific function of a colander, my child recognised its colour and shape and instead imagined the object as a hero's hat.

Anthropologists acknowledge that the meaning and use of objects is context dependent and differs across time and place. As Brown (2001, p. 143) observed, "however materially stable objects may seem, they are, let us say, different things in different scenes". However, the colander was not a foreign object to me and the events were taking place in a familiar situation; yet I now viewed it differently. This experience led me to wonder about the constraints and preconceptions with which we perceive domestic objects.

These inspirational deviations dwindled as my children matured and the previous functions of these objects were reaffirmed, but a lingering enchantment surrounds these common things; they now possess the ability to summon treasured memories. It is not merely the new associations attached to the colander that intrigue me. Rather, it is that the spontaneous action of a child can reveal an object that was previously invisible. A child's game had altered my gaze and redefined my relationships with mundane possessions, leading me to question whether we are aware of the meaning imbued within the inanimate and ubiquitous objects that are present in our domestic milieu.

We may not even notice that an object exists; through habitual usage and continued presence familiar objects are taken for granted. This nonchalance towards domestic objects is common. It seems we have a modus operandi in which, paradoxically, we do not see the objects with which we are most familiar.

Through my artistic practice I seek to provoke an act of noticing; not of the unusual but of the everyday. My fascination lies within the domestic milieu and the myriad

of material objects that constitute an abode. I seek to invoke a rediscovery of hackneyed household items: to notice the everyday; to take a detached, sideways look at ordinary experience; and to ask what is it that each of us sees if provoked?

## **The act of seeing**

In his philosophy of perception, Merleau-Ponty (2004, p. 7) invites us to “rediscover the world in which we live, yet we are always prone to forget”. In everyday life, we do not notice the role our senses play in organising our experience. To discover and articulate the physical world, we somehow have to take “a detached, ‘sideways’, look at ordinary experience” (Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p. 12). Combining my own experiences with the concepts articulated by Merleau-Ponty, led me to explore the act of seeing and how the mind processes vision.

My interest and understanding paralleled that of Bornstein (2009, p. 209) as described in her account of visual perception which followed “a 17<sup>th</sup> century model: that one’s milieu provides a sensory input, which the brain then processes and reacts to”. It seemed that we had both perceived seeing as a process of our eyes acting like a camera, sending images to the brain through our optic nerves and our brain interpreting and deciphering these images.

Yet only 20 percent of the neural pathways to the primary visual cortex travel from the eyes; the other 80 percent of neural pathways come from other areas of the brain, such as those in charge of memory (Bornstein, 2009, p. 209). The important implication of this physiology for my practice is that “sensory information is not transmitted to the brain, it comes from it” (Bornstein, 2009, p. 209).

This discovery elucidates how our brain processes and interprets the over-abundance of information received from the senses. It seems that “the brain relies on the fact that there are certain qualities to the world that are constant and unchanging, filtering a glut of incoming information and eliminating detail in favour of basing perception on memories of what it already knows”(Bornstein, 2009, p. 209).

We construct an idea of reality based on previous information and memories. But if reality is 80 percent memory, what we see will be idiosyncratic. Our brain will interpret what we see based on our past experiences and understandings. Many of these experiences and understandings will be shared because of cultural and societal constructs and external factors such as marketing. But because we are all unique, our experiences and understandings differ, and we must therefore all see the same object differently.

Intriguingly, if what we see relies on memories, then what we each see is potentially unreliable. Marcel Proust spent a lifetime ruminating on his past. He insisted that “the remembrance of things past is not necessarily the remembrance of things as they were” (Lehrer, 2007, p. 95). Memory is fallible; a memory is only as real as the last time you remembered it and is slightly transformed each time that you recall it. Proust knew “the past is never past ... as long as we are alive, our memories remain wonderfully volatile” (Lehrer, 2007, p. 95).

A visual reality is therefore to be treated with a degree of scepticism as our mind creates its own unique image of a physical object; that unique image is influenced by own life experiences and expectations. Where we live, our home, forms a large part of our life experience and hence influences our idiosyncratic images of physical objects.

## **The domestic milieu**

We furnish our homes with objects that serve our living needs, such as a bed, table and chairs, cooking equipment and utensils. In the past, functional needs dominated our relationships with objects; the ability to create one’s identity through decorative surroundings was a privilege reserved for an affluent few. To illustrate our change in relative affluence, Bingham (2010, p. xiv) records the will of a 17th century English widow who was not unusually poor for the time. The document bequeathed her few possessions to different family members: a stool to one; some farming implements to another; a ‘cooking pot with broken lid’ to a

third; and so on (Bingham, 2010, p. x). Though the widower had almost nothing to leave, she nevertheless cared about the little she had. Back then, stuff mattered.

In contemporary society, aesthetic desire increasingly determines the material objects we acquire and retain. As individuals, our relative wealth compared to earlier generations provides us with the opportunity to enlist objects in revealing or deceiving how we wish to appear towards others. As a result, our homes provide an environment that supports complex relationships between humans and objects; it is an environment “in which persons and things exist in mutual self construction and ... mutual dependency” (Pinney, 2005 p. 256).

Within this complex environment, some stuff may still ‘matter’ to us. By exploring the labyrinth of emotional relationships between people and inanimate objects it is possible to uncover poignant stories. In these tales, the objects with which we surround ourselves can have a life of their own and may contribute to who we are.

