

Definition, Interpretation & Symbolisation

A Human Obsession

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Abstract

The aim for my thesis was to create a metal sculpture that would, in my own words allow the observer to conjure their own interpretation of the artist's work. The sculpture was produced using 6 mm blackened steel rod, formed to resemble the upper half of a human torso, I then played Tetris with some old sauna rocks that are placed inside the form. All of this once welded shut was placed onto a wooden cut from an ash tree that I had dried and charred.

The human form represents a visually familiar shape to all of us, but when we take that shape and strip it of colour, emotion and life essentially, we are left with an empty husk, it has no meaning, it symbolises nothing, its left to remain in its exposed and raw state.

The way I see it, our fixation with defining and interpreting stems from our need throughout our evolutionary lineage to stay alive, our curiosity has allowed us to map the world of all of its wonders and dangers, recognising what makes us happy and what does us harm, so when something has been given meaning, it makes us comfortable, because we now know its purpose, and whether it intends to harm us, but when we can't give meaning we become unsure, like staring into the abyss of the open ocean, we become curious, do we fear it and retreat or succumb to our urges to give it meaning.

So, my sculpture was made to be recognisable, but enigmatic enough to make the observer uncomfortable with not knowing what it signifies, and to come up with their own, if they want to, I also like the idea of people just appreciating the skill behind it. So, if my sculpture achieves any of this, that doesn't make it special, it merely means it has accomplished its job, which is what any creative mind should look to achieve, but it's critical to get people to think, we need more people to think.

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Abstrakt

Målet med min examensarbete var att skapa en metallskulptur som, enligt mina egna ord, skulle göra det möjligt för observatören att trolla sin egen interption av konstnärens arbete. Skulpturen gjordes med en 6 mm svart stålstång, formad för att likna den övre halvan av en mänsklig torso, jag spelade sedan Tetris med några gamla bastustenar som är placerade inuti formen. Allt detta en gång svetsat stängd placerades på ett träskär från ett ask som jag hade torkat och kolat.

Den mänskliga formen är en visuellt bekant form för oss alla, men när vi tar den formen och avlägsnar den i huvudsak av färg, känslor och liv, sitter vi kvar med ett tomt skal, det har ingen mening, det symboliserar ingenting, dess vänster till förbli i sitt nakna och råa tillstånd.

Så som jag ser det, vår fixering med att definiera och tolka härrör från vårt behov genom hela vår evolutionära linje för att hålla oss vid liv, vår nyfikenhet har gjort det möjligt för oss att kartlägga världen av alla dess under och faror, vilket ger mening åt vad som gör oss lyckliga och vad skadar oss, så när något har fått mening gör det oss bekväma, för vi vet nu dess syfte, och om det tänker skada oss, men när vi inte kan ge mening blir vi osäkra, som att stirra in i avgrunden av det öppna havet blir vi nyfikna, fruktar vi det och drar oss tillbaka eller ger efter för våra uppmaningar att ge det mening.

Min skulptur var gjord för att vara igenkännlig, men gåtfull nog för att göra Observatören obekväma med att inte veta vad det betyder, och att komma med sina egna, om de vill, jag gillar också idén att människor bara uppskattar skicklighet bakom det. Så om min skulptur uppnår något av detta, det gör det inte speciellt, betyder det bara att det har gjort sitt jobb, vilket är vad alla kreativa sinnen bör se ut för att uppnå, men det är viktigt att få människor att tänka, vi behöver mer människor att tänka på.

Språk: Svenska Nyckelord: Skulptur, mänskliga, definiera

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6. Introduction

Where did my interest in design begin?

Short history lesson (it's all relevant, trust me). My father is veteran blacksmith and metal worker; born in Belfast, Northern Ireland. He and a lot of other young lads went to work in the shipyards at the age of sixteen, just like their dads, and grandfathers before them, the generation responsible for the building of the infamous and "unsinkable" titanic, a maritime, technological marvel in its day "built by Irishmen, sunk by an Englishman."

Belfast's Ship building industry was a booming, Influential and beneficial export for the country, and metalworkers were in high demand, as the lower class didn't have options for university, this provided trades and opportunities for those that didn't have much.

