

Rochester Institute of Technology

## RIT Digital Institutional Repository

---

Theses

---

6-27-2003

### Talismans of task

Karen Pollitt

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.rit.edu/theses>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Pollitt, Karen, "Talismans of task" (2003). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology. Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the RIT Libraries. For more information, please contact [repository@rit.edu](mailto:repository@rit.edu).

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

TALISMANS OF TASK

by

Karen Pollitt

**June 27, 2003**

## Approvals

Chief Advisor

Professor Bruce Sodervick

8/25/03  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

Associate Advisor

Dr. Thomas Lightfoot

8/25/03  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

Associate Advisor

Professor Luvon Shepard

8/25/03  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

Department Chairperson

Dr. Thomas Lightfoot

8/25/03  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

I, \_\_\_\_\_, prefer to be contacted each time a request for reproduction is made. I can be reached at the following address:

Karen Pollitt

August 8, 2003  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

## CONTENTS

Signature Page .....	ii
Table of Contents .....	iii
INTRODUCTION .....	1
THESIS: TALISMANS OF TASK .....	2
FIGURES:	
Figure 1: <i>Here My Troubles Began</i> .....	21
Figure 2: <i>Animus Lunate</i> .....	21
Figure 3: <i>Yet Unswung</i> .....	21
Figure 4: <i>Fetchkiller</i> .....	22
Figure 5: <i>Used To</i> .....	22
Figure 6: <i>Mentor</i> .....	23
Figure 7: <i>War God</i> .....	23
Figure 8: <i>Astral Jackplane</i> .....	24
Figure 9: <i>Charmed Vessel</i> .....	24
Figure 10: <i>Marker</i> .....	24
Figure 11: <i>Headstrong</i> .....	25
Figure 12: <i>Driven</i> .....	25
Figure 13: <i>Triumvirat</i> .....	25
Figure 14: <i>No Regrets</i> .....	26
Figure 15: <i>Sketch</i> .....	26
Figure 16: <i>Impact Driven</i> .....	26
Figure 17: <i>Bones That Go Places</i> .....	27



Figure 18: <i>The Making and the Doing</i> .....	27
Figure 19: <i>Bone Handles and Blood</i> .....	27
Figure 20: <i>Visceral Knowledge</i> .....	28
Figure 21: <i>All That I Dream</i> .....	28
REFERENCES .....	29

## INTRODUCTION

In my two years of research and exploration into the manipulation of sculptural materials, I used a set of modern and traditional woodworking tools I brought with me to the East Coast. The oldest chisel in my tool roll was in this region before, carried by my grandfather as a young man working his way west from his native Denmark. Grandfather had our tools blessed by the Lutheran pastor; after this, our *hands* were blessed as well. These tools, and my lifelong relationship with their use, became the point of focus for the thesis: Although I used my tools to encounter and to define form in wood, my tools have also defined me.

## TALISMANS OF TASK

Of all the objects I keep around me, it is my tools, the objects that facilitate making and doing, that I have retained most consistently throughout my two-score and two years. In *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and The Self*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi emphasizes that "the tools of one's trade, more than any other set of objects, help to define who we are as individuals" (Csikszentmihalyi 1981, 92). Tools are meant for kinetic involvement--they are instruments of doing. Tools require physical manipulation to release their meaning.

I would define my Self by what I could build with my hands. I like being around my tools--I feel I am in control over my life and my world:

Objects provide an environment charged with personal meanings. They also indicate the goal of a personal self that can assimilate the diverse information of an impersonal world and imbue it with order and significance. When an object is imbued with the qualities of the self, it expresses the being of that person, whether in written words or a chair that was crafted or a photograph. (Csikszentmihalyi 1981, 190)

It is with a given set of tools and materials that I can express what is most uniquely individual about ME. I will not play the gender role dictated by culture. In my thesis exploration, I was not limited to traditional feminine objects. Instead, I looked to my tools, as I once looked to the tools of my grandfather, as the things that will help me define who I am.

I was taught the craft of woodworking by my grandfather, Robert Fulton Nielsen. A Danish immigrant, he had a concise manner in the teaching of making and doing. We made furniture. Furniture is everyday things for everyday circumstances. With what my grandfather taught me, I now investigate art.

The very word "art" often creates more trouble for me than it solves. Often I use the traditional practices of the furniture maker with intent to invest something with a new character.

*Here My Troubles Began* (Figure 1) incorporates many processes once reserved for the

making of furniture; a stack-laminated walnut wand, with outsized splines of cherry wood pinned and joined by purpleheart pegs, balanced and suspended from a steam-bent walnut arc. Two applications of goatskin parchment are stretched tautly on the suspended wand. The finish is Watco® Danish Oil with metallic flakes added.

This is an autobiographical work: the walnut wand is carved to resemble a stylized human right femur, the large leg bone. My own right femur is deformed by a congenital birth defect; I would pass this flawed DNA to my offspring if I had any. Because of this, I have made totemic right femurs at times throughout my life. As primitives have made fetishes or offerings to ensure prosperity, I generated models, proxies of something I coveted. I ended up with a quantity of wooden bones, of which *Here My Troubles Began* is the most recent.

