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Destruction of the cute and delicate

A Thesis Presented

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Abstract of the Thesis

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The purpose of this thesis is to explain the reasoning behind my sociopathic behaviors toward the cute and delicate figurine collections of the average American society.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	pg. v
Acknowledgments	pg. vi
Introduction	pg. 1
Sculptural Collage	pg. 3
Artist Influences and Inspirations	pg. 3
Destruction Process and Artistic Creations	pg. 5
Melted Appropriations	pg. 14
Artistic Influences and Inspirations	pg. 14
Destruction Process and Artistic Creations	pg. 16
<u>Recent Victims Exhibition</u>	pg. 17
<u>Chance Exhibition</u>	pg. 21
Conclusion	pg. 25
Bibliography	pg. 26

List of Figures

1. Figure 1. *Teach Me How to Play Ball*, Porcelain collage, 2012 pg. 6
2. Figure 2. *The Shaver*, Porcelain collage, 2012 pg. 8
3. Figure 3. *ManBaby*, Porcelain Collage, 2012 pg. 10
4. Figure 4. *Butt Tails*, Porcelain collage, 2013 pg. 11
5. Figure 5. *My Delicate Horses*, Porcelain collage, 2013 pg. 12
6. Figure 6. *Erased DeKooning* 1953. Robert Rauschenberg pg. 15
7. Figure 7. *Egg is and was?* Melted Waterford Crystal, 2012 pg. 17
8. Figure 8. *Candy dish is and was?* Melted glass, 2012 pg. 18
9. Figure 9. *Turkey is and was?* Melted glass, 2012 pg. 19
10. Figure 10. *Koala is and was?* Melted glass, 2012 pg. 19
11. Figure 11. *Blue Vase is and was?* (Detailed view of Recent Victims) 2012 pg. 20
12. Figure 12. Recent Victims pedestal display, 2012 pg. 21
13. Figure 13: Before photographs of victims in the thesis exhibit. 2013 pg. 22
14. Figure 14. *Mouse is and was?* Melted Fenton Appropriation. 2013 pg. 23
15. Figure 15: Front view of pedestals of Chance exhibit. 2013 pg. 24

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Introduction

Within American culture, collecting as well as displaying of glass or porcelain figurines, plates, or various other novelty objects may be considered a conventional practice among middle and upper class families. Generally, “average” or working-class American families, who possibly are unable to afford such collectable items, showcase these objects with great pride and emotional importance. The collectable items become symbols of perfection and balance to these families, although, in reality they may be covering secrets of disease, abuse, or dysfunction present in the household. This notion is the underlying premise of my artistic practice, and the basis for my idea to destroy mass-produced, popular craft objects and reconfigure them into perversely unfamiliar, yet highly altered, renditions of the original objects.

Based on personal experiences and observations, it is highly common for middle-class American families to place excessive importance on materialistic creations for the purpose of projecting the appearance of happiness and perfection to others. In addition to securing a sense of “normality,” these superfluous collectibles hold various degrees of sentimental value, which is altered with the melting and breaking destruction involved in my artistic process. Indeed, this destruction changes the value of these objects on many levels. The socially ascribed value is broken and reconstructed, eliminating the portrayal of happiness and balance in the original object. The consumer and monetary value assigned by the manufacturer is also demolished when breaking the object. Finally, the artistic process heightens the item’s value from a household trinket to a fine art object, and moves the display of such item’s from a household dresser to a gallery and onto a pedestal.

The destructive process in my practice is meant to unveil the unhealthy behaviors associated with the act of collecting these objects, as well as to reveal the fallacy in the

appearances of normality, perfection, and the futility of these attempts for class elevation. The new sculptural constructions show grotesque, disembodied, sexually tense, uncomfortable, yet humorous gestures that hint at the reality of dysfunction, violence, disease, and secrecy inside the American family household. These secrets are hidden behind the appearance of innocence, and false happiness embodied in these figurines, which are heightened by the emotional importance they are assigned by these families. The destruction of these objects reflects the objectives underlying Minimalist artistic practices and related artists. Specifically, Jackie Winsor (1980) and Donald Judd (1964) emphasized the elimination of non-essential materials and form, and the utility of the least amount of elements, while expressing the maximum effect possible, in the development of artistic creations. Donald Judd's clean and stark presentation of his wall mounted boxes and Jackie Winsor's strict use of limited materials in a minimal structure affected my formal results and decisions.