But alongside this Northern Ireland was in the midst of a civil war (better known as the "Troubles") which plunged the whole country to a stand-still, over religious and political differences, that have stemmed back to hundreds of years of Irish oppression by the British. Over the course of the next 30 years, the city's streets were turned into war zones; riots, shootings, daylight murders and bombings between terrorist paramilitary militia groups and the British army were a common sight on a daily basis, which ultimately claimed its toll of thousands of casualties, both young and old. But the people persevered with their everyday lives and eventually in 1998 a peace treaty was signed resulting in a cease fire. Growing up in Belfast at the tail end of the war allowed me to understand the damage that had been done, why it happened and what and where I need to be careful of.

Today Belfast has changed drastically for the better, unfortunately the aftermath following means there is a fair degree of violence and bigotry today, with minority groups who still believe in the cause of the war, and try to reignite this hatred for one another, so rioting, shootings and bomb threats aren't necessarily a thing of the past yet, but the vast majority of people believe our recent history has become a large part of who we are today and that we should move forward from it and learn from past mistakes, this however wasn't enough to reignite the shipyards, Belfast's only main export was lost and the jobs along with it.

All of these events that my father lived through fed his creativity, after the shipyards closed down, he decided that as a trained blacksmith and welder he began creating metal furniture, art pieces and sculptures influenced by the troubles and the story of his city. And since then, has spent his life shaping metal, developing his own style and venturing into designing and creating metallic furniture, art and sculptures.

So as a kid, whenever my dad was working, hammering or just making a racket in the workshop, I would be standing behind him, holding the flashlight, asking questions or just watching and learning, as he drew, planned and then conjured his ideas from his head on a page to a physical form, and when I got old enough to swing a hammer and put the Lego away, he began to train me. That was the moment I started to unravel and understand design and its many forms and practicalities, where my own urge to create and design my own ideas manifested, but it took me a while to realise how much it meant to me.

My initial two and a half years at Novia were spent as a visual communication understudy, or Graphic Design if you will; I previously completed a two year Interactive and Creative media course before my attendance at Novia. So, a degree in graphic design appeared to be the next logical step in advancing my career, due to the fact It is an increasingly growing market with an abundance of job opportunities on a universal scale, but regardless of all this, I never felt inspired to commit to a life as a graphic designer.

I believe I had the potential, the knowledge and the skill to succeed within the field, but I honestly don't believe I ever had a genuine enthusiasm for it. To be confined to a screen all day, with such a large number of restrictions and barely recognizable differences in the tasks a graphic designer is given, I personally felt that there was insufficient space for individual touch, yet for some reason I continued denying this feeling on the grounds that I blamed it on "stress of student life" that being until I recalled a conversation I had with my father a while ago, that ended with him saying "you'll end up working with your hands one day, like me" and from then on I could acknowledge the fact that I have and consistently will be a craftsman.

7. Art & Design: My attempt at a definition

In many ways that are not always apparent, but rather instinctive, I feel more inclined to call myself a designer rather than an artist, is the result of what I do also considered art? of course, they are essentially the same thing, I just think designer has a nicer tone. Art & Design have a symbiotic relationship, in the sense that they exist always as separate ideologies in close “physical” association, within each other’s worlds, as if they were one entity. However, if you approach these terms and begin to question their definition separately, we begin to reveal connotations that are better suited to the former and the latter.

The term Art has a sense of chaoticness that lingers ever presently, a perpetual question mark that has refused to be defined and will continue to do so. Art is rebellious by nature, for centuries it has inspired creative divergents and renegades, to defy questionable societal etiquettes and farcical legal statues that in their endeavors, have placed censorship towards the arts through-out history, crying controversy for daring to think different.

In an ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) report titled “Freedom of expression in the arts and entertainment.” They touch on more recent examples of censorship in modern art culture, focusing on the music industry, which has had its fair share of controversy through-out history; Elvis started shaking his hips too provocatively then NWA’s strong views towards law enforcement that people didn’t like, then these people take it upon themselves, as if it was their god given duty to ruin it for everyone else, while under the illusion that they are a “ martyr for the cause” this mentality of “ I believe everyone has the right to free speech until it disagrees with my opinions” is going to be the downfall for freedom of expression, the solution to intolerance isn’t to conform to this forced society in which no one says anything anyone else finds Offensive.

