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A Tale of Two Dogs Fine Art Exhibit

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A TALE OF TWO DOGS FINE ART EXHIBIT

BY

JEFFREY ALAN HARRIS, Bachelor of Fine Art

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

Stephen F. Austin State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Fine Art

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2019

A TALE OF TWO DOGS FINE ART EXHIBIT

BY

JEFFREY ALAN HARRIS, Bachelor of Fine Art

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is a formal examination of the fine art exhibit titled A Tale of Two Dogs by Jeffrey A. Harris as a partial fulfillment of requirements for a Master of Fine Arts degree from Stephen F. Austin State University.

By examining the multiple established points of view within his artwork, the author questions these establishments and asks if this approach leads to a relevant way of seeing. Using expanded polystyrene foam as a sculpture medium, a series of artworks created during the MFA research process are conceptually analyzed to explore the value of maintaining a multiplicity of viewpoints within a single composition. Through the examination of the various artworks and techniques, the author discovers that using multiple, often divergent points of view, within a single artwork (and by extension, a single exhibit) benefits the artist as a method of pushing creativity forward.

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CHAPTER 1

My Two Dogs

This exhibit consists of three groups of sculptures; a main group and two smaller sub groups. The main group relates to the primary thesis which uses my personal establishments and points-of-view to describe abstract ideas, feelings, and opinions. These sculptures are figurative embodiments that examine the ability to maintain divergent points of view within a single composition. The second group, called “Process Detritus”, serves as a visual method to describe my sculptural process. By using the same construction processes as the main sculpture group, but with less refined surface treatment, these pieces open a window to my technique free from jargon. Finally, the third group, called “What Is and What Might Have Been,” demonstrate the evolution of several of the ideas present in the main body from their genesis. Also present in this group are concept ideas that never made it into production.

Before going any further I want to talk a bit about establishments. This is not necessarily The Establishment that the Hippies rallied against in the 60’s, but more like the personal establishments we find ourselves working in or the ones we create within our own lives. They exist all around us. Our work environments have certain standards of

behavior that control how we conduct ourselves in our professional lives, especially if we want to keep our job. Religions have establishments that prescribe what that religion's adherent believe to be true. Establishments are an integral part of our lives, let's face it, establishments are how we organize our behavior in a society. Some establishments are good, for example traffic laws like stop signs and speed limits keep us safe and, in theory at least, keep traffic moving smoothly. Some establishments, like the ones we create within ourselves, can be self-limiting. These establishments affect how we relate internally to the world around us. Things like unreasonable standards of beauty, often promoted in popular media, may lead us to give unnecessary importance to our appearance. Finally, some establishments are downright awful and lead to strident ideologies resulting in airplanes flown into skyscrapers or, more recently, innocent lives lost while worshipping at a mosque by a lone gunman.

So, I want to explore my association with a variety of establishments via the use of a visual language. And, more importantly, by so doing, find out if it is possible for me to rise above my establishments and find a better point of view. I am under no illusion that I am going to change anyone's point of view with anything I say or do, but I can examine, through a process of self-discovery, my own establishments and how modifying my personal points of view can lead me to a wider understanding of why I think the way I do.

Ultimately, these establishments are controlled by our points of view. So, the question for myself is this: Does entertaining multiple divergent points of view lead to a relevant way of seeing? Upon reflection, it seems like a natural way to think. For example, I have a mother and a father who are completely different from each other. Their gender, size, life experiences, points of view, and personalities are different and sometime they even fight about these things, but I love them both equally. So perhaps we are conditioned from birth to be of two minds, which would imply that this is a natural, healthy state of being.

That may be a great way to live my life, but for art, could this outlook seem a bit schizophrenic? Not long ago I had a revelation. Not really a religious revelation, but the kind you have in the middle of the frozen food aisle of the local Sam's Club while shopping for groceries. One day, while following my wife around the store with a rapidly filling shopping cart, I stopped at the frozen dessert case. In there, among all the frozen deliciousness, I saw the perfect schizophrenic metaphor for the way the world works today: Healthy Choice Frozen Fudge Bars! Eureka, there it was, two completely divergent points of view in one tasty frozen package! My health is important, I work hard to keep fit, get enough sleep and stay active, but I really want that yummy fudge too.

Coming to this realization, I decided to bring this duality into a visual language where I design sculptures to contain multiple, possibly conflicting, points of view within

one composition. All of the pieces are autobiographical to some degree, so their genesis lies within the snip-its of experiences that have shaped my point of view.

Many of my sculptures have an edge of humor to them, albeit a somewhat dry edge. Sociologist Orrin Klapp wrote in his book *Heroes, Villains, and Fools*, that the "clever fool [has] the conspicuous function as outlets for aggressive tensions (Klapp 69).” While I am not going for a belly laugh with my art, I do like the idea of my work acting like a safety valve where the viewer may be able to address larger social issues with a safe handle that does not take itself too seriously.

There is a popular proverb about the two dogs that live inside each of us. A few different versions of it exists and its provenance is questionable. Some people claim this is a Native American proverb (maybe), some say it comes directly from Sitting Bull (probably not), and others claim it is from a book written by Billy Graham in 1978 (again maybe). Regardless of its provenance, it is a great story for illustrating how many of us think, myself included.

The proverb goes like this: “Inside of me there are two dogs. One is mean and evil and the other is good and they fight each other all the time. When asked which one wins, I answer, the one I feed the most.”