The target collections in the destruction process are familiar collections of the American household and of my own personal upbringing. Such collections are American Fenton Glass Company, Austrian Swarovski crystal, American Lenox porcelain, German Hummel figurines, and American Cabbage Patch ceramic adornments. Fenton and Swarovski glass companies are known for the solid glass figurines of kitschy animal subject matters, as Lenox, Hummel and Cabbage Patch produce cute and innocent ceramic figurative statuettes.

With respect to the destruction of these collectables, two distinct destruction processes were incorporated into the overall project. The first process involved the physical breaking or shattering of different ceramic figurines, and re-attaching the pieces in an irregular or atypical manner re-constructing the original object. Through the application of this destruction process several abnormal sculptural collages were created. The second method of destructive was

comprised of melting numerous glass statuettes in a ceramic kiln, which produced original and unconventional appropriated glass objects. While the primary focus of both destructive processes was to expose the exaggerated importance that “average” Americans place on these collectables, each process included separate inspirations by other artists, unique methods of eradication, and vastly distinct outcomes.

Sculptural Collages

Artistic Influences and Inspirations

Transgression art was coined in the early 1980s, and refers to artistic practices involving the deliberate violation of societal norms, morals, and conventional boundaries. Contrary to traditional art, transgressive artists primarily focus on the “shock” value of their creations, which are typically offensive, sexually graphic, violent in nature, and depicts mental illness. Paul McCarthy, a prominent artist within this genre, is well known for his transgressive performance art depicting obscene and grotesque physiological behaviors such as self-mutilation, sexually explicit acts, and inappropriately playing with various foods (Werner 153). Moreover, a majority of McCarthy’s video art includes different mental illnesses or abnormal mental states (Werner 153).

According to McCarthy, “a lot of what has been conjured up by this culture [American] is to be mistrusted,” and that a majority of Americans’ cause grave doubts to be raised surrounding reality (Werner 155). In addition to society, he expressed severe mistrust in the American entertainment industry by challenging its sanitized image with a dramatically opposite impression highlighting the existing crime rates, violence, and child molestation (O’Reilly 170).

McCarthy's influences to my practice are his vulgar representation of Disney's pop mass media icons such as Snow White's Seven Dwarves and Pinocchio. With the combination of his transgression art and his interest in pop icons he takes these popular subjects and creates an offensive and shocking performance or sculpture with their familiar forms. His practice exposes the outlandish behaviors of popular culture by creating intense aggressive obscene creations. Similarly, my intention in my practice is to expose outlandish behaviors by appropriating and destroying popular culture inspired craft collections and reconstructing them in awkward manners.

Destruction Process and Artistic Creations

The structural collage aspect of my project entailed actually breaking or smashing various ceramic figurines, originally produced by different popular designers, and gluing the pieces to one another in an abstract and unconventional manner. The reconstruction of the broken figurines was an arbitrary process and did not involve any specific guidelines or standards with respect to selecting particular pieces. Therefore, determining which pieces to attach to one another or the rearrangement of the ceramic fragments was primarily based upon personal expression, relational tension and intrinsic emotions. Among the several collages I created, two of them originated from Norman Rockwell Hummel collection. Unique to these specific collages, these original figurines belonged to my paternal grandmother and were accidentally destroyed while being mailed long-distance to my family following her death. Rather than restoring the statuettes, I embraced this unexpected destruction and used these broken figurines in my artistic practice.

The German Hummel statuettes are influenced by the Catholic drawings of children by artist Maria Innocentia Hummel and later turned into popular ceramic figurines with the support of porcelain maker Franz Goebel. Hummel collectibles are an average American collectors item or a valued family heirloom. The original collection portrayed figurines engaged in simple everyday activities, such as a man shaving in the mirror, a clown sitting with a black dog, another man playing catch with a small boy rendered as clichéd Norman Rockwell Americana.