“The answer is simple, and timeless: a free society is based on the principle that each and every individual has the right to decide what art or entertainment he or she wants -- or does not want -- to receive or create. Once you allow the government to censor someone else, you cede to it the power to censor you, or something you like. Censorship is like poison gas: a powerful weapon that can harm you when the wind shifts.

Freedom of expression for ourselves requires freedom of expression for others. It is at the very heart of our democracy.”

- ACLU Briefing paper number 14 – Artistic Freedom.

So, if art is chaotic then design must be methodical, well-structured and in some cases systematically meticulous? In a sense, yes. Appropriate design is fundamental when the aim is to create for a particular purpose. However, that does not mean that design is purely limited to a “functional” existence, if the intention is to be structured chaotically then it has every right to defy its intended function and call itself art.

A great example of this are the pieces created by the architect Katerina Kamprani, and her installations titled “The Uncomfortable; a collection of deliberately inconvenient everyday objects”

She takes everyday objects that have a design built for a specific function, such as spoons, pots and stools, but designs something that is very similar, but slightly different, to the point where it becomes very unpractical, not impossible to use, just very hard.

When observing design from a greater perspective my focus will often drift to the word “*design*” itself, it is used in so many ways that I begin to wonder if it has any specific meaning at all. In any case however, the results of design tend to be visible, meaning able to be seen, so if the results are visible, then wouldn’t that argue the point that design is all around us, that everything “able to be seen”, everything man-made has been designed? Whether it was a conscious decision by the creator or not, it still holds a form regardless, if its design promotes its intended purpose or is simply an unprepossessing shape your eye happens to notice at first and then subsequently won’t think twice about after the result of said shape has been used for its function?

So, are we right in trying to designate a label, to aim the phenomenon that is design to a specific definition? to try and explain how it is independent from or related to other aspects, or should we forget that and accept that its cause should remain a question and try to just inspire and reinforce good design indefinitely?

Me personally, I feel there are countless definitions. So, in short, I guess for me design is the balance between functionality and aesthetics, what is it that differentiates good quality design from terrible design? And does it always matter? I guess in some cases I could admit it's completely conditional and comes down to specifics.

However, in saying that I will state I'm always going to prefer something that has an aesthetically pleasing design to coincide with its functionality, I think that's something we can all safely agree on. I say this because as a design/art student I feel I'm somewhat wired or programmed to have this inclination to bring these two aspects together and to collaborate them at all times. This is what defines a good product, it has a methodically planned shape, to ease performance, a colour that rightfully expresses its style, made from an adequate material suitable for its intended use for sustained durability, and if you want your design to leave a permanent mark, most importantly you need to ensure you put a conspicuous amount of effort into your work.

The question "how could I use good design to make a change?" is something I would often think about. Yes the commercial market for design is an industry that is becoming increasingly more lucrative annually, I personally love the idea of working or possibly even owning a company that designs and builds log cabins in the woods, do what you love where you love it you know, but I often wonder whether or not I would like to see myself in this consumeristic market where aesthetic function and design are essential, or instead use design to make a statement, that questions the fundamentals, regardless of whether its lucrative or not, then again nothing says I can't do both. Either way the design process is collaborative art form and is very good at engaging other designers from all aspects to solve problems, needs and to tackle big issues.

'Design is what links creativity and innovation. It shapes ideas to become practical and attractive propositions for users or customers. Design may be described as creativity deployed to a specific end.'

Sir George Cox

7.1 . Culture and its influence on Art & Design

Culture is something we can instinctively relate to; from the moment we begin to develop speech and a collective awareness of our surroundings we begin to absorb the culture that we find ourselves belonging to. Culture is handed down from generation to generation, knowledge that we acquire over time, from our everyday way of life, to our mentality, our habits, values, attitudes and tastes, can all be linked to cultural upbringings.