Our abode can act as our signature or how we define ourselves. Merleau-Ponty observes, “people’s tastes, character, and the attitude they adopt to the world and to particular things can be deciphered from the objects with which they choose to surround themselves” (Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p. 63). For some, the opportunity to design our appearance becomes a responsibility. Boris Groys believes that “every citizen has to take an aesthetic responsibility for his or her self-design”. He proposes that “self-design has taken over the function of religion”; self-design has become “a creed” (Boris, 2009).

My interest lies not with the pieces and objects we have carefully chosen to form our habitat and which would come readily to mind when we think of our home; my interest is in the more mundane and overlooked household items. We can of course become emotionally attached even to ordinary objects. Intimacy is a universal human desire. We are destined to pursue close personal and physical relationships with other people and things.

Sometimes we become attached to ordinary things not because of the inherent attributes of the objects, but for the associations the object has with other aspects of our lives. We may treasure a mundane object through, say, nostalgia. The red

colander that doubled as a firefighter's helmet, possessed for me the ability to summon treasured memories. In cases like this, the artefact may be viewed as an empty space, of interest only because of the "meanings" that invest it with significance. To borrow Bruno Latour's phrase, "the inner properties of objects do not count, that they are mere receptacles for human categories" (Pinney, 2005 p. 257).

Whether it is an object we have specifically chosen for our abode, or because of the meanings we associate with the object, the relationships we form with material possessions that are significant to us create idiosyncratic narratives, and "we ask them to be our witnesses and accomplices" (Busch, 2005, p. 21):

*"many things conspired to tell me the whole story.*

*Not only did they touch me,*

*Or my hand touched them:*

*They were so close that they were part of my being,*

*They were so alive with me that they lived half my life*

*And will die half my death".*

From "ode to things," Pablo Neruda

My interest though is not in those objects that are significant to us. The spontaneous actions of a child and a colander triggered my interest in objects which surround us but which we do not "see". Miller (2005, p. 5) terms the "capacity of objects to fade out of focus and remain peripheral to our vision and yet be determinant of our behaviour and identity" as the "humility of things". Miller's surprising conclusion is that objects are often important, not because they are evident and provide physical constraints or assist us in our tasks, but because we do not "see" them. The less we are aware of an object, the more powerfully it can determine our expectations. If we are unaware of objects, they can "set the scene" and ensure normative behaviour, without being challenged.

## Invisible objects

The idea that marvels can hide from us in plain sight was the theme of *The Hidden Heroes: The Genius of Everyday Things*, a recent exhibition at the Vitra Design Museum in Germany. Curator Jochen Esenbrand explained that the museum devoted attention to such everyday things because industrial products employ the ideals of modernism still relevant today: an economy of materials, functionality and longevity (Esenbrand, 2010).

The humble, practical and pervasive lightbulb featured in the exhibition. Thomas Edison is attributed with inventing the incandescent lightbulb in 1879 and thus with establishing the foundation of our lighting system. Though it is inefficient as a source of light, since only 15 percent of the electricity it consumes is used to create light and the rest disappears as heat, energy efficient alternatives have not matched the warm, soulful light that makes the incandescent bulb so special (Rawsthorn, 2010, p. 13).

If asked to describe the objects that surround us, it is unlikely we would mention lightbulbs, paperclips, wire coat hangers, cork screws, or the other everyday items that “epitomize genius in the everyday” since they are things that hide in plain sight.



Figure 1. Rawsthorn, **These items epitomize genius in the everyday**, *The Global Edition of the New York Times*, August 16, 2010, p. 13

## Process

### The shelf

The shelf is an archetypical structure found in cultures and societies worldwide. It is so commonplace that we do not typically *see* a shelf; it does not enter our consciousness and is invisible other than for its function.

Since prehistoric times, people have made things in response to needs. Designer Enzo Mari (2009, p. 99) notes that “the more basic the need the simpler the form of the object. A basic form is what emerges when any possible alternative to it has been discarded as redundant; there is always an underlying tendency towards universality. An impersonal object will communicate the rules of its essence and

the principles of its repeatability". The form of a shelf is mostly an expression of the relationship between a flat surface and its mode of attachment to the wall.

For my initial artistic exploration of domestic milieu, I favoured the shelf as it possessed an anonymity that is often associated with universality. This universality diminishes the shelf's ethnographic associations. I chose a shelf that was simple in form; a wooden plank with limited shaping.

My first representation of the shelf was a photogram. The photogram enabled a sympathetic rendering of the shelf. I was lured to the photogram because of its ability to create a direct representation of an object. As shown in **Photogram of the shelf** (fig. 2), the visual depiction produced by the photogram is an index of the referent shelf. The shelf cast a shadow leaving a ghostly trace.

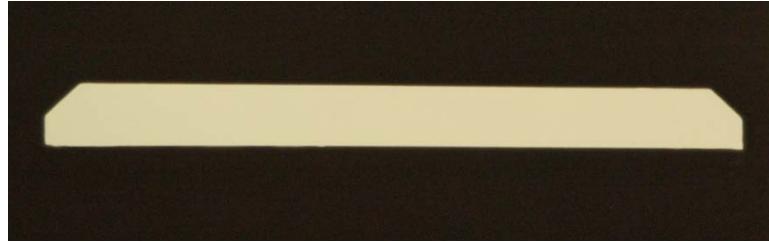


Figure 2. Jocelyn Mills, **Photogram of the shelf**, 2010

## Form

In the ghostly trace captured by the photogram remains an identifying 'form' of the shelf, without which it would not be the kind of thing it is. This identifying form is reminiscent of the shadows in Plato's cave allegory. Plato argued that the world we experience through the senses is a pale imitation of the world of ideas and ideal forms, which we can only experience through our minds. As a result, "for Plato, art that aims at recreating visual reality can never produce anything more than an imitation of an imitation" (Heartney, 2008, p. 96).