One of the sculptural collages constructed from the unintentionally broken Hummel pieces is *Teach Me How to Play Ball*, 2012. As demonstrated in Figure 1, the sculptural creation incorporates the remaining pieces of numerous different figurines, including a young boy and an adult male. The young boy is arranged in between the legs of the adult male, who is kneeling down above the male child in a dominant position. The young boy's mouth is open and his hands appear as if they are tied together behind his back, illustrating his inferior and submissive status in relation to the adult male. Regarding the adult figure, both arms are missing as well as his head, which is replaced with a protruding hand holding a baseball.



Figure 1. *Teach Me How to Play Ball*, Porcelain collage, 2012

Another sculptural collage created from the Hummel debris, is *The Shaver*, 2012. This piece incorporated numerous human body parts collected from different ceramic figurines, and were reconfigured into an abnormal “creature-like” organism (see Figure 2). The body or foundation of this piece consists of two male headless torsos that originated from an adult and child figurine, and were glued on top of one another. With these attached torsos as the core interior structure, all of the additional pieces were organized around them including: three male heads, various human extremities, and a black dog dressed in clown’s attire. Concerning the three heads, the main head of the collage is mounted on a child’s foot, which is attached to a leg extending from top of the two torsos. Furthermore, the face of this male head is covered in shaving cream, subsequently contributing to the name of this piece. The second head attached to this object is that of an older male, and was attached underneath the shaver’s head on a box or crate. Finally, the third head, which appears to be a male clown, was placed upside down towards the bottom of the structure in between the two torsos. Throughout the structure random human extremities were reconfigured in unusual anatomically incorrect positions. You can observe this in the arm extending from the neck of the male clown’s head and with the shaver’s arm, also protruding from his neck, is twisted backwards.



Figure 2. *The Shaver*, Porcelain collage, 2012

The Shaver and *Teach Me How to Play Ball* 2012, both invoke a sense of discomfort on the part of the viewer by means of creating absurd, sexually tense, and perverse gestures. Intensifying the grotesque qualities that struck me in the original configurations of the figures became my process for physical and conceptual transformation.

In addition to the Hummel's, another ceramic collection of figurines used in my sculptural collages is Cabbage Patch Kids. Particularly popular in the 1980s and more affordable than the Hummel's, these figurines generally included caucasian children of both genders engaged in various activities. Cabbage Patch Kids are notorious for their unique facial characteristics, specifically, they had oversized oval heads, abnormally large cheeks, small eyes,

and a limited number of hairstyles and colors. Particularly important to my artistic practice, this ceramic collection emphasizes the innocence and happiness stereotypically associated with children. However, my own personal perception of these figurines children as stylized caricatures entails a suppressed expression of perversion in conjunction with insincere happiness that is typically expected among “normal” children.

One of the sculptural collages created from this collection is *Manbaby*, 2013 that consisted of two porcelain figurines attached to one another (see Figure 3). The primary structure of this piece is a baby lying on his back with his legs positioned in the air and one hand placed on his foot, while the other is grasping a circular toy. Although the original object is supposed to be an infant, he actually resembles an older man and has numerous characteristics such as no hair and facial wrinkles that are typically attributed to older people. This inconsistency was the primary reason for the name given to this creation. Also important to this piece, was the inability to destroy the baby figurine despite several attempts. Specifically, placed in a cardboard box, many people attempted to break this piece by either throwing or stepping on the box, however, only the other figurines included in this container were destroyed. In this box, the head, of an originally blond male figurine in baseball attire, was selected and attached to the behind of the male baby.



Figure 3. *ManBaby*, Porcelain Collage, 2012

Another sculptural collage produced from the reconfiguration of the Cabbage Patch Kids series, is *Butt Tails*, 2013. As illustrated in Figure 4, this is comprised of two previously intact Cabbage Patch Kids that were rearranged in a peculiar and abnormal manner. The core of this new sculpture is a young, blond male child, who is in the middle of completing a cartwheel. Under close examination, the hands of this child are both missing due to the destructive process. Similar to *Manbaby*, the only additional piece attached to the original core figurine is the head of a female child with red pigtails, which was positioned on his behind. Regarding the original female statuette, the red-haired child was depicted in the upright position holding a bouquet of flowers in both of her hands. The remaining pieces of this original figurine were discarded and not used in any of the other collages.