When I began my undergraduate art studies, I did not consider woodworking, my first skill, to be art. Painting, however, a subsequent skill, was *fine* art. This is an outgrowth of the traditional Western division of "high" as opposed to "low" art, which, according to Erwin Panofsky, occurred during the Renaissance (Panofsky 1954, 2-3). The purely decorative paintings and objects of art produced under patronage for the privileged few were exalted over the decorative or functional objects produced for commoners. In *The Culture of Craft*, Peter Dormer discusses Paul Oscar Kristellar's argument for an eighteenth-century hierarchical division:

Such dominating concepts of modern aesthetics as taste and sentiment, genius, originality and creative imagination did not assume their definitive modern meaning before the eighteenth century...Scholars have noticed that the term 'Art' with a capital 'A' and in its modern sense, the related term 'fine arts' (beaux arts) originated in all probability in the eighteenth century. (Dormer 1997, 27)

In concurrence, a view from Crispin Sartwell:

...in the eighteenth century, in response to such developments as a growing middle class and increased secularization of culture, the notion of the "fine arts" was developed. This



notion is characterized by the claim that works of art have no practical purpose and that they are precisely to be contrasted with rather than integrated into, the everyday life of the culture. (Sartwell 1995, 122)

Humans are creatures with a predilection for classification or categorization in the effort to keep everything in its appropriate station. We designate "art" objects as art and "utility" objects as not art. I make single-use and multi-use implements to assist my art making from the same materials that I incorporate into the art. I can discern these as implements (as opposed to art), but others may call them art, regardless of the attitude their maker had toward them. In the simple distillation of a load of raw materials into something that I--and hopefully others--interpret as much more interesting than the materials themselves, I could be making art without even knowing it.

I believe the practices of the artist and those of the craftsman are horizontal, not hierarchical. With this comes the cross-fertilization of processes and materials. In this mode of experimentation and play, the sculptor could become the supreme interdisciplinarian, and these creative explorations defy all the critique-speak superlatives. In searching out my place as a sculptor, I found internal conflict: I once mused in my Baltimore journal, "If I return [home] as an Artist, has the Craftsman gone out walking too many times to make it home?" These two aspects, the artist and the craftsman, were at times at opposition. For me, the creation of a painting was much less satisfying than the creation of a wood object that might have no particular use other than to satisfy my need to call it into physical existence.

This thesis exploration also addressed the need for me to examine my internal definitions of how I work, aside from those of the physical art. For me to ignore my potential for innovation and simply follow traditional practices is a mistake, but to ignore my traditional craftsmanship skills completely is a mistake of equal magnitude. I have not left my traditional skills behind

me. I have, however, become less egocentric regarding skill in execution as a yardstick for sculpture and sculptural experimentation. Therefore, acknowledgement of my traditional practices, but with a focus on where *else* those practices could lead me as an artist, is the path I needed to follow in my thesis exploration.

My process of working is driven by an underlying current. I refer to this as "shoplore," a cross-fertilization of folklore and technology. I acquired my skills, modes of decorum and behavior (such as safety regarding use of tools and machinery) through first-hand interaction. This included the designs, techniques, and expressive structures within the discipline of furniture making and the understanding of the nature of wood.

The material we worked in had its own lore. Grandfather told me that "wood is alive until you burn it, then it is gone", and that "something made out of wood can always be made into something else made out of wood." The concept of wood being "alive" compares to the science of wood: wood expands and contracts with the levels of moisture in the air, wood moves according to its grain flow, wood stores tension, compression, and moisture which varies according to species, which is why milled boards do not always stay flat or straight. One species, English yew, requires expert sense of the tendencies in the grain to use the grain flow to restrain future movement. (A well-built chest of drawers of English yew is truly a harnessing of forces). In Cooper's reference, wood is symbolic of:

Wholeness of the primordial, paradisaal state, shelter at birth (cradle) and death (coffin), forms the marriage bed, gallows cross, and the ship of the dead, the lunar barque. Wood is the *prima materia* of the East, hence Christ as carpenter, the carpenter uses tools symbolic of the divine power of bringing order out of chaos. (Cooper 1978, 194)

*Animus Lunate* (Figure 2) is the earliest sculpture in the exhibition, created in my first quarter at Rochester Institute of Technology. It takes its title from *Animus*, a Jungian term for the male-oriented experiences a woman encounters as a child (and stores these experiences in her

psyche); *Lunate* refers to the crescent moon shapes and vessels (signifiers of the feminine aspect).

The mahogany, walnut, and bloodwood have been shaped as an integral form that is not juxtaposed with non-wood materials, this gives *Animus Lunate* a primal, osseous quality, a bone augmented into an edgy, otherworldly survival tool.

When I use endangered tropical hardwoods, they are usually recycled scraps or pieces that have been reclaimed from old furniture. I have a definite interest in the survival of wood species, and am aware of those species that are scarce. I have learned to augment a common, domestic wood into uncommon-ness simply by carving it.

The psychological properties of wood common to my experience are not overlooked in the technological world. R. Bruce Hoadley, a professor of wood science and technology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, suggests that

...the psychological appeal of wooden objects develops through the interaction of two vital elements working together: nature and mankind. That wood is a direct and unchanged product of nature undeniably attracts us." On the value of time and skill in execution, "Closely related to the value of natural wood in an object is the level of human involvement. Wood was originally used because it was the most appropriate, available, and logical material to satisfy functional needs, but along with production skill there developed a high level of artistic creativity and aesthetic appreciation. (Hoadley 2000, 108-109)

A high level of involvement with materials led me to work in the manner that I do. As my grandfather did, I learned to adore the serendipity within the sordid plodding of everyday existence. As he did, I leave one task undone at the end of each day, so I know immediately what must be accomplished the next morning. I learned to praise the not-so-perfect. The primary concerns regarding furniture are its technical qualities: strength, integrity of design, level of finish, life span of utility. I learned to build furniture that was sturdy, level, and to include a hidden deliberate imperfection. In shop tradition, if you built to absolute perfection, your luck



would go bad.

Margaret Lantis, an anthropologist, sees the need for folklore as "the universal desire to transcend human limitations, the common *subjective* experience derived from the sharing by a people of a body of folklore, and cites among other positive functions of mythology the relief from anxiety it affords" (quoted in Sebeok 1955, 108).