With that in mind, I want to tell you about my two dogs, which I tend to feed equally.

I grew up in the Golden Age of the television babysitter. The 1970's was a great time to be a kid addicted to TV. With reruns of Get Smart, Gilligan's Island, and The Munsters to name a few, my disconnect from reality began at an early age. So, it is no surprise that my first dog was born in 1972 while I was in the second grade. At that young age, a life changing event occurred. I met a man named Carroll Spinney. As I recall he was related to my second-grade teacher in some manner, her nephew I believe, and she asked him to come in to class to give a drawing demonstration. On the day of his demonstration, he stepped in front of the class with his long brown hair, a goatee, and a hippie vest (this was 1972 after all), then said "Hello class, how are you today?" in a perfect Big Bird voice! At that time Sesame Street was only a few years old, but it was already a huge hit. This guy was Big Bird in the flesh! And he was here to teach us how to draw! Our collective second grade jaws simultaneously hit the ground and our wee little brains exploded out of our heads. His lesson was so simple even a second grader could do it. He showed us how we can draw anything we want by breaking what we're trying to draw down into simple shapes. For his demo he showed us how to draw Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch (he was the puppeteer for both). If you could draw a couple of circles, then you had the eyes, a triangle laying on its side formed the mouth, and "C" shaped curves formed the feathers around his head. There you have it; you just drew a perfect Big Bird. By the end of the day the whole class was drawing Muppets like old pros and to this day, Carroll Spinney's demo has been the most influential art lesson I have ever had.

My second dog was born in 1991. By this time, I had been in the military for about seven years and stationed at an air base in Sacramento, California. The big event in 1991 was the war with Iraq known as Desert Shield/Desert Storm. Television during the build up to the war was pretty monotonous. No matter the channel you select on the TV, it was all war news all the time. I mention this here because I didn't participate in the build-up or initial war effort, instead I was camping beside my son's hospital bed while he was fighting for his life against a critical illness. In a hospital there isn't much to do while waiting for the doctor to come around, take a quick look at the patient chart, nod his head, before going to tee off another round of golf. In other words, there is a lot of waiting. To pass the time, one tends to watch a lot of TV in a hospital.

So, there I was, in the hospital, beside my son's bed, watching TV. As if I had a choice, I was watching news about the build up to war in the gulf. Eventually, a story comes on about Egypt's contribution to the coalition war effort. It was a story about the ferociousness of the Egyptian commandoes. To demonstrate their toughness, three Egyptian commandoes lined up shoulder to shoulder with the leader of the group off to the side, shiny whistle at the ready. On the ground, in front of each commando was a small box, about the size of a shoe box. When the leader blew his whistle, the commandoes leapt forward to the boxes, reached underneath, pulled out a live pigeon from under each box... and ate them alive. I imagine, at that moment, every pigeon in Iraq got up and flew away in sheer terror of the impending Egyptian onslaught. I looked

down at my son in his hospital bed, then looked back up at the TV and realized that the world had gone completely mad.

Shortly after that, my son lost his battle in the hospital and ironically, a few years later, I was deployed in support to Operation Desert Storm to the location where the commandoes ate the pigeons. I had the distinct feeling that the universe was trying to demonstrate its cruel sense of humor with me as the butt of the joke.

Those are my two mental dogs. One dog is innocent and joyful, it sees the world through the lens of a child's eyes. While the other is mean and cruel, it sees the world through the lens of insanity and irrationality.

In an artistic light, there are also a couple of artists who fit the two-dog analogy and whose influence tends to guide my aesthetic choices.

The first influencer is creator of the Rat Fink character, Ed "Big Daddy" Roth. Eventually, by about age 11, I outgrew Big Bird and replaced him with Rat Fink. Ed Roth was a purveyor of Wierdo Monsters, custom cars made out of Styrofoam and fiberglass, and a guy who liked to hang out with bikers. He was an outsider whose art, and the art of the people he hired to make his art, was enormously influential on a generation of disaffected, misfit youth... Like me.

The next influencer is closely associated with Roth, in fact he got his first job as Art Director at Roth's studio. Additionally, he's the one who coined the term "Lowbrow

Art” in his book *The Lowbrow Art of Robert Williams*. He is best known as a painter, but later in his career he has completed several sculptures that I have found inspiring. For example, one sculpture titled “FS Jockey,” is of a horse jockey riding his own tongue. It seems like a metaphor, but I’m not too sure it’s a metaphor of. When I first saw this sculpture, it made me wonder how he made it. Researching this piece, I learned he made it out of Styrofoam and fiberglass. That realization made the proverbial light bulb go off in my head. During an interview for his recent exhibit titled *Slang Aesthetics*, Williams is quoted as saying “This is art that has no responsibility for decoration (Meline).” The attractive quality of this comment is how it illustrates the artists freedom to create works that may rub against public opinions of decoration or even propriety, but still maintain artistic validity.

CHAPTER 2

The Art Work

The Amoral Convenience of MQ9

MQ9 is the Air Force Air Combat Command's designation for the aerial attack drone better known as The Reaper. The inspiration for this piece came from a series of conversations I had with fellow Air Force members (some of whom were fighter pilots) prior to the Air Force's use of armed attack drones. Many of us felt that the use of a drone to attack an enemy located half way around the world, while the pilot "flies" his aircraft from a control room in Colorado Springs, smacks of amorality. Now, some people feel that this type of thing helps to keep our young soldiers and airmen out of harm's way and that is true, it does. Oh, it's great, not only are drones cheaper to manufacture and operate, but the support requirements are much less than that of a squadron of fighter jets, and best of all, they are almost risk free. Killing someone remotely is a very risk-free way to pursue combat and if we can fight without the risk of losing our countries greatest treasure, then why stop.

