Art Amid The Ruins:
A Post-Industrial Aesthetic

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Cultural production cannot help but reflect the era which gives it birth. Today we find ourselves at a critical juncture in human history, as a massive wave of change sweeps across our societal relationships, drowning the old assumptions and certainties which stand in its path. The art which this era is bringing forth is filled with the questioning of old values and the search for new directions, meanings and faiths.

Cleveland is a typical product of the Industrial Revolution. It was established, as were most Midwestern settlements, at a strategic site for the distribution of commercial and agricultural goods. As an industrial-based economy came to replace the earlier agricultural-based economy (1865-1930), this prime location set the stage for the city’s development as one of the nation’s primary centers of industrial production. An economy based on the production and distribution of industrial goods required many such regional centers, and Cleveland, along with the Midwest, boomed.

But, as the Industrial Revolution began running out of steam, so did Cleveland. As agriculture had earlier given way to industry, by mid-20th century, the production, storage and distribution of information was well on its way to replacing industry as the basic controlling element in the world economy. This radical shift, which writer Alvin Toffler has called the “Third Wave,” has resulted in a deep structural crisis affecting every aspect of our lives. A critical factor in this shift is the drive to decentralization, reversing the centralizing character of the Industrial Revolution. Information can be widely dispersed, yet readily accessible.

The previously thriving cities of the Midwest find that they have become vestiges of an earlier form. As with most such cities, Cleveland flounders, its once vital economic base desiccated and without replacement. There is an atmosphere of malaise, which a thin veneer of boosterism fails to cover; despite vain attempts to replace the former solidity of vigorous factories and vibrant neighborhoods with the spectacle of Flats, Gateway and Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The old approaches, solutions, and convictions no longer seem appropriate.

In 1913, in the heyday of the Industrial Revolution, Marcel Duchamp’s “Readymades” called into question the separation of “art” and “life.” Duchamp’s validation of the everyday object as “art” forced us to view both in a new way, beginning a critical inquiry which would frame much of the discussion of
20th century art. With *Bicycle Wheel*, the found object was brought into the basic structure of art-making. The inquiry has since been continued in various ways, and for various ends, by movements such as Dada, Surrealism, Pop, Fluxus and California Assemblage, to name but a few.

Amid the ruins of that which gave inspiration to Duchamp, Midwestern artists have been creating works grounded in the cast-off corpse of industrial society. Gritty found-object structures and installations echo the dysfunctional industrial character of their elements. The work is often loud and jarring, and emanates both a profound sense of loss and a sense of humor.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, in the desolation of one of Cleveland’s former industrial centers, a version of this post-industrialism began to emerge. It found itself in an odd juxtaposition with a local aesthetic which has, historically, placed strong emphasis on craftsmanship, and demonstrated pride in the region’s industrial character. This emphasis can be noted by reviewing the history of the May Show, known until 1956 as the “Exhibition of Work by Cleveland Artists and Craftsmen,” and including, until 1959, a prize category for paintings of industrial scenes. I would argue that a stress on technically refined, well-crafted work largely defines the May Show aesthetic. Whether this primarily is a reflection of or an influence upon the directions taken by local artists is a topic for another paper. Nonetheless, post-industrialism in this area has a unique flavor, seasoned as it is by loving craftwork and meticulous attention to detail.

One of the first area artists to address the new realities of the city was Melissa Jay Craig, who, in the late 1970s, organized a group of self-proclaimed “Regional Art Terrorists” or “RATs”. The RATs did a series of installations in the then largely abandoned Flats district. These included adorning Flats-spanning bridges with mylar banners, and numerous murals in tunnels and on bridge abutments. Unfortunately, none of this work was documented. One of the RAT pieces is still somewhat visible, however. Along the RTA tracks, riders headed downtown from the East Side are treated to a mural of Egyptian-style figures. Each of these figures is carrying a briefcase.

Craig has since moved to Chicago, but her work continues to reflect the particular character of Cleveland post-industrialism and she exhibits here regularly. In the 1991 work *Tools*, Craig merged the residue of animals and the residue of industry--bones and broken tool parts--into a selection of hand tools. That these “tools” are frustratingly close to being functional heightens the irony.

Much of Craig’s work since the late 1980s deals with the emblematic cultural representative of the pre-electronic era: the book. *Winter of Our Discontent*, from 1992, fashioned from books, branches, bark, nests and paper, speaks eloquently to the book’s current circumstances.

Beth Wolfe began working around the same time as Melissa Craig, and in the same venue. She, too, did a number of installation works in the Flats, which also went undocumented. Wolfe continues, in many of her installations, to incorporate the site itself into the work. Her 1989 *Grove Court Condominium* was placed in a condo overlooking the industrial ruins that condo was replacing, a video documents the dismantling of that plant, and a pair of hanging coveralls had belonged to a worker there. In *Concrete*
Canoe, from summer 1993, water from the Cuyahoga River is pumped through the mesh canoe. The
water attempts to create channels back to the river, but is blocked by dirt-mound dams.

Vortex, which incorporates on-site ducting and shredded tires, was part of Wolfe’s 1992 Alien
Harvest installation at a former tire plant in Akron. Wolfe brings a similar approach to her smaller works,
creating a harmony from often discordant elements, remaining faithful to the character of her materials,
and building a sophisticated mix of trash and technology. Her Insta-Genet Sperm Bank was begun in 1985,
and remains in progress. It’s 48x36x12 inches and includes toy cars embedded in tar, circuit boards,
nipples and a paper towel dispenser; the viewer can operate a ViewMaster via a surgical-type pump, and
can make “withdrawals” from a liquid-filled bag.

