Alternative Perception of Objects

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Abstract

Humans are surrounded by objects. The human-object interaction is more frequent than the human-human interaction. The history of objects is as old as the history of human beings. This fact establishes and defines their meanings in a social and cultural context.

This essay aims to look at the established meanings of corpus objects and possibilities of developing new meanings of tableware and other objects related to table in contemporary craft. To investigate if the perception of the object changes with the change of material or its formal aesthetics. How can the meanings of the objects and their identities be altered or substituted? Do we recognize the objects the same way if their form and function is altered? What role does material play in how one reads an object?

This essay looks at the importance of objects and the role they play in our daily life. To explore what lies in an object beyond its function and the notion of materiality, what can be the boundaries and limitations of our perception, understanding and tradition of objects?
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Introduction

Culture is made of objects and things. Things that are used by humans in daily life attain meanings and are called things through interacting and practicing certain norms and habits\(^1\). Things and objects play a vital role in the existence of humans. Objects tell us stories, stories of a particular time and place. With the change of time there are changed stories, sometimes old meaning of things and objects are changed and replaced. This transformation through time with the help of available technology has been in process since ever, which helps in creating new perceptions of things and objects. There are much more things and objects in the world than the number of humans. Objects and things around us multiply much faster than anything in the world. It is quite interesting to compare the biological growth with the growth in number of objects around us. And some of these objects have strong position and fundamental importance in our daily life.

As an artist, corpus objects and their relationship with humans have always interested me. Focusing on objects related to table ware and eating norms, it can be seen how the relationship of humans with these objects is very special. It starts with the basic act of eating with hands and ends in personal association, possession, nostalgia or many other untold stories attached to these objects. Just like humans, these objects reflect a social life; humans and things have much in common. Craft historian and writer Damien Skinner explains in his words that, ‘Things and objects actually have social life just like people by virtue of participating in a system of commodification and exchange. The way the world works, and things move and give the value of things in economic system, this actually is the way we treat objects and things as they have social life. Similarly we all have social life like in modern world just like objects\(^2\).’

Just like Humans, objects also have agency to affect the things and situation around us, they have ability and power to move and change the things\(^3\). My inspiration and interest lies in knowing how new identity and meaning of objects and things around us are created. In this modern era, where technology is growing twice every 18 months\(^4\), it is very fascinating that every new product or thing challenges the older one, thus establishing its own agency, power and importance.

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\(^1\) (Appadurai, 1986)
\(^2\) (Skinner, 2013)
\(^3\) (Bennet, 1957)
\(^4\) (Kaku)
In this essay I tried to see corpus objects from a perspective which enables these objects to be interacted with humans other than the functionality or changed meanings. If the functionality is restricted or changed, then what is left there in these objects to be interacted with? Are they still usable or there is something else which makes these objects interesting or valuable?

Craft is strongly attached to tradition, a craft object has to have a function to serve or fulfill, as explained by Damien Skinner quoting craft historian Glenn Adamson on the five key ways of defining any object as craft object\(^5\). When it is said that the things and objects might not seem what they are, there is always a margin to change the perception of objects. A lot has been done in arts on this idea, from Duchamp to the Surrealists, Dadaists and many other modern and contemporary artists who have practiced widely with the objects and their altered perceptions or meanings. However I try to investigate that phenomenon by looking at the examples from craft artists working with objects creating altered meanings and perceptions of corpus objects, thus creating a new and interesting approach towards these objects.

\(^5\) (Skinner, Contemporary Jewellery in Perspective, 2013, p. 8)
Objects, Meanings and Materiality

Humanity is viewed as a product of its capacity to transform the material world in production, in the mirror of which we create ourselves. Such a perspective seems properly described as ‘material culture’ since it implies that much of what we are exists not through our consciousness or body, but as an exterior environment that habituates us and prompts us. This capacity of objects determines our behavior and identity, it helped to explain why anthropologists looked down upon material culture studies as somehow either trivial or missing the point.

Pierre Bourdieu describes this in his book *Outline of Theory of Practice*.

‘The ability or power of objects to implicitly condition human actors to become the primary means by which people are socialized as social beings. We are brought up with expectations characteristic of our particular social group largely through what we learn in our engagement with relationship found in everyday things’.