Formally, this piece was inspired as a parody of the Air Combat Command patch I wore while serving in the Air Force. The wings were patterned loosely after the wings on the patch, but the sword was replaced by a giant plucked chicken. The symbology of the wings and sword seems an obvious reference to air combat, so I've attempted to subvert that meaning to say this type of drone air combat is chicken.



Figure 1, The Amoral Convenience of MQ9, 2018

It seems we like things cheap and easy, expedient and risk free, I wonder if that is our collective establishment...and what its ramifications are.

Tiki de Milo... Somebody Loves Me Even if You Don't

Sometimes our establishments are formed from our self-perception. Am I good looking or ugly? Do I fit in or am I a misfit? Am I an insider or an outsider? Would it be better if I were a different color? Maybe hot pink would be good. Ever since I was a kid I always never quite fit in. It wasn't because I wasn't good enough, or smart enough, or anything, it was all about my perception of myself. Even though I've often felt that I didn't fit in, the reality has always been that there was someone who loved me.

So why the Venus de Milo body with a tiki head on it (see figure 2)? These two elements seem pretty far apart. From one point of view the Venus de Milo is a standard of Grecian beauty, but from another point of view it is an anachronism. The tiki on the other hand seems garish and kitschy, but from another point of view the tiki is a representation of a goddess or god and thus the ultimate symbol of beauty. It really just depends on your point of view and which establishments you operate under. Even more than that, the pairing of a hot pink tiki head with the Venus de Milo strikes me as strange and it is just something I want to see in my life.



Figure 2, Tiki de Milo or Somebody Loves Me even If you Don't, 2018

The Iron Fist of Dangling Authority

Just like the MQ9 sculpture, this one is loosely based on an Air Force patch (see figure 3). The interesting thing I like about this one is that the symbolism of the clenched fist changes with its change of orientation. The fist is a very martial symbol and pops up repeatedly within the military visual language. Upright it is a symbol of power or even protest, oriented on the diagonal it becomes a more active striking type of symbol, but horizontally it takes on a different meaning. The size coming out of the wall seems to defy gravity and in its horizontal position it seems more supportive of the thing it is holding. It almost becomes a pedestal of sorts. The rusty iron finish reasserts its authoritarian appearance while any number of things could dangle from its grip. The configuration shown here features an abstract globe with an ambiguous appearance. Is it a germ, or an exploding proto-planet, or anything else that the viewer might imagine? The ambiguity of the dangling globe defuses the martial symbolism of its Soviet style iron fist appearance.



Figure 3, The Iron Fist of Dangling Authority, 2019

What Is and What Might Have Been (Series)

Several people who have seen the preliminary sketches I usually make for my sculptures have said I should include them in my thesis show. I thought that idea had merit, however the drawings are made on butcher paper, tacked to my studio wall with blue painter's tape, and tend to get wadded up and thrown into the corner when I move on to my next sculpture, so are in sad physical shape. For that reason, I balked exhibiting the drawings even though I wanted to convey the origin and evolution of my ideas. Enter the miracle of two-part, tintable, urethane, liquid plastic.

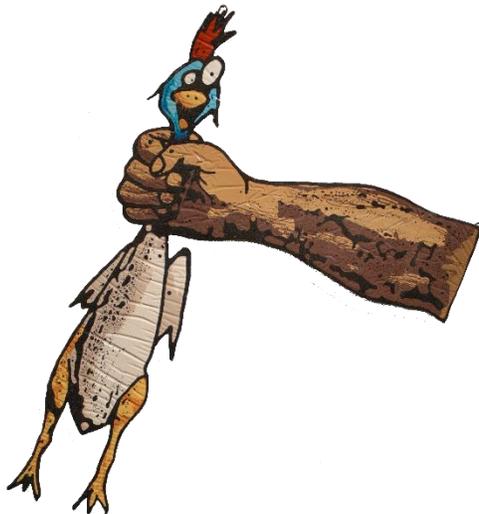


Figure 4, What Is and What Might Have Been no. 2, 2019



Figure 5, What Is and What Might Have Been no. 1, 2019

These pieces (see figures 4 and 5) are a view of my work, lifted directly from my sketches, that show pieces as they were originally conceived and pieces that were thought of, but never built. When viewed next to the final sculptures they represent, the progress of the idea is clearly present.

Process Detritus (Series)

The process of making my sculptures is, for me, every bit as valuable as the finished artwork itself. There exists a kind of Zen quality in the making of art. Whether I am sanding on a sculpture, or trying to pull the perfect pinstripe, or drawing out an idea for a future project, in those moments everything else just fades away. All the stressors and anxiety hanging over my head disappear, if only for a brief moment. I need to mow the grass in my lawn that's grown three feet tall . . . gone. I need to write my thesis paper and have no clue what I'm going to say . . . gone.

Despite its personal value, there is a problem with my process. It's really boring to talk about. I notice when I talk to people about how I make my sculptures, especially when I get to the parts about the merits of expanded versus extruded polystyrene or the uses for two-part urethane casting resin, their eyes start to glaze over and they give me that deer-in-the-headlights look that lets you know they've mentally checked out. So how do I communicate this thing that is immensely important to me, but entirely boring to everybody else?