However, from a more traditional point of view, culture is more widely associated with national traditions such as forms of art, Music & craft, Fashion, architecture and cuisine, customs and religion, etc. These are the aspects of our culture that we grow accustomed to and possibly have a strong sense of pride or dedication to. Subcultures can even be formed within a culture, these people who have found they differentiate even farther within their own society; even right here in Finland we have a subculture of Swedish speaking citizens.

But culture can be used to determine much more than that. Instead of focusing solely on an aspect of culture such as art, music, fashion or within one country, it is more common today in modern society to categorise these aspects as one universal culture, and this is what is known as pop culture.

A considerable downside of popular culture though is that has become one of the leading causes to mass consumerism, nowadays we all want the same thing, the latest technology or the nicest clothes, competing with each other, a “want it but don’t need it” mentality, which means more money, and more resources which over years and years has led to problems such as climatic issues, economic instability, systematic poverty. In some way we have become addicted to this new way of life but haven’t yet learnt how to adapt to it within moderation.

Within the Art and creative community, we even see that we tend to follow certain trends, a vast number of musicians and artists all compete within similar genres because they see what people are demanding and then they supply it. But what I find so unique about the modern Art, music and creative culture is that we have so much freedom to express ourselves how we want to, we all have different preferences and tastes in forms and styles and we are encouraged to be different from anyone else and I'm grateful we have the opportunity to do so.

8. Process: Initial thoughts

From the moment I transferred from the Graphic design bachelors to fine arts I knew I would be creating a sculpture of some sort. I'm not a stranger to a pencil or paintbrush, but it's definitely nothing that inspires me, yes, I see the appeal and the beauty of a remarkable drawing or painting and the technique and skill that is required and so unique to the medium, but I lack the ability to finish a painting or drawing after the initial hours, to find the desire to complete it, and tend to leave the unfinished piece in a box for several years only to see light again when I decide to clear out all the paper that has been hoarded away.

However, when I have the chance to go into a workshop, I will have a hard time being able to leave or take a break; I become so infatuated with the tools, the noise, the smells, the heat and dirt, it's a lifestyle, I love everything about it.

That is where my creativity lies, utilizing the raw materials and making something I can see and feel in front of me, regardless of whether it be commercially practical or artistically unconventional.

It's a wonder why I've never attempted to make a sculpture before, I think I've been so focused on practicality rather than creative expression, which is something I feel I have begun to accept since beginning my bachelors.

3.1. Process: What is my sculpture

Literally, my sculpture quite simply put, resembles the upper half of a human torso, made from metal rods, similar to a wire mesh mannequin, placed atop of a large cut from the trunk of an ash tree and incased within the wire mesh are a selection of rocks. Although saying it like that it really underemphasizes the amount of work, I put into it, honestly it took forever; my hands hurt, there is dirt that refuses to remove itself from my skin, and I have a never-ending amount of metal dust logged in my nostrils, but nothing I haven't delt with before.

So, what does it mean? Which emotions are being represented? What fault in our ways as a society is being conveyed as symbolism? like any piece of art what it "literally" looks like, is never usually what it represents or symbolizes, there is always an ulterior or hidden meaning...right?

Technically yes, it's one of the fundamental things we have been taught to appreciate about the arts, that not everything is always as it seems, *that life looks pretty different through rose tinted glasses*, and for those of us more creatively inclined, we apply the same level of open-mindedness towards more if not all aspects of life.

I love that, but it makes me question everything so I hate it.

I have this impromptu compulsion of diving head first into rabbit holes and this is my latest one, why? As in why is it that we instinctively feel the need to place a meaning behind every piece of art we are looking at, why do you want to know my inspiration and my motives, what will you do with that information? It's just natural curiosity in most cases I understand, but I still manage to convince myself that trying to figure out why was a good waste of my time. So, following are some of my incoherent ramblings on questions that presumably don't need answered.

Whether it be consciously or sub consciously, we love to give meaning, it's cures our instinctive desire to feel in control. As humans we can't behold the real, we perceive things as symbols, mental codes because that aid us, it enables us to categorize the world around us, such as numbers, genders, colour, landmarks and they make us feel protected. It helps us not only map the shapeless and ever threatening universe, but also to express and control our unconscious in relation to the world, thus we make music, literature, so on... which are strongly reliant on language, language that in turn gives us meaning.