Figure 4. *Butt Tails*, Porcelain collage, 2013

In order to sustain my artistic process of destroying collectibles, I began purchasing an assortment of ceramic figurines from various prominent, and typically exclusive designer companies. Specifically, one collection of similar figurines I acquired throughout this process is Lenox porcelain. Developed in America during the 1890's, Lenox is predominantly recognized for their porcelain tableware. However, they have also created several distinct collections of ceramic figurines and statuettes. My "pursued victims" included the Lenox collectible Carousel and Unicorn horses. Indeed, unicorns and carousel horses are normally considered to be dainty and fragile creatures, as well as stereotypically being associated with magical and mythical perceptions. The Lenox structural collage created from these figurines, *My Delicate Horses*, 2013 was comprised of five large carousel horses and twelve miniature horses (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. *My Delicate Horses*, Porcelain dimensional collage, 2013

Following the destruction of the original purchased figurines, the heads and extremities of the horses were used to create an upright sculptural structure standing on several outstretched limbs from the original objects. While the heads of the horses were configured into a single cluster, the limbs of the larger unicorns spiraled down the remainder of the structure, and were positioned to produce the illusion of a stepping or dragging motion. Moreover, within the central

opening of this five-headed figure, the heads and limbs of the originally smaller horses were randomly placed continuously throughout the entire structure. Personally, this continuous layering of the horses outstretched limbs and multiple heads metaphorically symbolizes the “hidden” secrets that may exist in a dysfunctional household by showing an abnormal gesture with this structure completely unfamiliar from the “standard” original. Indeed, my artistic practice attempts to figuratively expose the abusive or dysfunctional behaviors that may occur within American families, while on the surface appearing “normal” and healthy.

Melted Glass Appropriations

Artistic Influences and Inspirations

The second component of my artistic process is the destruction of glass figurines by melting these objects with excessive heat. Specifically, this aspect involved melting various objects in a kiln, at approximately 1600 degrees Fahrenheit for 6 hours. With an extensive and evolving interest in Minimalism (e.g. Donald Judd), I have explored the simplification of various types of materials such as wood, concrete, and glass. The underlying focus of my work is the manipulation of form or structure through the application of distinct artistic methods, considering the least amount of necessary materials and means of producing such changes.

Two artists who were inspirational and contributed to the appropriation of my glass figurines are William de Kooning and Robert Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg's "Erased de Kooning" drawing offered a context of eliminating the artist's skill and labor similar to what I was doing in the destruction process of the glass objects. Rauschenberg's collaboration with de Kooning, to terminate de Kooning's marks in his drawing by the process of erasing, inspired me. The erased de Kooning not only questioned what art can be, but the concept and process of erasing became the major conceptual and esthetic traits of the work. The blank paper with traces of what was once a de Kooning drawing, was framed with a plaque stating "Erased de Kooning Drawing, Robert Rauschenberg. 1953" (see Figure 6). The viewer is left with their imagination to fill in the blank paper and think about the extinction of the work and Rauschenberg's statement "It had to begin as art, its going to be a de Kooning in order for it to be an important piece." (Rauschenberg, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpCWh3IFtDQ>)



Figure 6. *Erased DeKooning* (After/ Before) 1953. Robert Rauschenberg

De Kooning agreed, after much interrogation, to the process of elimination and Rauschenberg challenged the values of art by, in some people's minds, destroying the work. The conceptual drawing by Rauschenberg removes the importance of the physical object and the destruction of the work becomes the major factor in its making. In my art practice, similar to Rauschenberg's, extermination of de Kooning's drawing, the high temperature kiln destruction of kitsch, mass-produced objects changes the original object to a blank and neutral compressed piece of glass. The "class structure" of the object changes from an everyday household decoration to an unconventional, newly realized sculpture.

Destruction Process and Artistic Creations

Similar to the sculptural collages, this destruction process resulted in unconventional and obscure objects, extremely different from the original figurines. Furthermore, the figurines used in this aspect of my project were also produced by well-known companies, and are commonly collected and treasured by American families. For the purpose of this destructive process, the original figurines were restricted to only Fenton glass objects including, a candy dish, turkey, koala, three different colored vases, and a mouse. As previously mentioned, each of these statuettes were individually melted in a 1600 degree kiln for approximately 6 hours. There were no other modifications made to either the original or new structures other than alterations caused during the melting process.