Process Detritus to the rescue.



Figure 6, Process Detritus no. 1, 2019

This piece (figure 6) sat in my foam scrap heap for about a year. As I worked on other pieces, I would look at it from time to time and think to myself that it looks like something I could use. I wasn't sure how I should use it or how it would fit in with the body of my work. Finally, it dawned on me that these cast-off pieces do a great job of describing my process, but in a visual, less nerdy way.

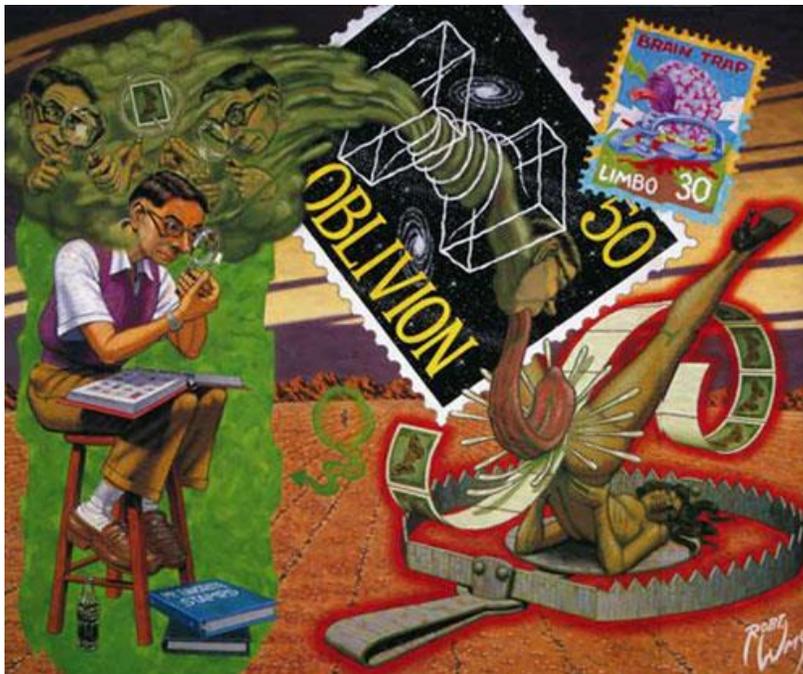
They are all pieces I have cut off from larger works with the idea that I may need some filler foam in the future construction of other works. Haphazardly, they have interesting form all on their own, but also describe an internal truth in my larger sculptures. These pieces are made with the same tools and materials used on all of my other sculptures, but instead of trying to subvert the identity of the material being used, I allow the material to maintain its form while still bringing encapsulating and painting processes into play. However, there is another problem here. When viewed next to my other sculptures, it looks like two different artists made these.

After thinking this through I realized there are actually three bridges that connect the *Process Detritus* pieces with other pieces like the *Tiki Di Milo*.

Bridge number one is a conceptual bridge. Since the concept of my entire exhibit is the value of being able to maintain a multiplicity of divergent points-of-view, it stands to reason that the elements of the exhibit itself should demonstrate that quality. Figuration and abstraction are two points of view which rightly belong in an exhibit based on divergent viewpoints.

Bridge number two is a visual bridge. The surface patination and architectural structure of the *Process Detritus* can be seen echoed within other pieces such as *The Superficial Hippie Shrine to a Melted Mouse*. It also exists in the abstract ball attached to the *Iron Fist of Dangling Authority*.

Bridge number three is a link back to Robert Williams. Consider two of William's works, the first is a painting titled *The Brain Trap* from 1997 (figure 7) and the



other an eleven-foot sculpture titled *The Brain Trap* from 2010 (figure 8). With this sculpture he is not trying to illustrate his process like I am. What he is doing here is pulling an element out

Figure 7, Robert Williams, The Brain Trap, 1997

of his complex painting and focusing in on that form as a single composition. This focus changes the content of the new work, creating a new point of view.



Figure 8, Robert Williams, The Brain Trap, 2010

Superficial Hippy Shrine to a Melted Mouse

Inspiration for this piece (figure 9) came in a very intuitive fashion. Originally, this piece was supposed to be a giant baked potato, but as it developed, as is often the case, it changed. To make this piece and conserve on a dwindling supply of EPS foam in my studio, I decided to make the original potato shape by stacking foam blocks around three boxes laying on the floor so as to create a hollow center that I could fill later. Once all of the foam was glued together, I kicked out the cardboard boxes, stood the “potato” up on its end, then took a look inside the void I had created. I noticed that the hollowed-out center had an interesting architectural quality that I did not want to lose. Stepping back, I noticed a similarity to the roadside shrines one sees with tiny Virgin Mary’s in them, except on a much larger scale.

I abandoned the potato idea and moved on to the idea of a shrine, but a shrine to what? At first, I thought a shrine to nothing would be clever, but was very superficial. Then the idea of superficiality appealed to me as well. What could be more superficial for a guy who grew up in Southern California than Mickey Mouse? I still liked the idea of a shrine to nothing, so the mouse figure needed to exist somewhere outside of the shrine. In response to this, I created a “melted” mouse that appears to have suffers some ambiguous violence as it lays in a puddle outside the entrance of the shrine. Once this stage was completed, it seemed that the large orange field on the outside of the shrine needed some visual image to break it up. The form of the shrine structure seemed reminiscent of the

VW hippie vans from the 1960's, so, in response to that, I gave it a hippie paint job. Wanting to portray multiple points of view with in this one sculpture, I designed the graphic to represent conflicting support for both peace and war.