In the light of these words it is very interesting to see the human relationship with table-ware objects, how it is perceived, formulated, and valued in our daily life, how and why we read objects in a specific way in relation to the form, function and materiality.

Human-Object Relationship

*Relation with/through function and use*

Table-ware and corpus objects used for food have a special kind of association with human body. Humans' direct interaction with these objects and usage with hands create meaning and plays an important role in human life.

Talking about the human-object relationship specifically in terms of functionality and interaction, I would like not to disregard and briefly look at the dining furniture before discussing corpus objects, their perception and relationship with humans. Dining furniture is the connecting point where human interaction with tableware objects take place and attain special meanings. Being used in the specific environment and situation of the dining room, dining chairs are easily recognizable from other types of chairs meant for leisure, work and ceremonial purposes. It keeps the human body in a position suitable for eating.

Similarly height dimensions and functionality of dining table differentiate it from other types of

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6 (Miller, 2005, p. 2)
7 (Miller, Materiality, 2005, p. 6)
8 (Bourdieu, 1977)
table meant, associated and recognized by humans suitable for certain functions. However when it comes to the changed perception of this furniture, the meanings of chair and table can be changed with slight changes by replacing some other objects rather than the one they are meant for. Thus the reading and perception of the viewer changes as seen from these examples by artist Sarah Lucas, whose work challenges the meaning of the objects and their use, and creates a different and provocative perception. It addresses the sexuality of objects, gender and sexual politics, she replaces inanimate objects that focus on the body, which actually do not fit in there according to usual social norms.

‘Two fried eggs and a Kebab’ suggests a disregard for good nutrition and requires as little skill in the kitchen as possible. ‘The Bitch’ suggests the position or domain of housewife or a female cleaning maid indicating the lack of monetary value given to this kind of work. Sarah Lucas is the first artist in the art world who challenges the sexuality of art, hence changing the usual perception of art as not thought before in terms of gender.

It is quite intriguing to explore and investigate how this idea of replacement or change of meaning of an object has been addressed in the field of contemporary craft, especially in the corpus or tableware field. How much potential and margin is there to change or alter the meaning, challenge the agency of the objects which are taken so seriously in our daily life? Does a table-ware object or a corpus piece still remain a piece of craft or it changes its meaning and becomes something else? Is it only the functionality or the change of material or formal aesthetic which develops our perception of corpus objects?

The table-ware objects perform a specific kind of functionality. The recognition of different objects is due to their functionality, form and capacity to perform a certain function, to make it

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9 (Malik, 2009, pp. 36-38)

10 (Malik, Au Natural, 2009, p. 1)
easier to handle with hands. Process of preparing and cooking follows a social yet very individual and personal act of eating. It guides us to recognize these objects. These objects used for food have a unique and individual relationship with humans and the human body; we use and interact with these objects directly with our hands. Their usage is related to physics and laws of physics which guide shapes and proportions. Pitchers and teapots generally pour more easily when their spouts angle off at ninety degree from the handle, the forms are easier to handle when the elbow of that angle runs through the center of gravity of the pot. Mugs with narrow openings keep the liquid warmer. It is easier to drink warm than the straight sided ones. In bigger pots to cook, handles on both sides of a pot at 180 degree help holding the pot easily with both hands, with our choice we cook what is most desirable for us to eat. Furthermore, we have special relation with these objects in eating and drinking actions, it’s oral, sensual and personal.

To analyze the aspects of human-object relationship, examining works by corpus artists from the field of craft can tell us more possibilities of corpus objects. Beyond the notion of functionality and materiality objects can be narrative, poetic and surrealistic.

**Cups and Spoon Series by Maki Okamoto**

Maki Okamoto works with objects which are commonly used in our daily lives. Cup, spoon, boxes and so on. She reforms them, treats them and sometimes breaks the functionality of objects established as norm. She puts new faces on them. Her work is a communication tool between user and their surroundings.