Prior to completely delving into the destruction of glass figurines through melting, I conducted a pilot test. The initial test victim was a vintage Waterford crystal egg, specifically searched for and purchased for this purpose (see Figure 7). Following a six-hour period in the ceramic kiln, the original egg became a flat, oval-shaped, yellow mound. Of considerable importance, the original egg, which incorporated fine details and ridges of the crystal, were still clearly identifiable in the new transformed glass splotch. The egg lost all of its form and these details became mere impressions within the new object. In addition to altering the object's form, the melting process diminished its monetary value, and eliminated the crafted labor into a morphed blemish of glass.



Figure 7. *Egg is and was?* Melted Waterford Crystal, 2012

Recent Victims Exhibition

The egg pilot test enhanced my interest and motivation to continue exploring the impact of the melting process on different types of glass. In my art exhibition Recent Victims, I displayed various Fenton glass sculptures created by the destructive melting process. Specifically, the “victims” in this exhibit included a koala, turkey, candy dish, mouse, and three vases. The heat obliteration of each object not only melted the dimensional aspects into compacted “blob” like shapes of glass, but small remains of color and detail from the original object were still visible and remained embedded in the new flattened glass arrangement. For example, the original Fenton candy dish contained the fine detail filigree in the interior, with wavy opaque edges and dark green organic feet holding up the dish (see Figure 8). As a melted object, the wavy, opaque edges folded over each other surrounding the dish’s supporting legs and

the transparent filigreed interior is pushed upward and exposed. The candy dish became an unidentifiable green, liquidized object where the viewer is tempted to touch the material to further identify its true material identity.



Figure 8. *Candy Dish is and was?* Melted glass, 2012

As illustrated in Figure 9, the turkey, when melted, became a composition containing purple contour lines of the initial object's eyes, beak and feathers. The koala's melted structure showed no remainders of the original object only a faint outline of the koala's tiny feet (see Figure 10). The turkey and koala also both melted into either a circular or odd, long, flattened shape. Observing these shapes, the viewer has no indication as to what the original object was and is left questioning the glossy transparent glass.



Figure 9. *Turkey is and was?* Melted glass, 2012

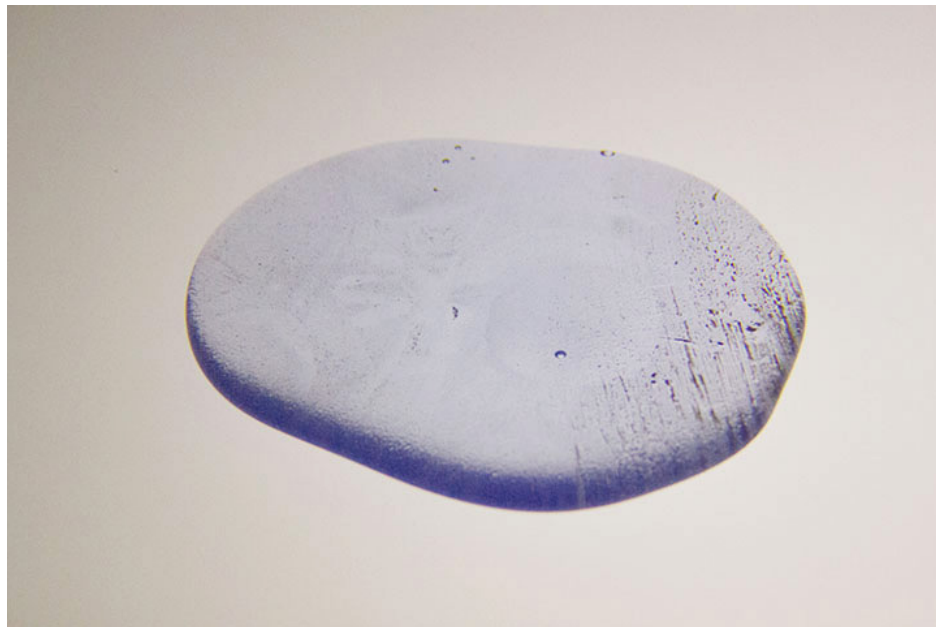


Figure 10. *Koala is and was?* Melted glass, 2012

Also, in the Recent Victims exhibition there were three Fenton vases. The vases had solid round bases, and as a result of melting these items, the bases remained intact and the vase