Aristotle made a distinction between form as organisation and structure, and matter, as that which is possessed of qualities without having form. Russell (1961,

pp.177-178) succinctly summarised Aristotle's position as "we may start with a marble statue; here marble is the matter, while the shape conferred by the sculptor is the form". However, he goes on to emphasise that "form" does not mean *shape* in a reductive literal sense, but in the sense of a defining border and delimited identity. To Aristotle, form is "more real than matter"; a form can exist, as per Plato's notion of idea, outside of matter (Russell, 1961, p.179).

The connection between form and matter was taken up as one of the main considerations for American minimalism of the 1960s. By simplifying form and using non-referential material, minimalist sculptors like Robert Morris (1966, p. 226) sought to maximise the resistance to perceptual separation; one sees and immediately believes that the pattern within one's mind corresponds to the existential fact of the object. Morris (1966, p. 226) deduced that for simpler shapes, "one need not move around the object for the sense of the whole, the gestalt, to occur". For Morris, unitary forms "create strong gestalt sensations"; that is, they allow an experience of the whole. Unitary form does not reduce relationships, rather it magnifies "the most important sculptural value - shape" (Morris, 1966, p. 228).

Echoing Bornstein, Morris attributes this aspect of apprehension to "perceptual theories of 'constancy of shape', 'tendencies toward simplicity', kinesthetic clues, memory traces, and physiological factors regarding the nature of binocular parallax vision and the structure of the retina and brain".

These concepts informed my interest in simple shapes, constructed in materials that we would generally expect, and that are so familiar that we ignore them. Perhaps, as Morris (1966, p. 226) cites Goethe, "what comes into appearance must segregate to appear".

I explored form by casting the unitary form of a shelf, before moving to more complex and irregular shapes, and used casting to create an indexical representation of selected objects. The process of casting "converts an object into a spatially distinct analogue of itself" (Lawrence, 2008, p. 8). The index created is a naked rendering of the original; a sanitised imitation.

Casting is analogous to aspects of palaeontology, “fossils are nature’s form of casting”; they are “a natural copy” (Krauss, 1997, p. 216). Artists Robert Smithson and Allan McCollum, were fascinated by the production of dinosaur tracks as a natural cast. They refer to the “specificity of these casts as evidence, their testimony to the passage at a particular time and place of the movement of a now vanished animal” (Krauss, 1997, pg 218).

Casting evidence of a particular time and place is not limited to our past. Casting is the sculptural practice that enables the form of the object to be recreated with a true likeness. By casting architectural and household objects I entice the audience to partake in an act of noticing the present, reinforcing that sculptures are after all “distillations of life” (Gross, 2004, p.35). As Gross (2004, p. 35) reviews Rachel Whiteread’s sculptures, “it is the present moment she enlivens for the viewer”.

With the current pervasiveness of computer-driven machinery and technologically advanced materials, exact and flawless forms can be readily produced. I chose to persevere with the laborious and imprecise mode of casting using materials that could be moulded and cast at home. My approach contrasts with the industrial production aesthetic pertinent to minimalists like Donald Judd who specified the materials used should not represent, signify, or allude to anything. These industrial production processes produced repetitive identical units to attain a “wholeness” that was, at the time, new and revolutionary (Fried, 1986, p. 320). Now, the only limit to producing perfect forms - using evolutionary materials - is expenditure.

## Colour

I cast a series of transparent coloured resin shelves (fig. 3). Like brightly coloured “eye candy”, the vibrancy of the hues was desirably delectable, albeit momentary and fleeting.



Figure 3. Jocelyn Mills, **Resin Shelves**, 2010

Colour is intrinsic to all matter. The enchanting tale of *Mr Rabbit and the Lovely Present* (Zolotow, 1962, p.6) succinctly describes the power of colour which is never alone in its associations, such as in this extract where Mr. Rabbit helps a little girl find a birthday present for her mother.

“She likes red,” said the little girl.

“Red,” said Mr. Rabbit. “You can’t give her red.”

“Something red, maybe,” said the little girl.

“Oh, something red,” said Mr. Rabbit.

This story encouraged me to indulge in colour. In the narrative, the girl sees colour before she sees any other attribute of the object; for her, colour is foremost in conveying meaning.

Yet Mr. Rabbit reminds us that qualities must be embodied in a particular something and because of this, a quality cannot manifest without inescapably binding to other qualities. As Kean (2005, p. 189) observes, “since all objects have qualities, any given object potentially resembles something else. This means any

object can suggest possible future uses or interpretations". Because qualities bind with other qualities in material objects, material things inherit a social and historical character.

Mr. Rabbit and the little girl decide that the girl's mother would like a present in each of her favourite colours but they soon discover some things make better gifts than others. The resulting gift is a beautiful basket of fruit.

Interestingly, a banana is included in the basket to represent yellow. Presumably the banana is a considered choice due to the sour properties associated with lemon. Sartre writes in *Being and Nothingness* (1956, p. 609) that each attribute "reveals the being" of the object: the lemon is extended throughout its qualities, and each of its qualities is extended throughout each of the others. It is the sourness of the lemon which is yellow, it is the yellow of the lemon which is sour" (Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p. 63).

In my resin shelves, colour accentuated an artificiality that declared these shelves man-made. The shelves drew attention to the way in which colour can be an additive and, in this situation, to its potential to enhance the synthetic nature of the material.