However, when you face the unspeakable, something that is either in between categories or way beyond them, our unconscious urges for meaning and categorization, for words to describe it, for understanding, then at the same time, in a way that we cannot tell, we fear it, for it may be threat, and we want it for it lacks categorization, which our brains mean to give it, sometimes though Language fails it, but humans are curious even though fearing, causing attraction to the ambiguousness of what we are trying to give meaning to.

There are two authors who put this perspective into even greater depth than I ever could; Edmund Burke: A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful. And Wolfgang Kayser: The grotesque in art and literature.

"We are strongly affected and terrified because it is our world which ceases to be reliable, and we feel that we would be unable to live in this changed world. The grotesque instils fear of life rather than death. Structurally, it presupposes that the categories which apply to our world view become inapplicable." The various forms of the grotesque are the most obvious and pronounced contradictions of any kind of rationalism and any systematic use of thought"

— "Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, 185"

So, if I'm being truthfully honest, my inspiration for this sculpture is essentially nonexistent and to a point pathetic, like I said I knew I wanted to do a sculpture but I had no idea what, until I seen a garden sculpture in Krauta with a similar idea, a small geometric shape, filled with tiny stones, so I thought I should make it bigger and shape it like a human, that is the entirety of my "inspiration."

Which means I'm leaving my sculpture up for interpretation, I want people to come to their own conclusion or meaning, maybe it speaks to someone in ways I'm not seeing, maybe it does represent something deep in me that I'm not aware of as of this moment, might not ever find out, I'm fine with that.

I "blame" my dad; I learned from him. It was never really art, he was old school working class, he did it because he needed the money, Came up with an idea, and brought that idea to life, there was no interpretation of his thoughts or feelings, it was work, once it was done and sold then it was on to the next one, in fact the only time he would consider himself an artist was down at the pub after a couple of beers, and someone would complement what he does, only then would he take a moment to zone out and acknowledge he has a skill to manipulate of one of the toughest materials to control, he kept it lowkey, and to me that's an artist.

3.2. Process: Materials Used

I was always going to work with metal, I do enjoy working with wood, but metal is much more forgiving, it is resilient and you can afford to make mistakes, with a welder and an angle grinder you can always add or remove more material. Whereas working with wood or stone, requires a patience and level of finesse that is far more relentless if you make a mistake, and seeing as time was somewhat of the essence, I think I made the correct choice when choosing metal, plus it's definitely my strongest medium to work with given my years of experience with it.

For this particular sculpture the metal is the predominant feature, using 6mm blacked steel round bar for the making of the body. Its light, sturdy and capable of being cold bent, without the risk of stress fractures occurring that would compromise the internal structure, making it the perfect material for the purpose I intend to use it for.

The podium on which it stands on is a solid log off an ash tree I cut down from the yard of some family friends last summer.

And lastly the stones that were be placed inside are from an old sauna from the building where my workshop is, being given a new purpose in life.

3.3. Process: Methods

This was my first time making something as intricate as this, so there was a lot of trial and error within the procedure, for one its quite hard to recreate a human body proportionately from memory and secondly there was a lot of repetition of measuring, cutting, bending then welding, I couldn't just cut out all the pieces in one go, then shape them accordingly then tack them all together with the welder, that would have been ideal and made the whole process a lot smoother in theory, if it wasn't my first time doing it then yeah I could take note how many pieces need to look like a certain way, and where they go but for a first time build it would be quite unpractical, as you need to watch how the shape is forming as you go in order to keep the proportions and shape correct in relation to another.

First step was to take a cut from some large paper roll. I laid it on the ground to draw some out references, by drawing the head and body in 2D form from a front and side view I could keep myself somewhat right in regards to how much material I need to cut and how it needs to be shaped.