slumped over to its side, folding the container into a flattened sheet of glass. The vases were no longer three-dimensional objects, but instead new entities appearing weightless and as light as swatches of fabric. The blue vase in this exhibit melted over to its right side, solidifying into a shape that appeared as if liquid was being poured. Originally, this vase had six prongs or peaks around the top opening, creating a wavy edge, which was responsible for the molten, biomorphic appearance of the new structure (see Figure 11).



Figure 11. *Blue Vase is and was?* (Detailed view of *Recent Victims*) 2012

In preparation for this show, even the proper lighting of the work had to be considered. Custom glass topped pedestals were built to display each individual piece (see Figure 12). The pedestals were lit from ceiling fixtures with natural florescent light, creating a stark and pristine atmosphere. The white pedestals stood against the white walls and floor so that the minimal colors remaining in the glass sculptures would be visible in the pallid surroundings.



Figure 12. Recent victim pedestal display, 2012

Chance Exhibition

Further exploration into the malleable configuration of glass and the intentional destruction to the “cute” and “delicate” household objects takes place in my thesis exhibition, *Chance*. In this exhibit, the reconfiguration of a series of Fenton glass statuettes including, a blue Santa, dragon, shoe, mouse, an electric insulator, two bears dressed in clown attire, and Little Red Riding Hood with the Wolf (see Figure 13). Each of these objects were subjected to the melting process, and each lost its original physical form. Other than the original color and ingrained impressions of some previous details, these figurines became completely unidentifiable. Therefore, in the exhibit, photos of the original objects and figurines were placed

near the newly formed creations, in order to provide viewers with a reference to understand the impact of the melting process.



Figure 13: Before photographs of victims in the thesis exhibit. 2013

In the Chance exhibition several of the objects after transformation were similar to the melting destruction of the Fenton glass mouse. Prior to being destroyed, the Fenton mouse was white opaque glass with blue and red sections and two white stars, one on the inside of his left ear and the other in the middle of his stomach (see Figure 13). His arms and legs were completely attached to his torso, and his ears were oversized and very pronounced. The newly created work not only lost all of the original form, but there were no longer three distinct colors (see Figure 14). The previous white, blue, and red on the mouse melted together, and created a shade of light green. The light green unidentifiable object resembled a pool of liquid, lacking any form. Other than the trace of one white star no other detail remained. In comparison to the other glass figurines, the destruction of the Fenton mouse resulted in some of the most extreme and unexpected changes.



Figure 14. *Mouse is and was?* Melted Fenton Appropriation. 2013

Similar to my previous exhibit the lighting and proper display of these new glass objects were taken into great consideration. A white, hollow, wood pedestal with a transparent glass top was built for each of the sculptures. (see Figure 15). All of the pedestals were placed in a single line in the middle of the gallery. The photographs of the original figures and objects were positioned on the wall closest to the pedestals. Each pedestal was lit from within by blue light. This lighting was selected to shine through the glass top to illuminate the glass objects from underneath. Formally, the effect of illuminating the object from beneath gave the object greater significance in its presentation and enabled the viewer to see interesting traces and small details from the original object.