About the cups Maki says “Cup” is literally just a small open container, usually with a flat bottom and a handle, used for drinking. It has an archetypical shape and is used by people on a daily basis more often than other objects such as cutlery. But a cup is not only a receptacle for liquids; it is much more than that. It is a witness of our conversations, an archive of our experiences. If I

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11 (Lebow, Aesthetics of Function, 1999, p. 7)

12 (Okamoto, 2013)
cut off a cup’s main function, what is left? Story-telling? Triggers and hints that can evoke memories or personal and intimate experiences? I want to create empty space in my objects where the viewer can create and develop their own, very personal story

Maki’s cup pieces change the meanings of the cups and, it appears and reflects much more than just cups. They are no more functional, but they are deformed and probably have been cast in some other materials than in traditional materials such as ceramic or metal. But still her pieces are narrative, though deformed but still intact, not broken, placed in a group, stacked in pile or in form of just two. As a social norm of drinking tea or coffee, it is not only the act of drinking but sharing a lot more than that; sharing of thought, moments, time and companionship.

In the absence of functionality of these corpus objects, it has an attraction and engagement of viewer in narrating the untold or told stories of everybody around us. In this way these corpus pieces from the series ‘The cups’ break the norms of traditional use and become more than just an object in order to create and develop new meanings. So the relationship of these objects with humans changes, though it still remains personal, but probably becomes more interesting.

Maki’s cup series can be compared and related to Kjell Rylander’s work; Rylander is a Swedish ceramist who creates tableware objects that explore construction and reconstruction of existential dilemmas: society, eternity, individual and isolated moments in time, are the areas of focus of Rylander’s work.

Kjell uses second hand objects, and rejoins different parts in an unusual way to construct new objects with new perception for the reader.

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13 (Okamoto, http://makkin.se/work/the-cup-2010/, 2013)

14 (Shwartz, 2008).
Maki Okamoto’s spoon series has much more to offer than her cups series. Spoons being tools to break and consume small portion of food have a specific kind of shape. A spoon has two distinct features, form-wise: a slightly concave base to carry or hold the food- in the case of a fork, this feature is pointed spear-like to pierce and hold the food, usually for meat or solid portions of food. The other feature is that it has a handle long enough to be held with the hands, which is the same in the case of a fork. In her work she has created different meanings and perceptions of forks and spoons by replacing, substituting and playing with the different possibilities of the use of form. Her spoon series is quite unique, innovative and surrealistic in appearance.

Though the shape of spoons and forks is altered variably by cutting, rejoining in unusual and creative way, they are somehow functional, and perform an altered or different functionality as cutlery. This spoon series was applied practically and offered to guests to experience and discover the fresh perspective on contemporary eating rituals in Steinbeisser Experimental Gastronomy, Amsterdam in 2012. This experiment offers a different and changed eating experience in a responsive yet thought provoking manner. It offers guests a chance to socialize with objects in a different way which makes human social beings.
Maki’s spoon series further explores the possibilities of altered meaning and perceptions that lie within an object. It offers Spoon brooches, in form of jewellery pieces. The altered functionality using spoons as jewelry carries altogether different meaning of corpus objects as the established meanings due to the functionality of these objects.

Jewellery is not only used for personal adornment but it is also meant and used as a social marker, defining or guessing social position of an individual in society. Jewellery pieces carry personal association, belongings referring to someone or special memories; in fact they carry a lot more than just a jewelry piece. Jewellery is a statement when worn on the body.

Wearing spoon brooches can tell very different stories. Stories of objects interacted with or treated as if they were just like family members; these objects exist and live with humans in the same environment, are meant to be special and are taken care of, are interacted with and communicated socially and personally quite regularly, they have a place in our homes, in our mind, in our life. Humans are known from the kind of taste and selection of objects they posses, looking at our social structure and the way our society works, the higher the social rank, the

more special or rare the possession of objects one might have. Just like the famous English proverb, 'A person is known by the company one keeps', it looks suitable to say in our time that 'a person is known by the objects one keeps'. As Pierre Bourdieu defines that our upbringing and development of personality in a social group is conditioned to our relationship with the everyday things around us, that is the ability of objects which makes us socialize, thus objects have a social life just like human\textsuperscript{17}.

**Corpus objects by David Clarke**

When it comes to alternate perception of corpus objects by alteration, substitution and replacement of parts, materials and objects, the best suited works in this connection would be the works by corpus artist and silversmith David Clarke. His approach towards work is considered transgressive for the conventional silversmiths\textsuperscript{18}. He chooses rejected, broken or unwanted silver tableware. Cuts, alters, and reassembles them in a very unusual way.