This universal desire often goes unheeded in our modern, "rational" society's overbearing paradigm of consumerism. Suzi Gablik sees a modern need for:

...an alternative mode of consciousness that understands the world in a sacred manner. Because it corresponds to something universal in the collective unconscious, it remains with us, even though our own cultural response has been to deny and repress this mode. We are finally beginning to understand that it may have something crucial to teach us about our own "contingency sickness", a disorder of the modern world that results from being deprived of meaningful ritual or any contact with the great archetypes that nourish the life of the soul." (Gablik 1991, 50)

This hybrid of folklore and technology, shoplore, made a "mundane existence" become culturally and psychologically charged. As a child, I never regretted a single summer day spent in that woodshop; for me, the experience was emotionally charged. The feeling of fellowship, of solidarity, of stability, fulfilled a human need. We were a tribe of makers, working in the pure way of Work, keen to our tasks.

Tools have continued to hold significance for me in social and emotional contexts: ties to long-dead kin and shopmates, effort and time spent in my life of making and doing, an embodiment of cultural beliefs, the foundation from which artistic experimentation has grown. As a child, I could not work well until Grandfather altered adult-male-sized tools to fit my hands. He said, "The tool is made for you, not you for the tool. Make it work well for you." A mere few of Grandfather's tools co-mingle with my own in my chisel roll. I am consciously aware each time I reach for his nineteenth-century skew chisel that I have not allowed myself to



purchase a new one. This quirk of my personality is best explained by Csikszentmihalyi:

Objects provide an environment charged with personal meanings. They also indicate the goal of a personal self that can assimilate the diverse information of an impersonal world and imbue it with order and significance. (Csikszentmihalyi 1981, 190)

Furthermore, in regards to all the sawdust-strewn places in which I have put my tools to their tasks, beginning in my grandfather's shop, where practicum mingled with folklore,

Although we live in physical environments, we create cultural environments within them. We continually personalize and humanize the given environment as a way of both adapting to it and creating order and significance. (Csikszentmihalyi 1981, 122)

Perhaps because my tool use ties my past to my future, my tools have taken on a talismanic quality for me. Ernst Cassirer makes a mythical connection, saying that:

...symbolic condensation is a response to the exciting ambivalence of meaning-laden circumstances. Compressed highly significant experiences are the focus of an isolating attention, can congeal into a mythical image, can be semanticized and thereby spellbound--of any object that both repels and allures. (Cassirer 2001, 10)

The attraction/repulsion concept posed by the Cassirer lecture is at the core of my relationship with my way of working and with the physical work in progress. For me, each physical artwork has its own inherent rhythm, and until the rhythm of my process of creating matches the rhythm of the work-in-process, I am bound to it and in flight from it at the same time.

My investigation culminated in a series of improbable tools. Wood was explored as the primary material, additional materials were researched for their newness, to tie the time-honored to the now. These "tools" served no practical purpose, yet their handles or other graspable areas invited kinetic activity: the works were touched or held by those who would otherwise not touch "art." This importance of tactile involvement is stressed by Kenneth Frampton: "It is symptomatic of the priority given to sight that we find it necessary to remind ourselves that the tactile is an important dimension in the perception of the built form" (Frampton 1983, 28).

The line between art and utility was blurred enough to invite this tactile curiosity, though

the large glass-bladed axe of *Yet Unswung* (Figure 3) can never be used as one would use the common tool that inspired it. The spirit of kinetic potential remains. The sculptures are inspired by hand tools, which carry a language of human social history. Hand tools are human-powered, and can be grasped and used instantly, and deliver an immediate response. Each viewer brings experiences of having taken a tool in hand; this completes the artwork and makes it whole.

During the gallery presentation of my thesis exhibition, I decided to not post an artist's statement. Any written explanation would have dulled the unique dialogue between each gallery visitor and the work: I wanted to allow freedom of interpretation in many ways and forms. Miguel Tamen asserts that a shared language (in the case of *Talismans of Task*, I call this the language of the Making and the Doing) has a fellowship of believers:

There are very often beliefs in certain special abilities, acquired through repeated experience, innate intuition, and so on, as well as beliefs about the virtues of specialized knowledge that can be learned and taught, often in special places..." (Tamen 2001, 134)

In the interest of the strongest relationship between the viewer and my work in the exhibition, my work had to communicate on its own.

The sculptures in the exhibition were results of both additive and subtractive means of working. Rough sawn plank hardwoods were milled and stack-laminated, then alternately carved and shaped to produce "handles" with single or multiple graspable areas. "Toolheads" were generated of plasma cut sheet steel, carved Lexan™, carved industrial graphite, cast aluminum, fused and *pate d'verre* glass, and wood.

I have experimented with materials to best unite the past with the future. This juxtaposition of new and old in *Fetchkiller* led me to merge Lexan™ (a "bulletproof" material that is still capable of being forced to fit my whims) and the wood (a figured maple of great hardness and durability). J. Dewey, in a passage quoted from *Art as Experience* by

Csikzentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, addresses the need to mingle the traditional with the cutting edge:

The junction of new and old is not a mere composition of forces, but is a re-creation in which the present impulsion gets form and solidity while the old, the 'stored,' material is literally revived, given new life and soul through having to meet a new situation... Things in the environment that would otherwise be mere smooth channels or else blind obstructions become means, media. At the same time, things retained from past experience that would grow stale from routine or inert from lack of use, become coefficients in new adventures and put on a raiment of fresh meaning. (Csikszentmihalyi 1981, 181)

*Fetchkiller* (Figure 4) is a tool that manifests an old Scandinavian belief that a recently deceased person leaves behind a fetch (an earthbound essence that may seek out a newborn within their lineage, since an infant has no strong self-identity), to live another, albeit vicarious, life. Nordic Folklorist Reimund Kvideland describes this still-living belief:

The concept of *fylgje* (fetch) is described as an accompanying spirit. In ancient times, the *fylgje* was credited with a protective function, revealed when a person was in a critical situation. (Kvideland 1989, 122)

It was a widely held Scandinavian belief that the fetch seeks a newborn of the opposite gender, so that it can have more influence on its host. The concept of the fetchkiller tool is older than the introduction of Christianity into Scandinavia, but the influence of Christianity made these curious implements quite popular. Fetchkillers are traditionally supple wooden wands or staves waved protectively over the cradle; in direct contrast to tradition, I have given this one a stout maple handle and a blade of Lexan™.