While Melissa Craig and Beth Wolfe were turning the Flats into artwork, Steven B. Smith began
creating his collaged assemblages of trash, toys and the occasional small dead animal. One of the area’s
most prolific artists, his work is characterized by a haunting beauty, which compliments his sardonic and,
particularly in his earlier work, often angry, political statements. Many of these works have the feel of
John Hartfield gone 3D; Smith’s skill with the unexpected juxtaposition echoes that of Hartfield.

Most recently, Smith has been adding corrosive chemistry to his underlying support elements
(generally junked metal trays). Works completed in 1993 include Spirit and Mom? Spirit is 13x13x8
inches, and features a rather fearsome mummified fish head bursting from the blue field of corrosion,
labeled with an automobile nameplate. In Mom?, 14x9 inches, a rubber bath-toy bird looks beseecingly
at a baggie-encased dead bird.

Another artist who, in the early ’80s, often collaborated with Smith, but who has since left Cleve-
land, is Judson Wilcox. Currently in Boston, Wilcox, like Craig, continues to exhibit in Cleveland. His
white ceramics echo the purity and form of classical sculpture. They are cast from molds made from
assemblages of trash. Warrior, a classical head with holiday lights, is from 1990 and is 25x13x10 inches.
Roxie Lady, from 1988 or 1989, is 26x20x5 inches. It includes a figure cast from a Marilyn Monroe
shampoo bottle.

The next few artists are not often thought of in the same context as Craig, Wolfe, Smith and
Wilcox. This has more to do with social circles, and the strange east/west division that dominates the
city, than with the work itself. (As a side note, I believe that the issue of “East Side Art” and “West Side
Art” is one worth exploring; but that, too, is a matter for another paper.)

Joan Damankos’ elegant assemblages emit a deeply personal sense of entanglement and loss. She
collects her elements over a long period of time, without consciously planning how she will use them.
She eventually finds the objects suggesting their own inter-relationships. Damankos then works at
accentuating the results of these intuitive associations.

Pierced Armor, from 1991, is 73x21x11 inches. It was fashioned from bullet casing, metal, linen
thread and earth. The bullet casing is rusted, torn and aged; it speaks of a violence long since spent. The
linen thread ties it to the earthen pile beneath. Letter from S, 1993, is 10.5x6.5 inches, from metals, resin,
gold, lead and wood. A metal tag offers an un-readable identification while a small smudge of gold leaf hints at brightness, but sheds a resin tear. The form of *Edge of the Known Universe* is reminiscent of a cauldron, or a water tower. Its crown-like top is a jagged barrier. Inside, dried twigs rest on a water-like mirror, while a small bell hangs beneath.

In comparison to the work discussed so far, Don Harvey’s work seems clean and pure. But his themes of industry, civilization, nature and environment, and, particularly, his use of industrial materials and fluid waste products, places him in this company. Harvey presents us with the beauty of the materials and with the havoc wrought by their creation. He uses photographs jet-sprayed onto metal; text; aluminum, copper, and stainless steel; plastic tubing and discarded automotive fluids. Components jut from flat surfaces, intruding into our space, infringing upon our environment. Nature is memorialized in photographs.

The work of Patti Fields and Ray Juaire is also quite refined. Fields and Juaire are younger artists and each works independently as well as in their collaboration: Fields in jewelry and small metal sculpture, Juaire in paint on discarded wood. The dialectic of their quite different aesthetic approaches achieves a synthesis in their collaborative work, where the roughness and universality of trash comes to terms with the detail and intimacy of precious adornments. Their reliquary-like constructions convey an almost medieval sense of religiosity, while their imagery is a commentary on our times.

Bryn Zeller is another younger artist. The abandoned factories and mills of Youngstown are Zeller’s parts bin, as he makes literal use of the wreckage of industry. While far different in style than the work of Fields and Juaire, his works also contain a sense of religiosity. These altar-like sculptures resurrect the strange magical wonder of their industrial plant sources; they emit the sensation of being incomprehensible relics from a once-mighty civilization.

*Master*, from 1993, is 9’x5.5’x4’. Small flames burn in light fixtures and high-voltage sparks arc between electrodes, while a deep throbbing sound comes from within. Fronting the piece is a steel-plate “kneeling pad.” Zeller’s works often allow for viewer interaction. In *Mesh (Homage to a Perfect Relationship)* (1991), a hand crank can be turned. The interaction, however, yields no clear results.

This lack of resolution is a key unifying factor in the work I have been discussing. Post-industrialism poses questions, but offers few answers. It is an art brought forth by a period of transition, when the old answers no longer suffice, but new ones remain unclear. It is an art which ponders, rather than celebrates, for it is speaking to the death of one era, but, not yet, the birth of a new one.
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Post-Industrial Theory

Discussions and papers in the Internet lists "Communications Research and Theory" (crtnet@psuvm.bitnet) and Post-Modern Culture (pmc@ncsuvm.bitnet) have provided a valuable ongoing resource.

The Third Wave; Alvin Toffler; William Morrow, 1980.


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