![David Clarke, The unusual suspect. 2009](image1) ![David Clarke, Spoonie Collection 2012](image2) ![David Clarke, Table ware objects, 2013](image3)

His work appears quite humorous, surrealistic and sarcastic by the collage or rearrangement of various objects to form a new object. David's work not only challenges the conventions of tableware but it also challenges the tradition of use of silver material in silversmithing. He experiments on silver objects with other materials like tin, pewter and lead, and conjoins with pots and utensils at odd which is against or forbidden in the traditional practice of silversmithing.

\textsuperscript{17} (Bourdieu, 1977)

\textsuperscript{18} (http://cargocollective.com/madhinchy/Metal-Morphosis-Silversmith-David-Clarke, 2011)
His corpus pieces are quite humorous, sometimes functional and sometimes with disabled or restricted functionality. These objects are mysterious and with unusual surprise. The ability of these pieces to interact with humans makes them succeed in being more than just objects. These objects can be called as functional objects in a surreal manner. The way they are exhibited, tells us a story of a family or history of objects. Mixing and joining them in together, tells us of further possibilities of using these objects in a very different way.

Comparing these references and examples of craft artists working on the same idea, raises a very interesting question to me: after an object is altered, does that object still remains a piece of craft or it becomes a piece of art? Does its perceived identity or meaning remains the same or it is changed, even though it still is functional and fulfills the purpose as per the definition of craft object by Glen Adamson?  

Recognition and relation through form and material

Another way of recognition of table-ware/corpus objects is through the material they are usually made of. Shape and form of objects help to perform function; these objects are recognized due to their cultural meaning established through history and use for a function. Constant improvement in the form and material of these objects helps to improve the functionality of the objects. There are pots or objects to cook food, which are heat efficient, hence protect and preserve the taste and quality of food. Other types of objects are the ones used to eat food in or with those objects. All these properties and characteristics of form, function and material of objects define their meanings. The form of a cup is meant for drinking liquids, traditional materials used in the making of cup are metals like silver, copper or tin, fired clay, ceramic, glass, with the addition of new materials like stainless steel, or plastics which not only protect or preserve the taste and quality of the liquid food but are also good for prolonging

19 (Skinner, Contemporary Jewellery in Perspective, 2013, p. 8)
the function of these objects. So a cup made in such materials is considered safer and more suitable for consuming liquid food than if it was made in any other material which is not suitable. These meanings are developed through the practice of eating regularly, selecting and using these objects unconsciously just by recognizing the shape and material of object. But what if the form of the object which is recognized on this established knowledge is altered or changed?

Due to the technological evolution there is not only a lot of innovation in functionality and use of objects as followed through tradition but also there have been constant innovation and creativity in form and materials of the object that challenges the tradition and history of objects very openly. For example, digital technology and electric appliances like toaster, electric kettle, oven, microwave, different food processing machinery, have not only changed the understanding and meanings in terms of forms of traditional objects but also in terms of their use, functionality and materials. New materials like steels, different alloys, high and low density plastic have replaced traditional materials due to the efficiency of the materials and function. This way, new objects challenge the agency of the old ones, are in more demand by users and thus replace the older objects in the market and set new trends. However these plastics and other new materials have adverse side effects as they pollute the consumer cultures.
Conclusion
This essay had the aim to investigate whether the tableware and corpus objects look the same as they are meant to be. How their meanings are altered, and how the perception of the reader can be changed. Is it the material or the formal aesthetics or some other characteristic which change the meaning? In all the references and works of artists discussed above, it appears that corpus objects and tableware from western dining room, actually mean much more than they appear and known for. There are many other perceptions of these objects which are invisible or ignored otherwise, due to preconceived meanings in society. A little creative approach can break this stereotype and create something new out of it. The objects change their perception, identity, meanings and context with the change of function and purpose by replacing, substituting the vocabulary of the object with other forms or materials. The new perception of the objects challenges the agency of old objects. It raises the question on why there is a need to create new or alternate the perception of objects; why do contemporary craft artists sense and play with perceptions and formal aesthetics of objects to create new objects? Answer might lie in the current situation and future of craft, role and importance of craftsmanship with hand, and return of tradition with new possibilities.

Death of tradition? or need to redefine the term tradition?