Figure 9, The Superficial Hippie Shrine to a Melted Mouse, 2019

Finally, I believe that the inclusion of multiple points of view within a single framework (art, society, our own minds) pushes creativity forward and is indeed a relevant way of seeing. According to Billy Al Bengston, when a person sees a piece of art he or she should say, "I don't understand that, but it sure isn't boring." He goes on to say, "The only function of art is to be something that you ain't seen before; to be itself. (Boulanger)." With that in mind I hope my art can just be itself and people are not bored when they see it.

CHAPTER 3

Process

Like I said earlier, the experience of art, in this case the process of making it, hold a sense of primacy for me. In this section I will discuss some of the technical processes I use to make my sculptures and why those processes have meaning to me.

Often, the value of a thing lies in its making and there exists a certain satisfaction in technical fascination. More than that, there is a catharsis in making an object.

The process of making art reminds me about a time when my dad came to visit me from out of state. One morning, while he was paying me a visit, I was making cappuccinos with my overly complex espresso machine. An espresso machine can be a very complex contraption that if not operate properly can cause your cup of coffee to go wrong in any number of a hundred ways. While I was operating the complex machine, my dad, standing behind me says, “You know, there is an easier way to do that.”

He was referring to the K Cup machine that he has at his house. With his machine all you have to do is put the coffee pod in the machine and push the button. It

makes a good cup of coffee every time you push the button, but it never makes a great cup of coffee when you push the button.

So, I turned to him and said. “Easy is not the point. If I mess up any part of the complex espresso machine process, I will probably make a mediocre cup of coffee, but if I get it all right, then I will make a great cup of coffee.”

This is a good analogy of why my sculpture process is important. Its not easy and I could mess it up in a hundred different ways, but if I get it right then its great. And that coffee tastes so much better than the push button kind.

One question I am frequently asked is where do I get my ideas from. I wish there was a simple answer for that. They may come from the lyrics of a song, or they may come from a story I here on the news, or they may even come from some random thought I have while in the shower. I guess, in short, they are an amalgamation of my life experience.

The Wonderful World of Polystyrene Foam

The primary material of all my sculptures is polystyrene foam. There are two main types: Expanded Polystyrene and Extruded Polystyrene. Expanded polystyrene is the familiar white foam that looks like it is made out of small compressed foam beads. That look describes almost exactly how it is made. Small balls of liquid polystyrene is

chemically expanded to a desired diameter, then heat pressed into a form mold which compresses the beads and creates a unified form (How Is EPS Made).

Extruded polystyrene is the type a foam commonly known as Styrofoam first branded by the Dow corporation in 1948 (Performance Building Solutions). It is made by adding chemicals to styrene crystals, applying heat to melts the combination, then extruding the polystyrene mixture through a die. Afterward the XPS foam expands in the approximate shape that it was extruded, then trimmed to size (British Plastics).

For my exhibit, all of the pieces that are made of foam are made of EPS foam. Primarily because EPS foam is more widely used throughout a variety of industries, finding sources for usable scrap foam is much easier. This fact brings me to my next item of discussion, sources for construction grade foam.

All of the materials used in my exhibit are readily available for purchase from a variety of suppliers, however, in the case of EPS there are plenty of sources to acquire scrap foam for free.

Originally, I sourced my foam from a boat marina named “Franks Marina” in Belton, Texas. Due to the problem with zebra mussels in many of the fresh water lakes throughout Texas (Mocek, 9-96), boat marinas are replacing their exposed foam floatation blocks with fiberglass encapsulated foam floatation blocks to better facilitate zebra mussel control. As a result, many marinas around the country (where zebra mussels are a problem) have an excess of scrap EPS foam. I call this “Lake Foam” as it

is typically salvaged from freshwater boat docks and thus has been submerged in lake water for a number of years. Therein lies the problem with lake foam, it tends to be waterlogged and can remain that way for years. This can be a problem for the sculptor who uses a hot knife or hot wire tool to cut and shape their foam. During the foam cutting operation, when the hot blade or wire comes in contact with the lake water trapped in the center of the foam, it rapidly cools and no longer cuts the foam efficiently, if at all. For that reason, I do not recommend using lake foam for anything other than student training in reductive carving techniques. Additionally, one sculpture I completed about two years ago still drips water as of this writing.

If you are cheap like me, there is still hope in finding quality construction grade EPS foam for free. The best source I have found is a company called Blue Genie Art Industries in Austin, Texas. According to the company's website (bluegenieart.com) they are a "creative design and fabrication firm" that creates three dimensional displays for a variety of industries. Many of their displays are made out of EPS foam that they purchase commercially in large blocks. Typically, once their project is completed, they have several large trash bags full of foam block scraps that they later send off for recycling. I approached them about the possibility of using their scrap foam to which they gladly agreed to let me take as much as I wanted. The scrap blocks vary in shape and size, but are generally about six to eight inches wide and rectangular shaped.

The scrap foam blocks are usually in good shape and can be successfully glued together using a household gap and crack spray foam sealer available at any home improvement store. Alternatively, a foam adhesive such as 3M's Super 78 can be used if the pieces being bonded fit tightly together, but I have had the best performance success with the spray foam sealer.

