

LivingArt/Home=Art

School of the Museum of Fine Arts
Crosscurrents Department
Spring 1995
1 Three Hour Period per week
Faculty: Jo-Anne Green

This course is designed to (1) encourage you to think of the limitless possibilities of the world of physical materials; to enhance your curiosity and develop your perceptual skills; and (2), to think of your **home** as a visually rich, comfortable place where art is all around you, not just framed on the walls. You will use found materials to create a vibrant, living aesthetic which integrates personal history and social consciousness. It is rare in western culture that one will find dwellings made by the owners' hand, along with the many decorative and symbolic articles which adorn them; examples will be shown of both ancient and contemporary dwellings which continue to yield valuable evidence attesting to the cultural values, and the environmental and artistic traditions of the people who made them. Students will collect and use **found** objects to make assemblages in the **studio**; and, at **home**, each student will be required to choose a space to *alter* or completely change. You will be encouraged to invite your classmates to visit your "dwellings" and to share a meal with one another towards the end of the semester.

Course Proposal, 1994

EDUCATION

I am a South African artist who has lived in the US since 1983. I have a BFA in Printmaking from the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, an MFA in Painting from UMASS Dartmouth and am nearing the completion of a MS in Management/Art Administration at Lesley College.

WORK EXPERIENCE

I am currently the Development Coordinator for The New England School of Art & Design, and volunteer Fundraiser for the Do While Studio, which has peaked my interest in technology and art. I was an activist for a Fund for a Free South Africa and

have volunteered for a number of not-for-profit organizations, including Artists for Humanity, the Aids Action Committee, and the Massachusetts Breast Cancer Coalition.

PERSONAL HISTORY

As a child/teenager, I was a competitive dancer, swimmer, tennis, and field hockey player. I was forced to cease all physical activities - due to injuries - around the time that I graduated from high school. The transition from an intensely active life of the body to that of the mind and soul was difficult and is ongoing. My intellectual development coincided directly with the development of my creative and expressive skills, leading me into a labyrinth of ideas and emotions. My most recent art work consists of two-dimensional, constructed paintings, installations, and one-of-a-kind books which deal with themes of human aggression, and spirituality. I draw on my past experience as a dancer, and am inspired by world events, evolving media, music, literature, places, spaces, and people. My personal philosophy stems from a willingness to see, hear, learn, remain curious and ever vigilant. As a student of Tai Chi and Chi Gung, my expanding self-knowledge continues to help me to become a more responsible world citizen and, hopefully, a better human being.

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Students are struggling to find their identities in a postmodern culture which pays lip service to diversity and multiculturalism. While institutions attempt to rectify the injustices of monoculturalism, art schools across the nation are offering courses in interdisciplinary exploration and stressing collaboration among their students. Despite their good intentions, the multiple "issues" representing the numerous folds of a **coat of many cultures**- racism, ethnicity, sexism, sexual orientation, censorship, and religion - **obscure the naked truth, class**. If poverty and homelessness, which afflict some colors more than others, is not addressed concurrently with these issues, nothing more than tokenism will be perceived by the disenfranchised. Artists can begin by confronting 'materialism', and discarding it as an end unto itself. Natural resources and manufactured found materials can potentially be elevated to a vibrant, living aesthetic, one which integrates personal history with social consciousness. First, and foremost, a support structure must be created within institutions of learning, addressing the personal needs of students, and strengthening the desire and capacity of artists to serve their communities.

It is customary for students to travel hundreds of miles from their 'families' to attend college or university. The **absence of a familiar community** is a difficult adjustment, but *US society has deemed leaving home a rite-of-passage*; the pressure to "grow up," often internalizes fear and loss, the detriments of which often remain invisible. Transferring from a **rural** to an **urban** environment, or vice versa, is an added

adjustment, one which is rarely discussed and is, therefore, not taken into account when regarding the individual aesthetic. I contend that the willingness of a student to 'forget' a past which may be interpreted as unsophisticated, and the encouragement these students may receive from their instructors to do so, contributes to the sense of dislocation, and the repression of memory. Add to this the burden of a family's disapproval of art as a way of life, what results is **a profound sense of social, psychological and, even, spiritual alienation, further magnified by financial stress.**

A concerted effort is underway by, and for, artists to rejoin society by dealing with issues of **accessibility**; for example, artists join disenfranchised communities to collaborate on murals; art educators fight to be heard in their contention that art be an important part of the basic curriculum, asserting that perception (art) and conception (generally understood as science) go hand-in-hand; revolutionary groups like The Contemporary Museum in Maryland help to empower deprived communities by bringing the 'museum' to the people and initiating projects which are important to those communities to continue developing. Again, while large numbers of artists engage in problem-solving of this sort, who is assisting art students to feel more connected with each other and their 'community' of artists?

Most students who choose to study art are aware that the chances of finding employment in their profession, or of selling their work for financial security are slim. The romantic notion of the starving artist is unacceptable and until the US recognizes the crucial contributions artists make to society, and increases its financial support for them, we as artists and teachers must create innovative programs to support the lifestyles and individual aesthetics of our students. We can begin by simply acknowledging the economic imbalances and cultural differences between them.