## **Slip cast porcelain**

Morris objected to the use of colour that emphasises the optical because in doing so it subverts the physical. He preferred more neutral hues, which do not call attention to themselves, and which in his view, "allow for the maximum focus on those essential physical decisions that inform sculptural works"(Morris, 1966, p. 225).

Subsequently, I adopted an alternative method of casting in which colour was not additive or artificial and the material appeared as it was, resplendent in its own historicity. Recreating objects by slip casting them in porcelain emphasised shape through the simplification of material.

Using slip casting, I made a choice based in the ideas of John Ruskin and the Arts and Crafts Movement; the notion of “truth to materials” and the concept of “exposed construction” (Fariello, 2004, p.15). Consistent with these concepts, I did not glaze or polish the porcelain and the surfaces of my pieces reflect the process of vitrification or melting of clay. The mould marks and pour holes remain as witnesses to the method of construction.

## **Alchemy**

Slip casting is a method of mechanical reproduction dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is a scientific technique reliant on the innate qualities of the materials used within the process. Using clay, a material that is at once malleable and permanent, the process of transformation has connotations of alchemy. Alchemical experiments arose from an obsession with precious materials and were created as an attempt to turn base metals into gold.

After Marco Polo returned from a trip to the East with a porcelain pot in hand, European aristocracy began amassing collections of the mysterious material. At first it was thought that porcelain was not related to any other ceramic material. Its translucency and vitreous surface was so glass-like that it did not appear to be a form of clay. The Europeans initially called it “china” in reference to its point of origin and it became known as *porcella*, a type of glossy white cowry shell, which was believed to be its main ingredient. For more than four centuries, European craftsman competed for the secret to *arcaneum* (the alchemical recipe to produce porcelain); though they would not succeed until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Porcelain was precious and guarded as carefully as gold (Fariello, 2004, p. 10).

## **The casting process**

Slip casting requires a plaster-of-paris mould. As I was learning how to cast objects in this way, my initial casts were simple two part moulds, but near

completion of this project they became more complex. For example, the stool was made from a five-part mould.

The porcelain slip, being a suspension of clay in water, is poured into the plaster-of-paris mould. The microcellular qualities of the dry porous mould creates a capillary action which removes a high proportion of the water from the porcelain slip resulting in a layer, or skin, of clay being built up on the inner surface of the mould. This layer remains when the surplus slip is emptied. The thickness of this layer, skin or cast is determined by the length of time the slip remains in the mould.

The thin clay object is left to dry and then fired in a kiln at temperatures up to 1,300 degrees Celsius. The clay melts in this firing process. Vitrification is among the oldest of human transmutations, with the earliest known ceramic objects—the Gravettian figurines—dating from 29,000–25,000 BC. As clay is fired to maturity, the spaces between refractory particles are completely filled with glass, fusing the particles together and forming a new material, porcelain, which is impervious to water.

In contrast with 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, clay is often disregarded as a material now since it comes from a basic natural resource, dirt, and is associated with craft. Porcelain is less stigmatized with the associations made to craft and pottery. The slip casting process is unusual within the world of potters, as the vessels produced are not directly fashioned by the hand. Potters seek to make unique objects, and not the potential for mass-production.

## **Facades**

### **Porcelain shelves**

My initial work comprised shelves in various porcelain reincarnations: cornered with a bevel; a short shelf with a simple bevel; a shorter shelf; and a colonial bracket.

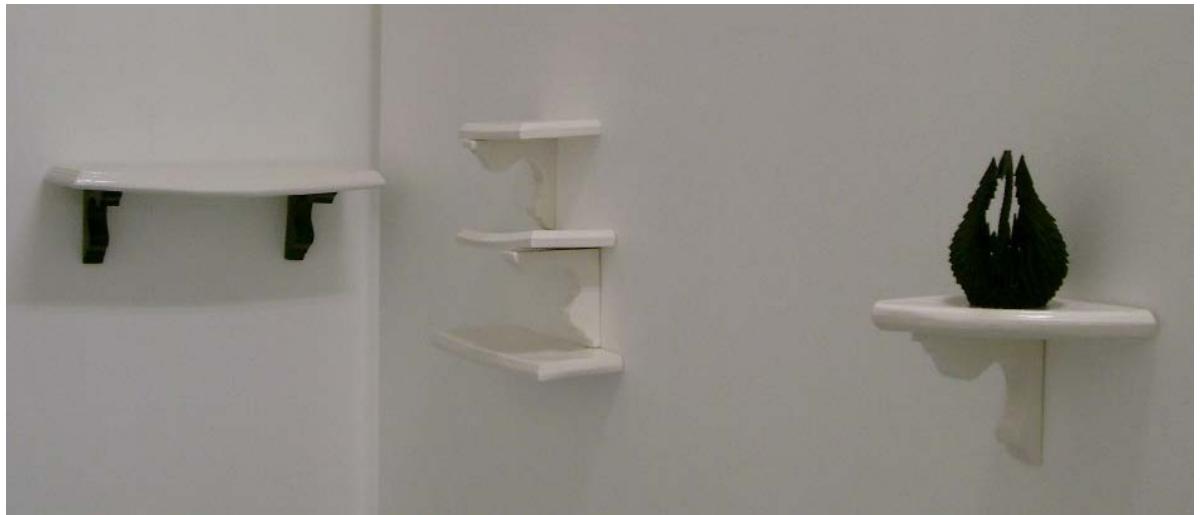


Figure 4. Jocelyn Mills, **Facades to Impress**, 2010

The porcelain shelf is an indexical representation of the original shelf: it is indirect as it is once removed from the original object thus reducing the taint of the past. Expunged of physical residue, the porcelain slip casting of ‘a plank with limited shaping’ remains. The initial impression is of a quiescent form. This fleeting impression is soon contaminated by the piece’s prominent defining characteristic: the bevel.