Once the basic form has been glued together from several scrap foam blocks (Figure 10), the sculpture can be shaped using traditional reductive carving



methods. There are a variety of tools that can be useful for foam carving. Two of the main tools for carving foam are the hot knife and hot wire bow saw. These use an electrical current passing through a resistive element (i.e. the knife blade or the hot bow wire) to melt the foam as it passes through. These tools will cut through the dry foam like butter, but the fumes

Figure 10, Tiki head block basic form

generated can be very irritating. You should always wear a respirator rated for organic vapor when hot carving foam.



Figure 11, Tiki de Milo torso at mid stage detail

Some power tools can be very useful for rapidly carving the foam into any shape you want. Power sanders and grinders will make short work of large areas and quickly bring you to your sculptures basic shape. These tools will create a large amount of fine foam dust particles that can be managed by wearing a dust mask.

For greater control and medium level detail, a wire brush is my tool of choice. Probably 75% of the carving I do on any of my pieces is completed manually with a wire brush. It is a lot of

manual labor, but it is easier to control, so you are less likely to carve too deeply into an area that you may have to fix later. A surprising amount of formal detail can be captured with just a wire brush and small hand saw (Figure 11).

Finer details can be achieved with alabaster riffles, sandpaper, and even small



Figure 12, Tiki de Milo at fine detail and base sanding stage.

wire brushes (Figure 12). At this point, it may be useful to rebuild any carving errors or form additional surface detail with epoxy putties like Smooth-On's Free Form Air or Free Form Sculpt. At this stage, it is useful to evaluate how much detail you need. You can put a lot of detail at this point, but if you intend to encapsulate your sculpture for durability

then fine detail will be covered by the encapsulation process and much of the detail may be lost.



Figure 13, Tiki de Milo epoxy encapsulated

There are several choices for encapsulating the foam sculpture. You could brush on a urethane resin, or a standard epoxy resin. You could coat the entire piece in the Free Form Air or Sculpt, or you could even laminate the work with a layer or two of fiberglass. Each one of my foam sculptures in this exhibit have been encapsulated in a

slightly different way in order to discover the most impact resistant surface. Figure 13 shows the Tiki de Milo sculpture, ready for primer and paint, with nine coats of epoxy on the outer layer, sanding between each coat.

Urethane resin by itself seem to be a bit too brittle to provide adequate surface durability, so my finding is that a fiberglass laminate followed by a coat of epoxy thickened with a powdered urethane polyfill yields a highly durable surface. To save time I only apply one layer of fiberglass laminate, but multiple layer (2 to 3) will add extra strength if time allows. The thickened epoxy coat over the fiberglass should be at least 1/8th of an inch thick. This epoxy coat will not only add extra impact resistance to the surface, but will also act to mask the texture of the fiberglass underlayer.

The final consideration is surface treatment. If constructed as outlined above, the epoxy layer on the sculpture's surface will be very versatile and can accommodate a wide range of surface treatment. Once a primer is applied you can paint with any type of paint from acrylic to automotive urethane. If being displayed outside, the surface of the sculpture should be painted with a high-quality exterior grade paint. Since I am using epoxy, the surface lacks the high level ultra violet light resistance that polyester resins provide.

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APPENDIX

Annotated Materials and Tools List

Here you will find a detailed list of materials used during my research. Included is a short statement about how they were used, useful synergies with other materials, and various tips and tricks discovered during the research process. While all of the below materials were used in my MFA research, not all of them were used in my artwork. Some of them were omitted for practicality reasons and others were used only for small investigatory projects. Though I have tried to be thorough in cataloging the tools and materials used during my research, this list represents only those items used during the course of the MFA process. There are many more materials and tools available in the realm of foam sculpture which I did not have the opportunity to use. The bottom line is, find what you think might work and give it a try... who knows what you might find out.

Paint

Sculpt Nouveau Metal B Coating

The Metal Coatings from Sculpt Nouveau are made up of ground metal suspended in a non-toxic water based acrylic binder. They are available in Brass, Bronze, Silver, Copper, Iron, and Pewter. They may be applied to both metal and non-metal surfaces such as glass, wood, ceramics, concrete, foam, and resin. Once applied, patinas can be applied based on the metallic content of the paint.

UVO Colorants

A concentrated colorant for urethane plastic, epoxy resins and expanding foam. UVO is an opaque colorant. Do not use with Smooth-On silicones. Silc-Pig (not listed in this appendix) is the colorant for silicone rubber.

SO-Strong Colorants

Similar properties to the UVO colorant listed above except that So-Strong is a transparent colorant. Do not use with Smooth-On silicones. Silc-Pig (not listed in this appendix) is the colorant for silicone rubber.

Epoxy

EpoxAmite 102 MEDIUM

Clear epoxy resin used for fiberglass lamination. This is a good substitute for polyester resin since it has zero volatile organic compounds (VOC). Downside to epoxy-based resin in fiberglass application is that it tends to be more susceptible to UV ray deterioration than the polyester resin. However, if the final product is painted, then the paint layer will greatly increase the epoxy's UV durability. As with most epoxy resins, EpoxAmite is a two-part component. Meaning that there is a resin part and a hardener which, when mixed together, forms the usable liquid resin. The 102 medium means that the hardener you use with this resin has a medium cure time. There is also fast and slow hardeners if need be.

Since this epoxy is used to lay up fiberglass it tends to be very thin and runny. To thicken the epoxy, add Ure-Fill 11 to increase its viscosity as needed.