*Used To* (Figure 5) is another fetchkiller design. Its title is intentionally ambiguous, so that it can represent the past or the future, depending on one's interpretation. The toolhead is built from layers of sheet glass, kilnformed in a sweeping arc; a laced two-part leather wrap denotes a handle, and a wrapped leather strand emanates from the handle to a smooth walnut "anchor-stone." The tool is grounded in a stack-laminated cherrywood and walnut arc, reflecting



the arc of the blade. The base enables the work to stand on two precarious feet.

In several of the sculptures, marks created by my tools were allowed to remain. The implication of utility is best achieved by the betrayal of the workings of my hands and my tools, not by the pristine surface of mechanized production, for which the "art-speak" word would be "the milled response" to the surface. By giving a sculpture a patina of utility, or by interpreting a common tool as a non-functional work of art, I meld my past to my future. I am best served in living in the absolute "now", so that I will not hold the progress of a sculpture to an ironclad planned result. When I consider the "what if..." of spontaneity, I allow the work to have its life. My work carries part of my life; my hands, my guts, and my tools were here, in that place, at one time.

In all this exploration, I strove to create work that looked effortless in its execution, no matter how arduous the processes of sculpting were for me. I wanted each work to appear that it may have enjoyed being called into existence. This is a celebration of expressive, explorative creating.

Many of the tools I chose to explore and to reinterpret are already charged with symbolism. They have been interpreted as stirrers, hammers, axes, cutters, planes, and knives.

*Mentor* (Figure 6) is a hammer-inspired form. The toolhead is cast, patinated aluminum with a purpleheart insert. The shaft is carved mahogany with laced leather wrapping to designate a gripping surface, and the shaft terminates in a flawed vessel at the opposite end.

Hammers as symbols represent formative, masculine force. When combined with anvils as companions, they join to symbolize the formative forces of nature and creation in both the masculine (as active) and the feminine (as passive) aspects. Hammers designed for striking or crushing are symbolic of justice and vengeance (Cooper 1978, 77-78).

There is a dichotomy regarding many tools; although their intended purposes may be either benign or beneficial, they can be easily turned into weapons in a time of need. Many early pole-mounted weapons have their origins in agricultural implements (flails, maces, poleaxes). I have sought out this benign ferocity for many of my works. *War God* (Figure 7) is restrained ferocity, created in the time of looming war in the Middle East.

*War God* is the most "dressed up" of my sculptures, for its talismanic assumption of hunter/warrior/predator aspects. The handle is white oak, carved to appear physically twisted between the ring handle and the two black walnut "blades." The blades were carved to resemble chert spearheads made by early humans. It appears that the blades are barely restrained in their fragile scabbards. The walnut blade edges are sheathed in goatskin parchment; parchment is the material on which many truces and treaties were inscribed. The parchment is laced with jute twine to tautly stretched leather rigging, and this in turn is nailed to the wood. The piece is figurative: a posturing, brawny bully with an upraised fist. Amanda Fernbach, a theorist on fetishism, describes our fascination with donning the skins of animals: "Leather is a totem, giving the wearer the power of the animal it once belonged to..." (Fernbach 2002, 17). Smaller talismans (a black feather interrupted at midpoint by a bead of white glass, a weathered, sharpened bone, a ruff of carnivore fur) represent those items to which we assign power and gather them to us for reassurance in time of great need.

*Astral Jackplane* (Figure 8) is a reference to shoplore and to its balance of practicum and folklore. The maple body is carved, oiled, with an end knob painted lapiz blue; this rests on stacked mahogany "stones" supporting its walnut handle. The blade form is kilnformed glass, drilled and sewn into the maple handle, and the laces are bound to six carved purpleheart pins. The staggered placement of three handles lends this piece a crawling or ambling quality, as if

this tool is never at rest. The piece has another balance; the balance of the practical, useful material versus the psychological mystique that wood possesses.

The vessel in *Charmed Vessel* (Figure 9) is found at the top of the cherrywood handle; its interior is gold-leafed. Root forms grasp the bowl as if in protection from a jute-wrapped serpentine handle that winds up from a base of two blades and a pierced ring form. The work is an encryption of a question that is posed by our globalized society: Can we satisfy ourselves without hurting others?

*Marker* (Figure 10), the largest sculpture in the thesis series, is a stout, twisted, stack-laminated cherrywood handle that sports a rounded "blade" of industrial graphite. The curious hands of gallery visitors found the wood to be much warmer than the graphite; as a result, the cherrywood handle has become patinated with graphite.

Though an initial glance may infer the sculpture as a cutter, a closer inspection reveals it to be a monumental manifestation of the ubiquitous pencil. Our first written language is the drawn line. The first implications of coherent early human communication lay in cave drawings; the first musings of any child are scribbles of figures that symbolize immediate family. Throughout human history, the writing implement has proven itself to be the mightiest tool of all. Thus *Marker*, a pencil of immense proportion, becomes the flagship of the exhibition.

Although a placard in the thesis show read "Yet Unsung," that piece's true title is *Yet Unswung* (Figure 3). Both titles, however, are equally appropriate. The toolhead is a stylized axe; it is composed of shards of clear glass that have been kilnformed in the *pate d' verre* method. The walnut shaft stands upright, presenting this tool for immediate use (if one would dare to swing a glass-headed axe). The walnut is carved with hints of organic forms: (maybe) a bird, a vine, a burl, a tail. First my tools, and then, later, curious hands have wandered here.



The carved, convoluted shaft terminates in a smooth handle that sports a wrap of sparkly blue vinyl fabric. The fabric, used for customized vehicle upholstery, is an acknowledgement of the Southern California car culture that is a part of where I live.

