

MFA Thesis Statement

By

Severn Eaton

Documents submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Art.

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## MFA Thesis – Severn Eaton

“When a person faces the great doubt, it is just as though he were standing in complete emptiness. At the bottom of great doubt, lies great awakening. If you doubt fully, you will awaken fully.” - Hakuin

Throughout my career as an artist, my work has explored a broad range of forms, materials, and subjects. Yet there is a consistency in that every project shares a voice, and no matter how specific the content, its origins can be traced to a common ground of skepticism regarding human institutions and endeavors. I believe the concentration of the past two years' work has clarified this voice and enabled me to resolve several core issues that had been stifling the impact of my art.

The resolution that had perhaps the greatest influence on the subsequent projects was a shift in material selection. There was a period of several months in which I created some large-scale outdoor installations, some of which I considered successful, yet somehow did not sit well in my conscience. After one particularly unsuccessful piece, it suddenly became clear to me that my selection and use of massive commercial products simply did not harmonize with the way I live the rest of my life. As a conscious human being determined to minimize my detrimental physical impact on the earth, I chose to turn towards salvaged material in hopes that it would exude the honesty I was searching for. This principle was furthered most recently when I began creating work that could be literally swept away after its completion, which led me to wall patches and



cobwebs. The comfort and peace of mind I gained from this general shift in process has enabled me to focus more on the content of the work.

A more obvious development is the sudden shrinking in scale that occurred as I realized that I could create more powerful visual statements with far less material. I had recently been seduced by the minute works of such artists as Donald Lipski, Tom Friedman, and Tim Hawkinson. I was amazed at the power of their objects to draw me in and leave me with a lasting impression. It was around this time that I entered into a more conceptual realm, working with breast milk and drugged bread. This major turning point for me enabled a serious exploration of the immaterial aspects of my artwork.

I have also come to recognize my love of craft and aesthetics through this temporary near-denial of them, and I feel that it is only recently that I have begun to reconcile my handwork with my brainwork. The most joy I ever achieved through art practice was during projects involving carving and metalsmithing, both laborious processes. Now, I am once again experiencing this pleasure while configuring cobwebs in a corner. Only now the process and material seem much more relevant.

Aesthetically speaking, I imagine my work is in reaction to and defiance of our media-saturated, over-stimulating, gluttonous, disgustingly materialistic culture. My work has a strong message, yet I choose to express it in a subtle way that I feel does not diminish its force. This is one of the causes of the lack of color in most of my pieces, in addition to the fact that I generally do not alter the



surface of the materials and objects with which I work. It just so happens that most of these things are white, gray, brown, or black.

Each individual idea has its own origin, and it is difficult to apply a general descriptive statement to this aspect of my creative process. However, I have noticed some fundamental connections among the sources of my work. The initial spark comes from something mundane, some part of my daily routine: an oil funnel, a wall patch, medicine, food, the media. Such elements present themselves as having a great deal of potential as metaphors for my views on big, important things: religion, politics, social institutions, human progress. It is within this connection between common objects and the big picture that lies a broad range of directions. Some pieces, usually untitled it seems, are more ambiguous than others and imply a certain attitude or feeling without such specific subject matter. For instance, the plaster patches depicting figures ascending and falling and the reconfigured cobwebs do not direct the viewer to any particular topic or contemporary issue. They are more timeless and universal, though affected by current situations, as always. On the other hand, works such as *Weapons of Mass Destruction* and *Homeland Security Advisory System* point directly to specific subject matter. Yet all of the work boils down to a sense of doubt in regard to human institutions.

My work is intended to raise questions, as I feel I am in a constant state of questioning. I am particularly wary as I write this, as we are now in the midst of war and humankind's potential for atrocity is blinding. I am a skeptic, and I question human enterprise. Everyone else should, too.



## Slide List: Severn Eaton

1. *Untitled*, 2003  
Cobwebs  
Dimensions variable
2. *Untitled* (detail), 2003
3. *50 Tallest Buildings in the World*, 2003  
Inkjet prints, paper  
Each approx. 1" x ½" x ½"
4. *50 Tallest Buildings in the World* (detail), 2003
5. *50 Tallest Buildings in the World* (detail), 2003
6. *Homeland Security Advisory System*, 2003  
From l to r: Low, Guarded, Elevated, High, Severe  
Spoons, syrups  
20" x 9" x 3"
7. *Homeland Security Advisory System* (detail), 2003
8. *Untitled*, 2003  
Spackle, paint  
Dimensions variable
9. *Untitled* (detail), 2003
10. *Untitled* (detail), 2003
11. *Untitled* (detail), 2003
12. *Weapons of Mass Destruction*, 2003  
Book, newsprint, tape  
7" x 5" x 1"
13. MFA Thesis Exhibition – Installation view