The wood grain of the original shelf camouflages the usually inconspicuous feature of the bevel. Once the natural wood grain was replaced with the muted surface pattern of porcelain, the ornamental bevel became the feature. This is synonymous with Adolf Loos’ conceptual framework, in which artificial “ornament is a catalyst for the deterioration of an object; it robs the object of its purity” (Miller & Ward, 2002, p. 19). The ornamentation derived from the material itself, the wood grain, is functional as it is part of the material structure. The porcelain shelf’s purity discloses the conflation of wood and ornamental detailing in interior architecture.

Loos’ seminal essay, ‘Ornament and Crime’, written in 1908, ardently “railed against bourgeois excess in design” (Miller & Ward, 2002, p. 19). He formulated

the flowing principle: *The form of an object should last, that is, we should find it tolerable as long as the object itself lasts*" (Loos, 1998, p. 172). From this perspective, decoration is a form of abuse that shortens an object's lifespan through the demise of the style in which it was decorated. Every epoch has its own style.

This collection of incongruous decorative styles and modes of attachment questions the authenticity of these shelves as everyday domestic objects. As described by Loos, they are mere facades to impress; objects stripped of their functionality since a porcelain shelf can bare no weight. A ubiquitous object, that may as well be invisible but for its function, was now without function and the feature of a display.

The porcelain shelves and other objects I would produce, are vacuous in two senses: they are in fact hollow, empty with the exception of air, and they are also now purposeless except as decoration. They are a skin of the original. While my pieces are vacuous, they are not indexical negatives. They are the external skin of the original. By contrast Bruce Nauman's cast is an example of the negative space under the chair. A cast of negative space is an ambiguous object: without prior knowledge or labeling of this cast of interstitial space one has no idea what it is, even what general species of object to which it might belong. Therefore while my objects are vacuous, they do not begin as "a thing is a hole in a thing it is not" (Townsend, 2005, p.14).

## Diversion to Crown Lynn

I was also cognizant of the semblance these pieces have to Crown Lynn crockery that was ubiquitous in New Zealand households in the mid-20th century. Once the daily dinnerware, Crown Lynn is now a coveted collectable, of which the white swan pattern reigns supreme. Avid collector Rosemary McLeod recounts a classic white swan encounter in its domestic splendor, "it sat in the picture window facing the street, with the white venetians poised above its head, and terylene drapes artfully criss-crossed on either side. Inside its hollow back sailed a bunch of red

plastic roses, fading to fleshy pink in the sun" (Ringer Monk, 2006, p. 56). Crown Lynn wall vases distinctly denote decoration rather than function.

Another well-known New Zealand ceramicist that resonates with my work but for quite other reasons is John Parker. Parker pares down form to a minimum, reducing expression to the essentials of the pot. At times his work is reduced to a "situation where form foils the function" (Mansfield, 2002 pp. 28-29).

Incorporating elements of the Crown Lynn swan, the wall vases tinged with 'kitsch' and the John Parker's austere vessels, I created a quasi wall shelf that is distinctly kitsch but does little to reignite a decorative elegance.



Figure 5. Jocelyn Mills, **Swan wall-shelf**, 2010.

## The shelf bracket

A colonial bracket that supports a shelf is identifiable as belonging to an epoch style. This particular style is synonymous with wooden house design in New Zealand during the early to mid-20th century. Individuals usually source wooden brackets to adhere to this architectural style. Despite his disdain for ornamentation, preserving tradition and respecting the past were important to Adolf Loos (Opel, 1998, p. 4).



Figure 6. Jocelyn Mills, **The porcelain colonial shelf bracket**, 2010

I replicated the colonial wooden shelf bracket, yet cast it in porcelain. Through its mimesis of this now obsolete style, the porcelain bracket creates an ethereality and funereal silence; a silence that is commonly seen in still life painting. The semblance evokes that of a funerary monument, a reflection on our mortality. The curves, size, and porcelain material of the bracket further connote death through their affinity with bone.

## **Whiteness**

White is frequently associated with solace, death and rebirth. Jean-Pierre Raynaud famously tiled the surfaces in his house with the white square ceramic tiles that are typically used for clinical or hygienic environments such as laboratories, bathrooms and hospitals. Daval (1991, p. 33) described the experience of entering into the world of Raynaud as, “there was a white, and there was structure: the white brought its own absolute dimension, but on the other hand the lines gave a structure to this absolute”.

Raynaud found security and equilibrium in monochrome. “The white struck me as possessing all qualities; it was sustained and yet it set was free” (Daval, 1991, p. 33). He created and found what he termed “zero space”, which represented the limits of introspection. “The zero-point is the moment when the individual comes to consciousness, where he can define his plans, choose his way”(Daval, 1991, p. 33). Raynaud’s fascination was with reinventing the real. Raynaud claimed “I take objects on the outside and restore them with the least transformation possible.” Similarly to Raynaud, “I simply try to show their poetic side” (Daval, 2010, p. 1124); in my case, by reinventing the real in slip cast porcelain.

## **Monumental**

### **The toaster and its box**

Toasting bread began as a way in which to prolong the life of bread (Bellis 2010), and a toaster is a common kitchen appliance in New Zealand homes. I purchased the Russell Hobbs Classic Two Slice Toaster and cast the toaster along with the box it was packaged in.