In this exhibition, my most prevalent reinterpretations involve cutting tools. The blade forms chosen best resemble those of the axe. The axe, a tool used by every human culture as both tool and weapon, is regarded as:

a symbol of spiritual penetration (to the very heart of the mystery) as well as an instrument of deliverance. The axe opens up the ground, enters it, symbolizes union with heaven, fertilization. The axe is also regarded as an instrument of separation and differentiation, it cuts, separates, grades. (Julien 1996, 29)

The axe is the chosen weapon of many cultural warrior gods, symbolic of wrath and destruction, "a symbol of spiritual penetration (to the very heart of the mystery) as well as an instrument of deliverance" (Julien 1996, 29-30). In Scandinavian lore, the axe accompanies a divine being, a chieftain, or a warrior (Cooper 1978, 16).

*Headstrong* (Figure 11) and *Driven* (Figure 12) are both self-descriptives of me as a human being. These are tools from the same wood pattern, though they were stack-laminated as mirror opposites and were carved very differently. The blades are similar in size and shape: the interior surface of the blade for *Headstrong* is obsessively tooled in a looped, squiggle pattern (people often confuse my last name with Jackson Pollock's). A heroic female torso, head, and arms, clad in metallic armor, was carved for the handle of *Headstrong*. *Headstrong* is displayed face down to a piece of mirror, my reference to the morning ritual of facing myself in the mirror and psychologically armoring myself for the day ahead.

*Driven* was designed to be a riddle of opposites: the steel blade (except on its beveled edges) has been given a layer of mahogany veneer; the basswood handle of *Driven* was given a smooth, stylized bone appearance, finished in several ink glazes to resemble a queasy, green

beetle metallic. The handle surface of *Driven* is clad in a goatskin parchment apron with the addition of a leather strap.

There are multiple handles and blades on *Triumvirat* (Figure 13), a suggestion that there is no single correct way for utility, but rather a permutation of possibilities. This work stands upright on its two outer blades and one outrigger handle. A central carved Lexan™ blade is held aloft in the bottom center. The main cherrywood handle rises from the center and sprawls in several directions. This cherrywood would not have been well suited for furniture, because the dark inner (juvenile) growth is too dark in contrast to the lighter growth of the outer, mature wood. In the stack lamination process, the darker and lighter woods have been mixed; these form an overall pattern resembling grain lines. The wood is finished with four liberally applied coats of Watco® Danish Oil. *Triumvirat* is my acknowledgement of the masters, mentors, and teachers who have influenced my ways of working, when I create work, I call upon their guidance, their knowledge, even their criticism--all this I have stored in my memory.

*No Regrets* (Figure 14) was the last work completed for the thesis exhibition. The title sums up the last three years I have spent away from my home and family while studying at two different institutions. Two handles hold an angular blade aloft; a third handle, a complex, figurative element, appears to "ride" the steel blade, which points upward and outward. The steel is ground in a pattern and left shiny, the carved cherry wood handles bear a wash of emerald green and a subsequent finish of Watco® Danish Oil with metallic flakes added. The handles have a feel of history; the blade, one of newness.

Most of the tools I have created are bladed, to best correlate with the "real" tools that I use. Blades are associated with sacrifice, vengeance, death, severance, division, and freeing. These blades I have designed contain feminine curves or openings and masculine angles or



points. The fact that the blades may not even be capable of cutting at all is irrelevant; it is the implication of purpose that spurs the viewer to ponder: in which world would this implement function, if it does not function in this physical world we all share?

I think most humans live between two worlds, that ethereal world of our minds and the physical world of our bodies. The artist is particularly gifted with dragging an object from the mind-world into the physical world. Ernst Cassirer explores this need: "In creating meanings which remain self-identical, symbolization creates a medium for thoughts which can transcend the temporal stream of consciousness" (Cassirer 2001, 10).

The greatest amount of flux of my mind-world and my sculpture lies in the countless sketches, drawings, and paintings. I have explored juxtapositions and constructions, shapes and forms, even attached three-dimensional elements.

The sepia-ink *Sketch* (Figure 15) is an early step in my thesis research. The ink is warm in color; it flows quickly, and it leaves my brush almost as fast as I can think. The shapes are formative, not resolved, and leave capacity for several ways of interpretation. Rarely is there a push for color/material differentiation, it is overall form, and its relation to similar forms that is explored.

*Impact Driven* (Figure 16) is a term for any tool that requires sharp quick force to function. It can also mean the goal of any visual artist, to have "impact" on an audience has "driven" us to continue to work as we do. Metallic and colored inks were added for impact. I wanted to describe motion in tools that are at rest. See the descriptive of *Mentor* regarding the symbolism of hammers.

*Bones That Go Places* (Figure 17), is an ethereal ink drawing. The title comes from a mildly retarded adult's (overheard) description of the drawn forms. This work is one for

ideation, a distillation of an amorphous wash drawing into handles and toolhead shapes. The images are arranged as if on a wall, ready to use. The paper has been treated with a faint metallic wash; the forms appear pushed into the surface as a result.

Another drawing, *The Making And The Doing* (Figure 18), describes the cacophony of activity in which physical sculptural effort emerges. It is inspired by a cartoon glyph for speed, a series of quick, horizontal lines culminating in a cloud. These I arranged radially, to impart sudden speed or noise or impact in all directions.

The first painting in the exhibition, *Bone Handles And Blood* (Figure 19) is a cluster of tool forms and nondescript objects meant to imply that these implements will never truly be at rest, although these as elements in a painting simply sit on the wall. This is the dichotomy of art and utility.