By beginning in our own backyard, we might address the concept of 'home'. The idea of **Home=Art** is as old as humankind, yet, in modern times the vast majority of homes in urban areas are built by strangers and decorated with reproductions of things and objects made by machines in factories. In addition, the cultural symbols of 'success', hi-tech machines and gadgets, are accumulated at an alarming rate. Individuals who cannot afford these objects are often reduced to acquiring them at the expense of educating and caring for their children; not having/consuming these status symbols is generally perceived as failure.

Consumerist urban life insures a rather aloof and impersonal habitat. Deprived of access to natural environments - gardens, parks, and forests - and safe neighborhoods, television has, to an alarming degree, replaced human interaction; viewers are deceived into believing that the personal revelations disclosed by desperate, lonely people on talk shows *is* 'relating'. Indeed, faced with an increasingly automated society, human beings are being sold the idea that technology in the home combats isolation and facilitates communication. There are fewer reasons than ever for people to leave their apartments/houses. Why go to a museum when the museum can be brought to you on CD-ROM?

And, what are the aesthetic implications of communication - via cable/fiber optics - which threaten to **replace** the active participation of individuals in their own society?

LivingArt/HOME=ART

Material cultures of people all over the world continue to yield valuable evidence attesting to lifestyle, cultural values, and environmental and artistic traditions, yet it is rare in western culture that one will find homes, household utensils, clothing and jewelry possessing symbolic (religious, traditional, ritualistic) significance, and distinguishing one ethnic group's *notion of beauty from another's*. In South African rural areas, where ethnic traditions remain largely intact, dwellings are made by hand, like many of the articles which decorate the homes and adorn human bodies. The lifestyle of the Ndebele people has become a highly visible example. Yet, in other cases, **rural artists** have individualized their 'constructions' by incorporating more personal and, often, Western symbols, creating homes which are an integral part of their art and their lives as a whole. For example:

"Jackson Hlungwani's residence can only be reached on foot. A pile of adorned carvings leaning up against a wild fig announces the start of a path which leads up to the ruins of the structure in which he has been living, and to which he has been adding since he moved to the area two decades ago. No mortar has been used in the meticulous masonry, even windows have been built without the help of mud or clay to support the large stone lintels. Although a rough thatch covers his 'church' building, his services are held outdoors in a large stone circle fronted by an altar (which consists of several life-size carved figures, a cross made of a glimmering flagpole upon which he has placed reflectors and plastic angels). Not all of the other enclosures are used, but one of them has become what he calls an 'office' and at the time of my visit it contained only a single sculpture."
Gavin Younge

Helen Martin's "Owl House" is a monument to a mystic vision. The outdoor "Camel Yard" is filled with more than two hundred sculptures carefully worked in concrete and glass, over twenty five years. Martins longed for something richer and more beautiful than the life she'd had, and was able to express this longing through her sculptures, and the walls she covered in crushed glass which shimmered in the candlelit interiors at night.

In Khayelitshe Township, a makeshift **city** of hundreds of thousands of displaced black South Africans, residents manage to recycle materials to create rich designs. Typically, an interior would be made by tying cardboard to the inside of a timber/corrugated-iron structure, and then gluing newspaper, gift wrap, printers' run-ons, can and bottle labels, coffee

and candy wrappers, and scraps of fabric to the cardboard for aesthetic appeal.

The US has a parallel culture, primarily in the south. For example, Ed Martins is an eighty-seven-year-old black man who is a resident of Smithville, Texas. Twenty years ago, after building his own house, he began making concrete statues and fit them to the dimensions of his yard- an owl, an effigy that memorializes his dog "Spot", a squirrel, several busts and even some electrified pieces.

Sadly, in the northeast, artists often *adorn* their homes with artwork, and the idea of **Home=Art** has not, to my knowledge, been explored. This course will encourage students to think of their living spaces as 'dwellings' in the sense that my selected examples do, integrating existing architectural elements, and incorporating existing furniture decoration.

THE COURSE

Students will be expected to collect found images and objects, without having to spend money on them. For example, any junk found in the street, including discarded furniture, books, pieces of paper, stones, glass etc. In addition, they would be encouraged to buy food and other household products as much for the aesthetic appeal of their wrappings as their price and taste. Items would be sorted into "**Home**" and "**Studio**" categories:

Part 1: **Studio**. We would make assemblages, and combine more conventional art materials with less conventional ones to make collaged drawings, paintings and sculptures. Students will be encouraged to think about the issues raised in this proposal, and will be possibly be assigned readings to facilitate classroom discussions.

Part 2: **Home**. The second part of the course will require that each student choose a room(s) in their living spaces which they will then alter with acquired objects/materials. I will show slides to give students a pretext/context for this project, and make periodic visits to their "dwellings" to assist with problems and assess their progress. This will be done in their own time with the deadline for completion being the end of the semester. Beginning in the middle of the semester, students will invite the rest of the class to visit their "dwellings" to share a meal with one another.

The purpose of the course is three-fold: **First**, to encourage students to think of the limitless possibilities of the world of physical materials, enhancing their curiosity, encouraging inventiveness, and developing perceptual skills. That is, everywhere they go, they will be *looking* for their materials instead of predictably finding them on the shelves of art stores. **Second**, students will be encouraged to think of the home as an integral part of their well-being, as 'beautiful', interesting, comfortable places, ones in

which they can share food and conversation with fellow students and potential friends. **Third**, that art is different things to different people, and that the stark white walls of galleries and museums are not the only contexts in which art can or should be seen.