Figure 7. Jocelyn Mills, **The toaster**, 2010



Figure 8. Jocelyn Mills, **The toaster box**, 2010

While the toaster remained relatively true to the original shape when slip cast in porcelain, utilising the cardboard toaster packaging as a cast produced an unexpected result. It bulged when filled with expander foam, creating a more protuberant box.

Casting these objects monumentalised the classic toaster. The pale and stony whiteness solidified this contemporary appliance as an artefact of the present. Monuments can “carve out space for memory. Something is gone, and to mark its absence we put something in the world” (Paton, 2004, p. 84). An association with monumentality is difficult to avoid as porcelain is often associated with fragile and precious forms. However, I am recreating a piece of the present, rather than the past, and not embarking on a nostalgic exploration.

## **Series**

### **The vegemite jar**

A jar of the breakfast spread Vegemite is also a common item found in the kitchen cupboard. When empty, these yellow-topped jars are often reused as storage containers for a variety of things, from homemade jam to screws.



Figure 9. Jocelyn Mills, **An abbreviation**, 2010

In **An abbreviation**, a series of porcelain jars are situated on top of a thin table. The thin wooden structure was constructed to resemble a segment of my kitchen table to set the scene for an exploration into scale.

The series of jars sequentially diminish in scale, with the size of each reduction determined by the natural shrinkage of porcelain during the firing process. The casting followed an evolutionary process, in which each subsequent cast was taken from the previous casting of the fired porcelain object. In this evolutionary process, the original tracings of the jar were gradually lost.

## The B series



Figure 10. Jocelyn Mills, **B recycle series**, 2010

The **B recycle series** also uses diminishing scale formulated in the porcelain slip casting process. The plastic bottle for the initial casting is specific to the ideas of reuse, reduced waste and environmental awareness that are now everyday concepts. The BEE product range is based on the principle of Beauty Engineered for Ever and although this particular plastic bottle is not especially indicative of recycling, the work shows a company that promotes environmental awareness, despite making consumable products.

## Entropy

Removing the shelves from the wall and stacking them, they made a clicking and grinding noise as they each accommodated the weight and shape of the next arrival. This positioning, combined with the materiality of the shelves, resonated with the familiar stacking of dishes.



Figure 11. Jocelyn Mills, **The stacked collection**, 2010

The elongated shelf, precariously positioned at the top of the stack (fig. 11), warped and slumped in the firing process, echoing a transmogrification that a shelf can display through its enduring function. Just as wooden shelves bend over time by the weight of their contents, the porcelain shelf slumped in a way common when firing at high temperatures. This entropic transformation determined by the firing process creates a unique form.

Entropy is defined as “a deconstruction of normative identity through material means. By rendering objects non-useful, the entropic gesture forces attention back onto its ‘mere’ materiality as an object, as a thing, so that it can’t be pulled back into the form of the usual “commodified” (and readily consumable) object”(Drucker, 2005, p. 173). An entropic process is passive, in the sense of being inherently unpredictable or random. For example, the artist does not predetermine the outcome of the transformation.

Unique forms emerge from the kiln; a coincidental beauty occurs in an industrial process with the artist in absentia. There is a poetic quality within the whims of porcelain production, which is executed by the firing process.

Like Eva Hesse, my art is concerned with the material process. Hesse’s primary means of obtaining her artistic goal was an extraordinary sensitivity to the diverse, and often untraditional, materials with which she worked. To understand the properties of porcelain and to explore the boundaries of this material, I introduced catalysts to assist the entropic transformation in the production process. I deliberately cast thin pieces to achieve different levels of translucency and structural strength; I introduced paper of varying mixtures to the slip (paper provided the slip with more resilience in its wet skin stage and the paper burns out when fired leaving the porcelain translucent); and I mixed high-fire with medium-fire slip.

These alchemical deviations to the usual material composition and slip casting process created the potential for different forms to occur when firing. Because I was creating hollow objects without internal armature, I suffered an extremely high attrition rate before and during firing.

There are a number of precedents for this notion of shape being trusted to the whims of the production process. Designers at Droog Design, a Dutch design company, have challenged the paradigm of industrial perfection to design and make functional and unique products. The B Service, by designer Hella Jongerius, is a range of items that are all different because of the chosen firing temperature. Frederick Roije’s lamps all exist in a different state of collapse as the porcelain

shade is cannot withstand the heat in the oven and so they all have a different personality (van Hinte, 2004, pp. 145-147).



Figure 12. Jocelyn Mills, **The lightbulb**, 2010

I slip cast a lamp and lightbulb many times from a single plaster-of-paris mould. The resulting lamps and lightbulbs, as shown in fig. 12, are misshapen in varying degrees. This result opposes that of industrial production in which mass production and uniformity is sought. An ambiguity now grips these porcelain objects: their identity is suspended and they are released from their function.

Sculptor Claes Oldenburg is renowned for reinterpreting everyday objects. One theme in his work is that of soft sculptures. He denaturalised the object by replacing ordinarily hard surfaces with soft materials that created a sense of movement in his work. Oldenburg's work has been criticised by Donald Judd for being grossly anthropomorphic (Brown, 2001, p. 147). However, I have not investigated Oldenburg's work for of his use of scale, which is the grounding for any anthropomorphic criticism. Rather, I am interested in his use of flaccid

structures and under-stuffed soft interiors, as the surface of the object finds its own shape. The object is subject to a limited form of entropic change not dissimilar to the whims of the porcelain firing process. His objects seem *tired*, while mine have *wilted* a little.