According to the Bruce Metcalfe, Craft practice being a traditional practice has to refer to its history following traditional materials and techniques. Object making has been practiced traditionally with hands and with traditional materials throughout the history\textsuperscript{20}. The term ‘ Tradition’ in anthropological literature refers to and often means time honored custom or belief, and tradition as a process in which customs or belief are handed down from father to son and requires only two generations to become a tradition. According to \textit{A.L Kroeb er and Clyde Kluckhohn}, the emphasis on social heritage or tradition is of utility or drawing attention to the social as well as biological heritage of human beings\textsuperscript{21}. However due to the technological evolution in recent decades everything which was tradition or has to do with tradition is changed and challenged. Technology and digital media has made and enabled copying easier, the magic of rapid prototyping machines, computerized cutting machines, scanners, laser cut, translating information into different media, all these technologies have enabled photogenic craftworks and made possible to produce highly crafted objects in mass production. This resulted in leaving away the role of craftsman, which was once very important in the production

\textsuperscript{20} (Skinner, Contemporary Jewellery Through Practice, 2013)

\textsuperscript{21} (Shanklin, 1981, p. 71)
of craft objects. The new digital technology is raising the question of what is useful and what it necessary.\(^{22}\)

**Future and role of artist**

In this scenario the role of craftsman has become important and strengthened in contemporary craft world with new approach. It has to be redefined in times to come. There is a growing awareness of the importance of hand craftsmanship against mass production from computerized digital machine technology. There are debates among craft historians about the new possibilities of craftsmanship and manufacturing. There is urge and need to return to the meaning of craft by hand, to the regeneration of traditional craft and skills. There is a wide margin for artists to play with the careful hand crafted skill coordinated with mind, which is not possible with new technology. Materials techniques and tools are reinvestigated and the history is re-explored in order to restore traditional practice and handmade skill in the extraordinary complexities of the technological world around us. Art historian Tanya Herrods explains that: ‘*New media reforms old materials in a surprising way. The new media has lead us to the new understanding of old material; we have a situation where trusted familiar materials can be altered arbitrarily. We need to make attempts to go back to the basics and examine investigate and discovering unexpected possibilities*.’\(^{23}\)

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\(^{22}\) (Lebow, *The Aesthetic of Functions*, 1999, p. 9)

\(^{23}\) (Herrods, 2013)
Appendix
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MA 2 Ädellab, 2014

My work questions and deals with the possibilities of developing new meanings and new interpretations of corpus objects in the field of contemporary craft. It addresses and investigates if the perception of corpus as well as tableware objects can be changed by altering the material or their formal aesthetics: do we recognize the objects the same way if their form and function is altered? How does their meaning change and how can it be substituted?

Coming from an art background and working with an interdisciplinary approach, then joining Ädellab, and focusing on aspects of corpus making, meaning and production, was not at all an easy task for me. It took me months to figure out what corpus is and to develop my interpretation of this vast and complex field. I had not only to deal with the material and technical heritage of traditional craftsmanship, but also with engaging in a thorough experimentation to produce different objects, explore the relationship between form and perception, in order to describe and transmit the meanings of objects.

I sought to apply my previous knowledge as sculptor in the workspaces of Ädellab, I tried to expand my knowledge of contemporary craft. I tried to represent and reinterpret the new context of corpus objects through my work.

My starting point was to look into various objects from everyday life, considering aspects of material culture and social habits. Focusing on the importance of these objects and the role they play in our daily life, I tried to explore what lies in an object beyond its function and notion of materiality, what are the boundaries and limitations of our perception, understanding and tradition of objects.

My inquiry led me to point out how we tend to socialize, to profoundly engage, with everyday objects, beyond their functionality. Specifically we socialize more with corpus objects and tableware objects because they speak to us in a different way than everyday objects do. There is an object-human relationship which reinstates their existence more than just a functional object. By reading these objects from this perspective, not only light is cast on social aspects of these objects, but also on different established contexts and their further meanings.

In my investigations and findings, there was a strong connecting point between corpus as well as tableware objects and the parts of the human body which are involved and associated with the handling of these objects. This handling leads to a process of consumption of food and to the ritual of eating, which itself involves other parts of the human body that strengthens our existence and survival as human beings. This was a significant stage of my work, where I
decided to make objects which combined the human body and corpus as well as tableware objects.