Free Form Habitat Fire Safe

Mix-By-Hand Epoxy Putty. Used in a similar fashion as the Free Form Sculpt, except that this epoxy is animal habitat safe and flame resistant. Folding Powder used to reduce the stickiness is sold separately.

FOAM-iT! 4

I tried this product for casting foam into pre-designed shapes. Work quickly as you have about 45 seconds between mixing the two-part foam and pouring it into the mold before it starts to expand. It is a little bit difficult to reductively sculpt as the foam dust that comes off of it tends to be quite sharp and itchy.

FOAM-iT! 5

All the same qualities of Foam-It 4 listed above except that it is 1 pound per cubic foot denser.

Free Form AIR

This material has been the workhorse for most of my sculptures. It is a lightweight two-part epoxy putty that is easy to shape when wet and easy to sand when dry. It cures to a rock-hard surface and can be painted with acrylic paints. This is a great material for fixing cracks and other small errors in the sculptures. It dries to a grey color and is relatively easy to sand when hard.

EpoxAcast 650 + 102

This epoxy was tested, but not used in any sculptures. It is a mineral filled casting epoxy that can be colored with the UVO or So-Strong colorants. This is a low cost and very hard epoxy that can be drilled and tapped. Quite a bit of mineral settling occurs in the part A component when it sits on the shelf for more than a few weeks. Will require about 30 minutes of mixing with a drill mixer.

Epsilon Pro

This coating is an alternative to fiberglass laminating the sculpture surface. Multiple (4+) thin coats are required to achieve a suitable surface hardness. Manufacturer claims it is a “protective, impact resistant coating for EPS, polyurethane foam, and more.” While that may be true, I have found that coating foam sculptures without a fiberglass laminate tends to result in a brittle, easily damaged surface. If a sculpture can be protected from bumps and drops, then this may be a good solution. If, on the other hand, the sculpture could be exposed to shipping or handling damage then a fiberglass laminated shell is a better idea.

Free Form Sculpt

Extremely hard and durable high-density epoxy sculpting putty. I use this in addition to the Free Form Air to create hard structural details on a foam/fiberglass sculpture. It is very sticky. To make it easier to handle, lightly dust with a poly fill powder such as Ure Fill 11. Just like dusting flour on bread dough, a little bit of poly fill on the surface will make it much easier to handle.

Free Form Habitat Cast & Coat

Filled, two component liquid urethane epoxy that can be cast solid or thickened for brushing or troweling on to vertical surfaces. Like the Habitat Fire Safe, it is safe for animal enclosures. Being that it is a urethane product I have noticed that when used as an epoxy shell over a foam sculpture, it tend to be unacceptably brittle and damages easily when bumped. Consulting with Blue Genie Art Industries in Austin, Texas, I learned that this product should be applied at least ¼ inch thick to avoid cracking.

Tarbender

This epoxy is typically used to coat bar or count tops with a hard, clear, durable surface. It has a honey like consistency and works great for making encapsulated sculptures. Even though it is self-leveling, I was unable to get a perfectly smooth surface without milling. This is another product that was experimented with, but not used in any of my sculptures.

Smooth-Cast 325

A urethane epoxy resin with a 7 to 10-minute cure time. Due to its short cure time, this resin is suitable for either roto or solid fill casting. This resin was the primary fill resin used in the “What Is and What Might Have Been” series of sculptures. It is a neutral color that allows for accurate color matching with UVO or So-Strong colorants. Being urethane, it does not stick to silicone, so a release agent is not necessary when casting in a silicone mold. However, using a release agent anyway will extend the life of the mold.

Mold Making

Mold Max 14NV

Low viscosity tin cured silicone rubber. This is a pourable rubber material for making flat molds or molds with in a mold-box. I like this one because there is no vacuum degassing required before pouring the silicone, as is the case with several other tin cured silicones.

Brush-On 40

A high viscosity brush on rubber suitable for vertical surface application, unlike the thinner pour on rubbers (i.e. Mold Max 14 NV). Apply four to six layers on item to

be molded. Being a urethane product, it is highly susceptible to atmospheric moisture, hence it has a short shelf life. Use Extend-It Dry Gas Blanket (listed below) to extend the shelf life.

Plasti-Paste II

Plasti-Paste is used for making mother molds (for example with Brush-On 40). This replaces the traditional plaster cast mother molds. A mother mold made from Plasti-Paste is thinner, lighter, and more expensive than those made with reinforced plaster.

Structural

4 oz Fiberglass Fabric

This is a 4-ounce, plain weave, fiberglass sheet used here as a surface fabric over my foam sculptures. When properly wetted out, it becomes transparent, and bends around relatively sharp curves very well. Although all of my sculpture used only one coat of fiberglass as a surface reinforcement, I recommend multiple layers for increased durability.

Fiberglass Mat

Chopped strand fiber mat not suitable for use with Epoxy resins. Binders in the chopped strand only break down with polyester resins making this material unsuitable if you are using epoxy as the wetting agent.

Expanded Polystyrene Foam (EPS)

Sourced from recycled material. Frank's Marina at Lake Belton, Texas, and Blue Genie Art Industries in Austin, Texas, provided the EPS materials from their scrap foam for these research projects.

PVC Tube

1/2" tube used to tunnel through foam block and provide a plastic reinforcement for support elements inside the foam sculpture. Once the tube is driven through the foam, epoxy is used to secure the tube in place and provide a channel for the threaded rod support. This allows for the repeated assembly and disassembly of the sculpture without degradation to the internal foam.