The stuff of knowing is in taking apart and reassembling; much of my work is the additive and subtractive taking turns. With texture paste, black and white gessoes, and ink glazes, and industrial graphite, the surface of *Visceral Knowledge* (Figure 20) was alternately added to and eliminated. A die grinder with a tungsten carbide bit was utilized first to pierce and then to actually draw on the surface, yielding patterns that look at times like brushstrokes. There is a spinal column with a burnt-orange ink splash; this presents a queasy literal visceral representation, visceral knowledge; to me, the knowing of my own soul. The three-dimensional toolhead in the lower right is band-sawn common white pine glued at the axis, then inked, sanded, and made into an integral part of the work well enough that its bulk goes unnoticed at first glance.

The third and final painting in the exhibition, *All That I Dream* (Figure 21) is a jumble of tool ideation in which negative and positive space become ambiguous. This piece was made in

the throes of anticipation of a time of heavy work, when the forms to spring from this research filled my mind. Dr. Tom Lightfoot, head of RIT's School of Art, described this diptych as the "painting of a sculptor."

My need to produce these artifacts of my mind that are connected by signifiers (handles, blades) to physical objects that produce them is undeniably a form of fetish making. We, as human beings, make objects representational of things we covet. Makers of objects must first have a passion for objects. Csikszentmihalyi alludes to a person's identity "becoming enmeshed with one's instruments of production, that the psychological charge of symbolic elements can vary, but it is emphasis on survival, one's skills, one's responsibilities" (Csikszentmihalyi 1981, 108-109). This unabashed fetish making, whether it is femurs or interpretable tools, is part of my own definition of Self, and a way of celebrating what I have learned, and what I have learned to do. Ernst Cassirer links what we do to what we think: "Symbolic form is thus originally generated by a stylizing force, which condenses the dramatic impact of experience" (Cassirer 2001, 10).

I am inspired in my mind-world by common objects in the world of the physical. These undergo a transmutation in the mind-based world and return in new guise to the physical world, achieved through a distillation of the physical effort, skills, tools, and materials regarding art-making, with mind-based intuitive thought. M.J. Herskovits, in *Man and His Works*, emphasizes that creativity cannot be examined separately from a cultural sphere of influence: "The creative life does not lie outside the enculturative experience...in his experimentation" the artist is "unwittingly" guided by cultural language and perception (Herskovits 1972, 110).

Professor Howie Lee Weiss, of Maryland Institute College of Art, lectured that "We cannot escape ourselves; we are present in our own works, even if we try to follow someone



else's rules for producing an artwork." I know that I cannot fully eschew my background in traditional practices, even in the farthest-flung experimentation. This notion is further emphasized in *The Social Meanings of Money and Property*, in which Kenneth Doyle states:

We learn primarily through direct experience in social interaction, secondarily from "mediated" experiences--television, movies, magazines, textbooks and so forth--in both cases pairing social messages filtered through (operational modes of behavior) with bodily sensations characteristic of our temperament. We store these impressions in memory. (Doyle 1999. 187)

The mediated experience pales in comparison to the real-time "hands-on" physicality of actually doing. The sensory needs, the feel of a truly sharp edge passing through material, the sound of machinery at full speed, the look and feel of a finished surface, can only be accommodated by doing, not by merely watching.

In defining the nature of making, Peter Dormer, editor of *The Culture of Craft*, focuses upon reliance on tacit knowledge:

Tacit knowledge is acquired through experience, this is the knowledge that enables you to do things as opposed to writing or talking about them. Tacit knowledge is the practical know-how, learned or absorbed by individuals through practice and from other people, but not necessarily through media. Media, though effective in helping a student understand principles of practice, but the actual business of learning is usually best done by face-to-face teaching or apprenticeship with people who are practically knowledgeable. If knowledgeable people fail to pass on their tacit knowledge, that knowledge will disappear. (Dormer 1997, 147-148)

Today's technological society tends to rely on audio-visual media as a means of teaching, so that knowledge gained through modernized teaching approaches tends to be diluted. In the many art-making processes, practical knowledge can be gained only through the directness of "hands-on" or tactile experience. It is imperative to the strength and survival of any art practice that it is unselfishly shared and taught by those people who are skilled in it. At this level of sharing, we conquer the divide between theory and practice. When teachers persist in teaching other teachers we achieve the greatest form of professional development.

Makers of objects must have a passion for objects. The tools of making and doing also build our identities as human individuals: According to Karl Marx, humans create their existence primarily through productive efforts (quoted in Csikszentmihalyi 1981, 92).

Csikszentmihalyi further contends that:

Productive action reveals a great deal about the worker's ingenuity, skills, endurance, as well as his or her limitations. Thus whatever information we get about ourselves from productive acts becomes a component of the Self as a whole. (Csikszentmihalyi 1981, 92-93)

My human relationship to tools as signifiers and definers is a complex one. From one perspective, there is the simple invitation of kinetic activity, that the use of the tool in hand releases its meaning. From another, there is also the emotionally charged contemplative meaning of an old skew chisel, taken in hand, which ties my artist's questions and explorations to the craftsman's traditional practices of my grandfather, Robert Fulton Nielsen. This culturally induced desire to honor him and my other masters, mentors, or teachers, has led me here.

Grounded in tradition, but with an eye to the new, I will move forward. I will continue to make drawings for ideation, but I will not consider these as unchangeable plans when I translate these ideas into various sculptural materials. I have learned to cherish the sculptural journey as equally as my arrival at a completed sculpture. My mind is capable of freeing the "now" from the desire for completion, so the work has room for exploration and change as it progresses, at its own pace, to completion. I have learned, thanks to the patient tutelage of Professor Bruce Sodervick, to work with a fluctuating "minds sketch" in my head, which changes, unfettered, with each "what if..." In the frenzy of unquestioned exploration, in the transmutation of humble implements into *Talismans of Task*, I learned to honor myself.