Ädel lab and its prized resources are deeply rooted in craft; however most of the artists and students approach to the making process, including my own, is quite artistic. Working this way and employing a self-reflexive method, triggered many questions in my mind about the meaning and value of craft today. Questions on the role of craft artists in this age of digitalized and industrially produced products for an ever increasing consumer market.

If digital technology can produce progressively more refined, sophisticated and precise objects than human hands, then what is left for me as an artist to work with and what is the reason for me to produce objects? Is it a quest or an investigation in the context of cultural production, away from the market, from its industrial, functional as well as decorative purpose?

Or
Is it the search of new forms of expressions which reflect social or political purpose?
Or
It is a critique of tableware/corpus objects in terms of their application, functionality and already established meanings?

Keeping in mind the role of an artist and the role of the objects in our time, and by carefully looking at examples of craft practitioners in the field of corpus, whose work I find relevant in relation to my own development and that speaks about the altered perception of corpus objects, I decided to investigate and reinterpret, as my master's project, the meanings and perceptions of objects, by changing, substituting and replacing the different parts and materials of the corpus as well as tableware objects. In most of the cases, the functionality of these objects is restricted or highly reduced, but in some cases it might be enhanced in certain ways. The outcome not only results in the changed perception of the objects, but also recreates the reading which might tell new stories around these objects in terms of different established contexts, their meanings, and human-object relationship.

Human body has always been inspirational for me. Not only because of the uniqueness of its shape, physical appearance and personality - every living individual has one - but also because of its hidden marvels, genius, its wonderful abilities to do unbelievable things. It actually looks like a mystery. It is quite fascinating for me that in 1300 or 1400 grams of weight, which is the weight of a grown human brain, lie our existence, all worlds, and the whole universe. Throughout history, there have been philosophers, sociologists, scientists and artists who have been defining and redefining the meanings and other complex phenomena related to the human body.
In the field of jewellery and in the tradition of corpus, body is inevitable and essential. Without body, a piece of jewellery is not jewellery as it cannot be worn or adorn the body. Similarly, without body, a corpus object does not remain corpus, but probably becomes just a mere object or thing, if it is not held by hands to perform a function. If corpus objects just like tableware objects, mean essentially functional as they need to be used to fulfill their meaning. This idea brings corpus very close to the meaning of everyday, functional objects. In the field of corpus, very often the objects allude to a function but aren't necessarily used, but in fact corpus, likewise tableware or objects of daily use, relies on the interaction with the human body in order to function.

In a way, both jewellery and corpus work as extensions of the human body for a purpose and function. Being a corpus artist, I need to find and redefine my own definition and meaning of corpus, in the time I am living in, however not fully ignoring or overlooking the historical and traditional references related to it.
Because of the fact that corpus traditions are historically related to the human body, as the origin of the word *corpus* and its meaning are derived from body, and because of my interest in and constant inspiration from the human body itself, I tend to idealize, or perceive differently, corpus objects that are actually made of or constructed from the human body, objects that are functional yet expressive and that can be used by our hands. My perception of corpus objects is influenced by traditional materials like silver or copper, which reference traditional corpus. However, as far as the formal aesthetics of my work is concerned, I try to look beyond traditional forms, perceptions and meanings of corpus objects.
Using traditional materials that can be associated with tableware or corpus objects, such as both ceramics and metal, mainly copper, I initially took moulds of the body and created a vocabulary of forms. By combining different forms, I made objects which appear close to the forms of corpus or tableware objects, mostly functional or at least refer to our understanding and perception of functional objects. In this way, my objects occupy an intermediate position between tableware, corpus objects and the human body. These forms referring to corpus or tableware objects are achieved through a process that involves substituting, replacing, altering, recreating, and displacing.

My work recontextualizes and explores the relationship of functional objects with the human body. The appearance of the resulting forms is quite surrealistic and unexpected, therefore granting each of the pieces a new manifestation through subjective perception of the objects. The combination of forms reminiscent of muscles, flesh and texture of human skin being quite fragile in nature, rendered in metal like copper or glazed porcelain, is quite conflicting. It is powerful as well as ironic.

The insertion of form of human body as reference to the subjects into objects and the elision of objects or functionality in the work, allow for looking beyond the ordinary appearance of corpus objects, an aspect which yields a complex exchange of ideas, imagery between the world of commodification and art, and between the world of practical usage and consumption.
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