Threaded Rod

This is used to provide attachment points between the separate parts of a foam sculpture.

Equipment

Digital Gram Scale

Many of the epoxies used during this research require the A and B components mixed by weight with a gram scale.

Latex-Free Gloves

Your hands will thank you when you are knuckle deep in epoxy.

Mixing Cups

Use a variety of sizes from small shot glass to quart paint mixing cups for mixing epoxies. Although clear plastic cups are preferable, do not use Styrofoam or wax paper cups as the heat generated from the epoxies during the cure stage can melt the cups.

EZ-Mix 8" Paint Sticks

I buy these by the case of 1,000 sticks. This may seem excessive, but to avoid cross-contamination when using multiple epoxies, it is best to use one stick for each epoxy and dispose of it when done. In this light, a thousand sticks is not a bad idea.

Red General-Purpose Scotch-Brite PRO Pad

These can be used as an alternative to steel wool or sand paper. They tend to leave less debris from the pad as compared with sandpaper. The pads are flexible and conform to the surface being scuffed allowing for a more even surface tooth. They have the added benefit of a longer useful life than typical sandpaper.

Grey Ultra Fine Scotch Brite PRO Pad

Same properties as the red Scotch-Brite pads above except for a finer tooth.

1- and 2-Inch Industrial Grade Chip Brushes

Used for applying resins on the surface of the foam and for a dabbing tool when applying fiberglass. Use once and dispose to prevent cross-contamination of epoxies.

EpoxAmite Dispensing Pumps

This is more of a convenience than a necessity. These pumps attach to the part A and B bottles and makes it easy to dispense the correct amount of each component. A gram scale is probably more accurate, but if you are in a hurry these are a nice way to go.

Wire Brush

The cheapest one you can find at a local home improvement store works well and lasts just as long as a more expensive one.

Alabaster Riffles

The riffles that work on alabaster also work well on EPS foam.

Miscellaneous

Ease Release 200

Mold release spray for non-porous molds or porous molds that have been sealed.

Habitat Folding Powder

Used to thicken and reduce sag in Free Form Habitat. Reduces stickiness and makes the epoxy more handle-able.

Patina Agent (Green)

Copper Acetate solution made from a copper ingot (or scrap piece of copper pipe) placed in a gallon of vinegar. Let the copper soak for a week or more, when solution turns blue its ready to use. To achieve a green patina on Sculpt Nouveau's Bronze, Copper, or Brass Metal B coating, you start by spraying the copper acetate liberally over the areas you wish to patinate. Next, sprinkle table salt over the wet copper acetate, then cover with plastic. After an hour or more you will have a nice green patina. Sculpt Neauveau recommends spraying the patina agent before the paint dries, but I have tried it on dry paint with good results especially on the copper and brass paints. Once you have the patina you want, you can then clear coat the patina for durability, but be advised that the clear coat may change the color from a bright green to a darker green. You should test your clear coat before applying it directly to your artwork. Using the same technique will create a rust patina on Iron Metal B coating even after the paint has dried. This patina agent has no effect on white metals such as pewter, nickel or silver. As a side note Sculpt

Nouveau sells a green patina agent for about \$15, the one I am using here cost about \$2 (including an \$.88 spray bottle)

Evercoat Polyester Filler

Similar to Bondo brand polyester filler, but a little bit lighter weight and, in my opinion, fills small deformations in the cured fiberglass better than the Bondo brand. Cures in about 10 minutes or less depending on the amount of hardener used. The fast cure time speeds up the shaping and surface refining procedures post fiberglass.

Ure-Fil 11

A finely ground urethane dry powder used as a thickening agent in a variety of epoxies. Epoxy viscosity can be controlled depending on the amount of Ure-Fill added to the mix. Add a little at a time until the epoxy thickens to the desired consistency.

Great Stuff Gap and Crack Filler

This is typically used to fill gaps and cracks around wood, metal, masonry, etc found around the home, but for my use it's a great glue. This is the best thing I have found for bonding the small blocks of EPS foam to form larger general shapes. As a foam product when finally cured, it has many of the same characteristics as the EPS foam. It carves just as easily and can be shaped with a hot wire/hot knife shaping tool.

3M's Super 78 Polystyrene Adhesive

This is a spray adhesive designed specifically for EPS foam. The problem is, the foam surfaces must mate tightly for this adhesive to work. If there are any gaps or if the pieces do not mate correctly, this may not hold very well. Great Stuff gap filling spray foam is a better choice.

Elmer's Craft Bond

This is a very similar product to the Super 78 listed above, but at a fraction of the cost. It has the same performance and drawbacks.

XTEND-IT Dry Gas Blanket

Uncured urethane is highly susceptible to atmospheric moisture. This product is a gas spray used to extend the shelf life of urethane bases resins and rubbers mold making materials. Crack the lid and spray for five seconds into the open container. The chemical locks the moisture content of the air in the container, preventing it from reacting with the urethane.

VITA

After completing high school in 1982, Jeff Harris joined the U.S. Air Force as an Electrical Power Production Craftsman. Twenty years later, after leaving the Air Force, he started HRS Grafix, a custom motorcycle paint and airbrush graphics business in Central Texas. In 2016, he received the degree of Bachelor of Fine Art from the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor. That same year, he entered graduate school at Stephen F. Austin State University and received the degree of Master of Fine Arts in May, 2019.

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