### The exercise ball

An exercise ball is not necessarily an everyday household item. Often they can be found deflated and hiding in a wardrobe; evidence of an earlier and perhaps failed commitment to health and exercise. I utilised an exercise ball for the challenge it presented physically, to push the limits of casting such hollow objects in a non-industrial environment, and since it is a shape synonymous with many other objects.



Figure 13. Jocelyn Mills, **The hard ball**, 2010

I was drawn to the inverse association between Oldenburg's **Soft Washstand** (1965) and my own work **The hard ball. Soft Washstand**. **Soft Washstand** has a vinyl splendour and caricature far removed from the porcelain pedestal basin from which I imagine it was modelled. Inversely, the exercise ball I recreated in porcelain is disassociated from its colourful plastic, half-deflated, reality.



Figure 14. Claes Oldenburg, **Soft Washstand**, 1965  
Vinyl, plexiglass, kapok, 55" x 36" x 28"

Porcelain slip casting is the process in which I have chosen to explore the space in which an object transgresses from being overtly recognisable to a subtle and often questioning form. Initially, I was fraught by the lack of ability to control the process, but now I embrace the prospect of unknown outcomes for these sanitised, seductively smooth forms.

## The stool

A stool is a simple place to sit, without a back or arms, which also acts as a platform to provide additional height.



Figure 15. Jocelyn Mills, **The stool**, 2010

The stool I cast is the only object in my work so far that was not sourced from a shop. Constructed from plywood, I designed and made the stool in the Massey University workshop. The form of the stool was similar to the porcelain stool designed by Hella Jongerius (formally of Droog Design) and produced by Rosenthal porcelain manufacturers in a project called **experiments in porcelain** (fig. 16). I designed the stool with curves rather than sharp corners as a curved stool would assist with mould making and casting. It was my desire to recreate this stool by using only one mould (a mould of five parts), so the cast stool would be one form, as opposed to several pieces cast and joined together.

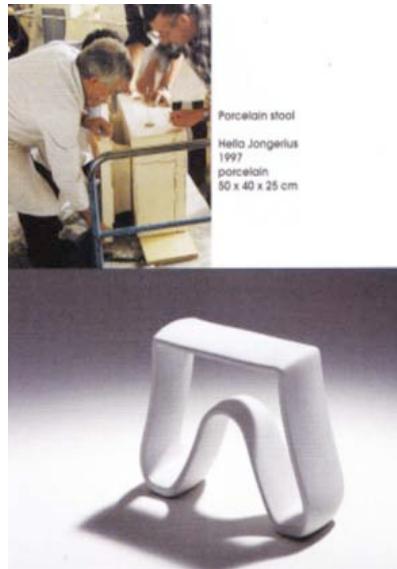


Figure 16. Droog Design, **Experiments in Porcelain**

I reproduced the stool a number of times in porcelain and my initial versions were true to shape, yet the material was fragile with incongruous surface nuances of layered plywood and dowelling construction. There is an elegance and beauty in these tensions.

As an artist that is process-driven, I was interested in the potential of these deviations and the transition from real life to new forms. The alchemic catalysts I employed ensured interesting entropic transformations would occur, only to be discovered when opening the kiln.

Drucker (2004, p. 172) identified the duality of form and matter as a reinterpretation of the Aristotelian distinction, “form is the signifying configuration ...and matter the inherently valuable stuff. Form configures and thus pulls material into a system of meaning”. In my artistic process, form has remained the constant component. For example, I continued to cast the same stool. However, through my alchemic practice the material that is pulled “into a system of meaning” is in, of itself, changed. The material is altered, from clay to glass, and its shape is no longer true to form. The stool series, **Taxonomy of form** (fig. 17), is an order of form in which the stool slips from being recognisable to being less obvious. The stool, a known object, enters the “inscrutability and mysteriousness of the thing” (Wagstaff, 1995, pp. 384-5).



Figure 17. Jocelyn Mills, **Taxonomy of form**, 2010

There is a beauty within the unknown that has occurred through the denaturalisation of the known. **Taxonomy of form** shows the morphing of the porcelain stool as its symmetry is gradually lost. The object succumbs to the forces of gravity within the firing process, skewing it towards a strange surrealism. This skewing could be seen as an awakening of the marvellous.

## In between

Cornelia Parker specialises in destructively transforming everyday objects past recognition and then precariously suspends them in space. She has steamrolled, shot at and exploded different objects, setting them free from their meaning and context. Their remains are suspended “in space - a new, precarious existence: *Suspension* is the English expression for hanging, but alluding at the same time to suspense and uncertainty” (Jahn, 2005, p. 17). I am interested in the theatricality of this aesthetic, as well as the idea of an in-between state, and was inspired to suspend my intact porcelain pieces.

A selection of cast porcelain objects: a toaster and its box, shelves and small containers were hung from the ceiling of a darkened room. The pieces were lit, casting shadows on the walls and floor (fig. 18). This interplay between the shadows and objects was redolent of pre-cinematic theatre. The contrasting silhouettes, white object and shadow, and their vaguely discernable suspension wires were characteristic of marionettes performing. The darkness enabled one to coincide with the objects in space. As viewers moved amongst the pieces their bodies also cast shadows that interfered with those already projected on the wall.