Figure 1: *Here My Troubles Began*. Hardwoods, mixed media. 21" x 17" x 11". 2003. (photograph by Elias Andreas Christakos, used by permission)

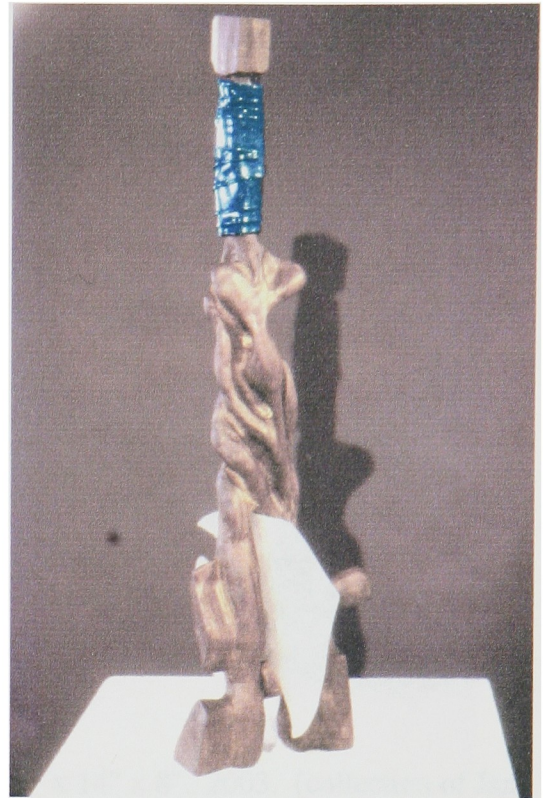


Figure 3: *Yet Unswung*. Wood, glass, fabric. 39" x 16" x 11". 2003. (photograph by Professor Bruce Sodervick, used by permission)



Figure 2: *Animus Lunate*. Mixed hardwoods. 16" x 10" x 7". 2001.





Figure 4: *Fetchkiller*. Carved maple and Lexan™. 9" x 14" x 8". 2003. (collection of Jane Kuppinger, Rochester, NY; photograph by Elias Andreas Christakos, used by permission))

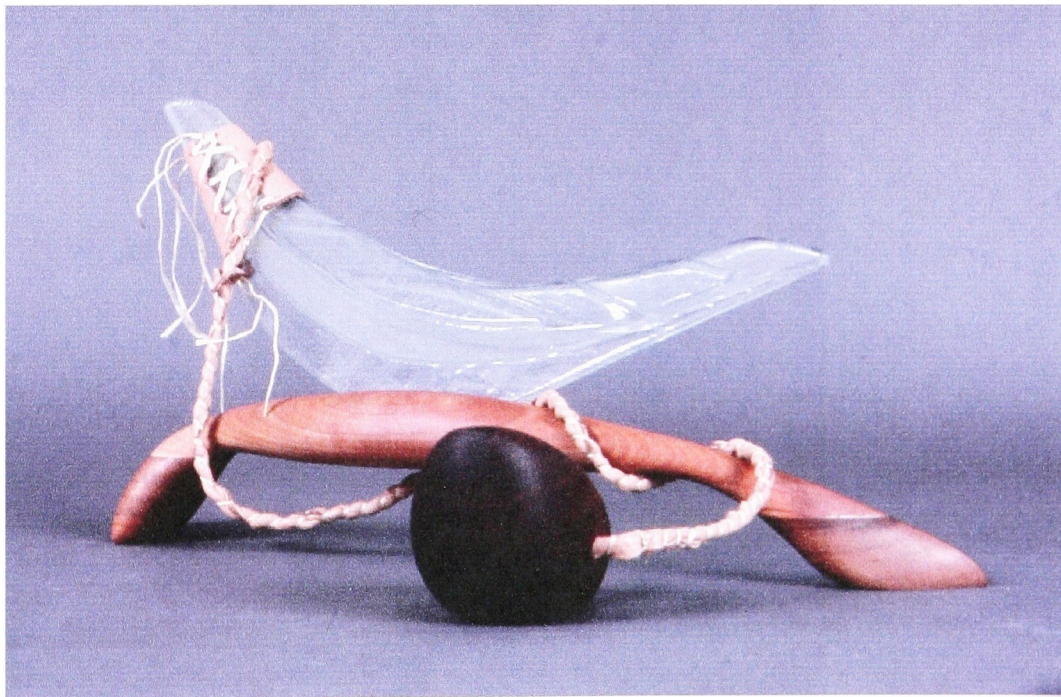


Figure 5: *Used To*. Glass, wood, leather. 9" x 15" x 6". 2002. (collection of Professor Bruce Sodervick, Sodus, NY; (photograph by Samuel K. Hamilton, used by permission))





Figure 6: *Mentor*. Cast aluminum, wood, leather. 15" x 9" x 4". 2002. (photograph by Elias Andreas Christakos, used by permission)



Figure 7: *War God*. Oak, walnut, mixed media. 22" x 28" x 19". 2003. (photograph by Professor Bruce Sodervick, used by permission)





Figure 8: *Astral Jackplane*. Wood, glass, mixed media. 22" x 28" x 9". 2002. (collection of Jane Kuppinger, Rochester, NY; (photograph by Samuel K. Hamilton, used by permission))



Figure 9: *Charmed Vessel*. Hardwoods, mixed media. 12" x 24" x 8". 2003.