First issue was realizing that even though 6mm rod is thin enough to bend cold (without bringing it to a glow using heat) it's still strong enough that smaller and more sharper bends aren't impossible but very difficult and time consuming to achieve, so without a proper burner or forge I had to come up with something else to get the bends I needed, so I got an old metal pipe about 10cm in diameter and drove a thunder bolt through the thread in the center (it was an old boat propeller that I had removed the fins off) into a 4x4 that I had attached to my workbench and then placed a second bolt a couple of millimeters (7mm or 8mm to be exact) just enough to fit the metal rod through, I could then use it to wedge the rod between the bolt and the metal pipe, with the curvature of said pipe acting as a form for the rod to follow as I pull and push therefore bending the rod to how I need it.

I started with the head; it was apparent that it would give me the most trouble so I wanted to get it out of the way first, the shapes in a head are sharper and more precise so the cuts of material would end up smaller and trickier to shape and hold in place to weld.

After I had made enough pieces to begin putting the head together, I could then start welding to see how the next sections should be cut and positioned, which is where I ran into my next problem.

The garage that I was using as my workshop belongs to an old friend of mine, and the house he lives in is even older, so the garage only had 10 amp power outlets and we had no idea what the breaker size was, lucky for 6mm rod you don't need to run the welder on a high amperage to weld it, so I started by running it at roughly 30 -40 amps which was too low, the weld wasn't penetrating and I could easily snap of the VERY hot recently welded piece of metal with my bare hands, while at the same time reminding myself why gloves are a thing and should be used.

30 – 40 amps didn't seem to be blowing any fuses or causing any lights to flicker so I could afford to bring my welders settings to run 50 - 60 amps, 60 ended up being too high and completely melting the base material, so brought her down a bit and hit the sweet spot around 55 amps.

If you are unfamiliar with how welding works, I can explain in a quick overview. There are many types of welding and welders but the most common and fundamental form is arc welding, also known as stick welding. It works by creating an electrical arc between a base material (whatever you're welding) and the metal inside the rod, once you connect the ground clamp, running a current through the base material, and the current in the rod, you complete the circuit, this is called 'striking an arc' bringing the two metals up to a melting point so they can be formed together, the rod is covered by a protective flux coating that shields the weld as it cools and prevents splutter, most stick welders run a Direct current (DC) and are polarity driven, typically the base metal being run as negative and the rod running as positive (you can reverse the polarity, but that's useful for more in depth methods.)

After Completing the head, I could now use it as a reference as to how the torso and arms should be sized proportionately. The torso and arms were definitely easier to complete but still took several days to get things as close to perfect as I could afford.

Once I had everything welded together and the shape finally complete, I gave it a couple of coats of matte black spray paint and attached it to the tree stump by using some fencing staples (U shaped nails) along the bottom rim of the sculpture.

By leaving a couple of slots open in the back of the sculpture I could use this as an access point for the rocks to fit and be placed, which required a lot more thinking and coordination than I had anticipated, trying to find the right size and shape for each section, and trying to make sure they fit nicely with the other rocks either side of it to prevent it from moving was also quite the challenge, but trial and error always works if you have the patience.

Once the rocks had been placed accordingly and nothing was moving I could seal up the back by welding the final pieces in place before causing a rock avalanche and needing to start again.

Now that everything was fixed and sturdy, I finished up by giving the tree stump a couple of burnt layers to give it some more texture, first I had to remove the fresh bark, I thought about leaving it on but after laying in the snow all winter it had begun to rot so I thought it best to remove it, use the propane burner to torch it and give it that nice burnt look, that better suit the colour of the sculpture in the end.

4. Conclusion

My first step was to draw out the form on some large paper roll, to use as some form of reference, to measure the estimate of the size of the cut and the way in which it needed to be shaped. This would be the process I used for the initial pieces of the sculpture, because once I started achieving a 3D form, I could see if I was going wrong just by using my eye.

Once I had the torso, head and arms all complete and attached to the wooden podium I could then begin filling the “insides” with rocks, this proved difficult as each rock had to fit in accordance to every other rock adjacent to it, so there would be as little movement as possible.

The last thing that was left was to remove the bark from the wooden stump and use a propane burner to give in a darker and more aged texture.

Now I could wrap it up ready for transport to the exhibition site.

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