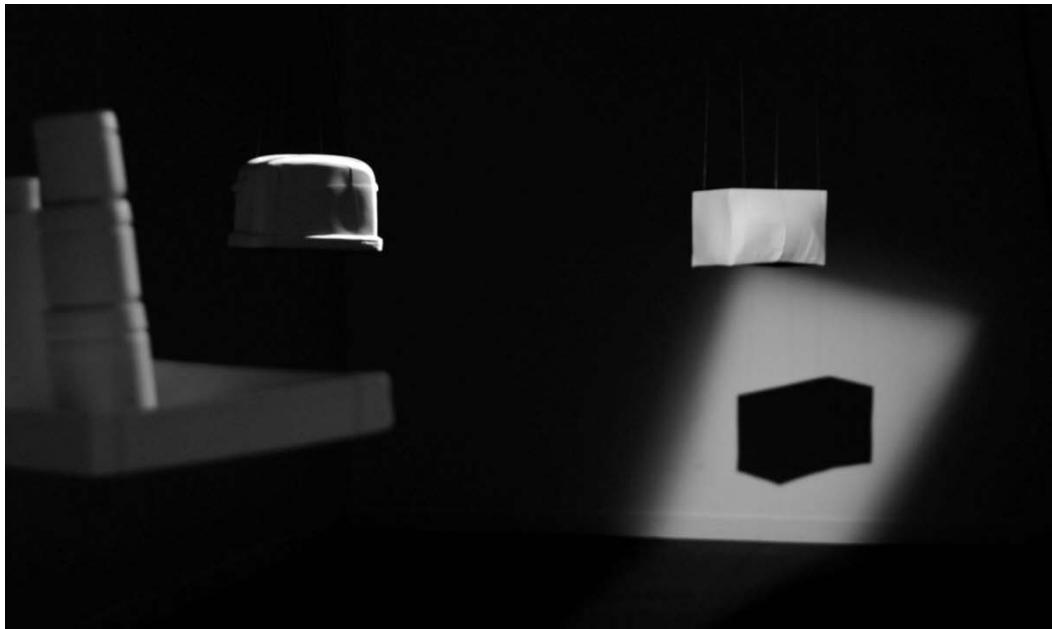


Figure 18. Jocelyn Mills, **An in between**, 2010

The objects were suspended in an in-between space, not on the floor and not on the wall. Being at eye level and obstructing passage through the space, the objects could not be avoided. The installation solicited the viewer's presence by making the objects "a function of space, light and the viewers field of vision"(Bishop, 2005, p. 56). The viewer is aware of existing in the same space with the objects; they are able to engage with the object from differing perspectives and distances. Because numerous objects share the same space, individual objects become less self important, with the exception of the **suspended shelf** (fig. 19) in which the interior became an intimate feature.



Figure 19. Jocelyn Mills, **Suspended shelf**, 2010

The **Suspended shelf** was hung in a manner that when combined with specific illumination revealed a coincidental beauty within a fissure that occurred accidentally during the firing process. As the light shone through this fissure, the now translucent sides made visible an internal arc. The fissure and previously invisible arc are also reminiscent of the body and in this way the shelf is labialised. This bodily characteristic offers a complexity to this piece beyond its minimalist endeavour.

The suspended shelf and serendipitous arc were situated in the corner of a carpeted room and appeared like a piece of furniture, bringing the work full circle. The entropic transformation had taken a piece of furniture (a shelf), stripped it of its original appearance and function, and returned it to a piece that resembles furniture.

## The conductor

**The suspended shelf** (fig. 19) evolved into another work, **The conductor** (fig. 20). With the addition of a frame and illumination, the porcelain shelf became a sculpture that was more like ornamental furniture. **The conductor** was used to throw a diffused light on to the sculpture **An invitation** (fig. 21).



Figure 20. Jocelyn Mills, **The conductor**, 2010

## An invitation



Figure 21. Jocelyn Mills, **An invitation**, 2010

In the process of vitrification, the porcelain shelves in **An invitation** (fig. 21) slumped and fused together. Fissures that formed in the firing process are hidden

by the pouring molten lead, a process redolent of traditional Chinese and Japanese methods of repairing pottery. The Japanese technique involves sprinkling finely powdered gold into sticky, lacquered seams to mend revered tea bowls. The tracks of precious gold show nuances of each repair and thereby convey the unique history of the tea bowl. (Lipske, 2009). The primary repair on the porcelain shelf in **An invitation** embellishes a defect to show the value of imperfection.

Frangible and nebulous, the fused shelves are poised on an external armature of rhabdoid stainless steel. The steel structure has been curved and welded to create a frame in which the fused shelves negotiate the space above the ground. The result is a form that appears to be waiting. It invites interaction, as Georges Herbert Mead remarked, “the chair is what it is in terms of its invitation to sit down” (Keane, 2005, p. 193). **An invitation** offers somewhere to sit or place something, but given the fragility of its materials remains functionless.

## Conclusion

The Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco reminds us that, “what is most important is not so much what people see in the gallery or the museum, but what people see after looking at these things, how they confront reality again. Really great art regenerates the perception of reality, the reality becomes richer, for better or not, just different” (Marcoci, 2010, pp. 168-69). My project was initiated through observing the naïve interactions of my children as they encountered their domestic surroundings for the first time, and how these experiences confronted me with a new perception of reality.

Through my artistic practice I sought to explore these new perceptions and to provoke an act of noticing for others; not of the unusual but of the everyday. This investigation revealed the propensity of everyday objects to be invisible to us. My method was reductive as I also desired to analyse the form of an object primarily through the use of natural or neutral materials. I was fascinated by the alchemic process in which each transformation provided the stimulus for the next.

A chain effect, similar in effect to the alchemic transformation, occurred in terms of my conceptual exploration. The invisible object, once seen, revealed the complex way in which we perceive the objects that surround us. In a world of constant stimulation from external sources, the white quiescent forms that I created offer an inner solitude. Casting in porcelain what we see in a glance, provides a space in which to imagine the myriad stories an object embodies and to consider one's own narrative.

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