Figure 10: *Marker*. Cherrywood, graphite. 81" x 29" x 27". 2003. (photograph by Professor Bruce Sodervick, used by permission)



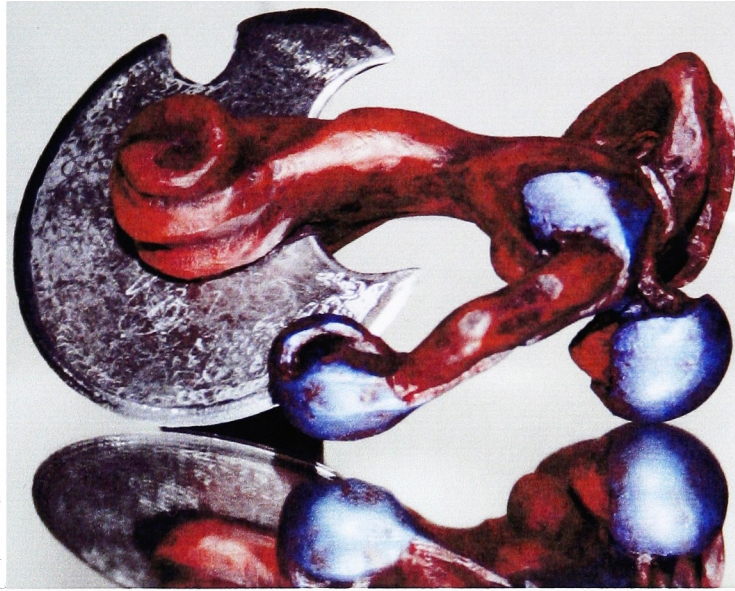


Figure 11: *Headstrong*. Wood, steel. 9" x 6" x 4". 2003.



Figure 12: *Driven*. Wood, steel, leather. 9" x 8" x 6". 2003. (photograph by Elias Andreas Christakos, used by permission)



Figure 13: *Triumvirat*. Cherrywood, steel, carved Lexan™. 40" x 23" x 19". 2003. (photograph by Professor Bruce Sodervick, used by permission)





Figure 14: *No Regrets*. Cherrywood, steel.  
14" x 12" x 4". 2003.



Figure 15: *Sketch*. Sepia ink on paper.  
30" x 22". 2002. (photograph by Jeremy  
Floto, used by permission)



Figure 16: *Impact Driven*. Inks on paper. 30" x 22". 2002. (collection of Jeremy Floto,  
Brooklyn, NY; (photograph by Jeremy Floto, used by permission))





Figure 17: *Bones That Go Places*. Inks on paper. 30" x 22". 2002. (Permanent Collection of the Wallace Library, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY; photograph by Jeremy Floto, used by permission)



Figure 18: *The Making and the Doing*. Inks on paper. 30" x 22". 2002. (photograph by Jeremy Floto, used by permission)



Figure 19: *Bone Handles and Blood*. Acrylic on board. 35" x 35". 2002.





Figure 20: *Visceral Knowledge*. Mixed media on board. 36" x 34.5". 2003.



Figure 21: *All That I Dream*. Diptych: mixed media on board. 35" x 37" (left panel) and 22" x 35" (right panel). 2003.

## REFERENCES

- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.*, New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Cassirer, Ernst. "The Liberating Power of Symbols." In *The Liberating Power of Symbols: Philosophical Essays*, edited by Jürgen Habermas, translated by Peter Dews. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001.
- Chadwick, Whitney. *Women, Art, and Society*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1996.
- Cooper, J. C. *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1978.
- Csikzentmihalyi, Mihaly and Eugene Rochberg-Halton. *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Dormer, Peter, ed. *The Culture of Craft: Status and Future*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1997.
- Doyle, Kenneth O. *The Social Meanings of Money and Property: In Search of a Talisman*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1999.
- Ellis Davidson, H. R. *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988.
- Fernbach, Amanda. *Fantasies of Fetishism, from Decadence to the Post-Human*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002.
- Frampton, Kenneth. "The Visual Versus the Tactile" Foster, Hal, ed. *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture Culture*. New York: New Press, 1983.
- Gablik, Suzi. *The Reenchantment of Art*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998.
- Guerber, H. A. *Myths of the Norsemen from the Eddas and Sagas*. New York: Dover Publications, 1992.
- Habermas, Jurgen. *The Liberating Power of Symbols: Philosophical Essays*. Trans. by Peter Dews. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001.
- Herskovits, M.J. *Man and His Works*. (403) New York, 1950. Sebeok, Thomas, Ed. *Myth: A Symposium*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972.
- Hoadley, R. Bruce. *Understanding Wood: A Craftsman's Guide to Wood Technology*. Newtown, Connecticut: Taunton Press, 2000.



- Julien, Nadia. *The Mammoth Dictionary of Symbols--Understanding the Hidden Language of Symbols*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 1996.
- Kristellar, P. O. "The Modern System of the Arts". *Journal of the History of Ideas*. 1951 (p. 510) Peter Dormer, Ed. *The Culture of Craft: Status and Future*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1997.
- Kvideland, Reimund and Sehmsdorf, Henning K. in collaboration with Elizabeth Simpson. *Nordic Folklore: Recent Studies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Lantis, Margaret. "Nunivak Eskimo Personality as Revealed in the Mythology", *Anthropological papers of the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, AK*, 1953. Sebeok, Thomas. *Myth: A Symposium*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972.
- Lee, Leonard. *The Complete Guide To Sharpening*. Newtown, Connecticut: Taunton Press, 1995.
- Lindquist, Mark. *Sculpting Wood: Contemporary Tools & Techniques*. Worcester, Massachusetts: Davis Publications, 1986.
- Panofsky, Erwin. *Galileo as a Critic of the Arts*. The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1954. (pp. 2-3) Peter Dormer, Ed. *The Culture of Craft: Status and Future*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1997.
- Pye, Christopher J. *Woodcarving: Tools, Materials & Equipment*. East Sussex, UK: Guild of Master Craftsman Publications, Ltd., 2000.
- Rich, Jack C. *The Materials and Methods of Sculpture*. New York: Dover Publications, 1988.
- Sartwell, Crispin. *The Art of Living: Aesthetics of the Ordinary in World Spiritual Traditions*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.
- Sebeok, Thomas, Ed. *Myth: A Symposium*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1972.
- Tamen, Miguel. *Friends of Interpretable Objects*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Walker, Barbara G. *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects*. San Francisco: Harper, 1988.
- Watson, Aldren A. *Hand Tools: Their Ways and Workings*. New York: Lyons Press, 1982.
- Weiss, Howie Lee. Unpublished lecture given at Maryland Institute College of Art, April 2001.