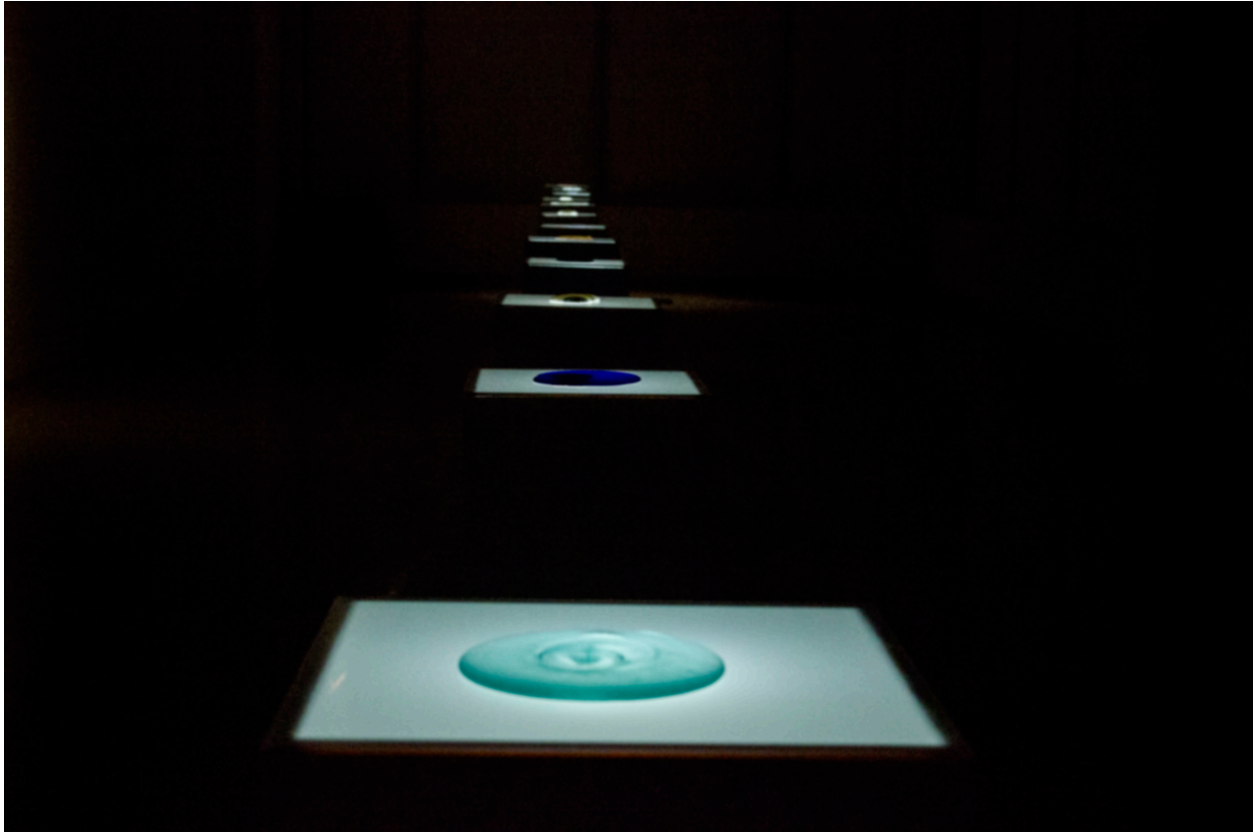


Figure 15: Front view of pedestals of Chance exhibit. 2013

Another interactive aspect of the Chance exhibition was allowing the viewer to attempt to match the new glass structures on display with the photographs of the original figurines and objects. In order to emphasize the dramatic changes produced by the melting process, the pictures were intentionally displayed in black and white, and did not include two of the displayed objects. These manipulations sparked the viewers' curiosity as well as motivation to link the original pictures to its newly morphed creation. At some point, the viewer realizes the number of photos do not match the number of glass works on display and is required to "play the game" and fill in the objects before appearance with their imagination.

Conclusion

The Chance and Recent Victims original sculptures were purchased from the American Fenton glass company. I targeted this particular collection because of their so-called “charming” and “humorous” traits as solid animal figures. The more that the “before” object is hideous, tacky and obnoxiously ugly, the greater the effect of the “after-transformation”. The “silly” figurine collections collected by the average American household projects an impression of false goodness and purity with their presentational smiles, giggles and enthusiastic postures. In my opinion, many American families furnish their homes with these disingenuous objects as a way of disguising who they truly are. These articles, presented with pride, are made deliberately visible in the home as an expression and projection of a healthy environment. A stranger entering a home with such a display of “statuettes” and “figures” may misconstrue the reality of the home situation and assume all is well, when in reality, it is not. My enjoyable, intentional destruction is to destroy the charade of these collectibles. I feel by destroying them and undermining their saccharin qualities I bring to light the raw, shapeless and sometimes unidentifiable realities that may lurk hidden within the average American family. And this definitely does not omit dysfunctional family life, child abuse and a host of other ugly realities that may hide undetected behind a screen of accouterments that falsely project the appearance of normalcy.

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