2011 Research at Andrews

Andrews University
“Art is a lie that tells the truth,” said Pablo Picasso, and Steve Hansen’s art is a study in this duality. Although his sculptures look like metal, they are made of ceramic. They draw on pop culture, but appear to be relics from his rural Midwestern upbringing. And while at first glance his current work appears to be a critique of consumerist culture, it is also infused with his personal concerns and life story.

One piece from his most recent series, titled “Gods of Commerce,” was exhibited at the International Exposition of Sculpture Objects and Functional Art (SOFA) in Chicago in 2008. This piece, and others like it, follows the tradition of trompe l’œil—his ceramic forms resemble scraps of metal advertisements, angelic icons, and old signage more than anything made from clay. Hansen, professor of art, deliberately composes each piece to explore pop culture’s presentation of self and ideals of beauty and race; or to make sly references to artists he admires. 

“With his eye for artifacts that people bringing their own stories to the work. I know what mine was, but for me it’s more important that [the piece] be interesting and with a feeling for what interests me. Art is a lie that tells the truth,” said Hansen: “I think as an artist, there are a couple things that are important. One, that you are true to your nature and nurture, and make work that’s personal. The other is that if you’re really obsessed with what you do, it tends to come out in your work.” Hansen very readily acknowledges his work as an amalgamation of his interests. “I try to have a feeling for the Midwestern self in the aesthetics I bring,” he says, “and combine that with a feeling for what interests me. Art history, politics, religion, pop culture, and Greek mythology all get thrown into the mix.” Hansen explores his fascination with pop culture in his more recent work, much of which incorporates concepts from advertisements from the 1950s and 1960s. Describing Venus, he cites the example of how Greek mythology has been conscripted into pop culture: “There’s really a surprising number of products named after Greek gods and goddesses.” Venus races, Ajax cleansers, even Mars candy bars.

Ceramics is a time-intensive and relatively overlooked medium. But Hansen enjoys the difficulty and finds a familial connection to the work. “I come from a family of carpenters, blacksmiths, and cabinetmakers,” he says, “and so I have a genetic bent towards working with my hands.” He also appreciates the challenge presented by such a volatile material: “A piece I’ve worked on for weeks can be destroyed in the kiln during firing,” he says, “and in that aspect the work is discouraging.” But he credits his Midwestern Protestant work ethic with the love for the difficult work. “In that mindset, if you’re doing something really hard, then it must have value.”

When Hansen was six, his father made him a toy dump truck from scrap parts, and this practical attitude has since directed his own creative process as well. “I learned early on that making what you wanted from what you could find was the norm,” he says, and has since created his own dies, presses, and even firing processes to achieve the unconvention al features of his work. Hansen faces the additional challenge of “trying to squeeze ceramics into a fine arts realm,” he says. “As soon as you make something out of clay, you have to work twice as hard to convince somebody that it’s art.”

“Ceramics, traditionally a ‘craft’ medium, is rarely considered fine art. But by making ceramic vessels that masquerade as metal sculptures, and creating pieces too large to be handheld, Hansen has found some success in elevating humble clay. His work appears in several museums across the country, and he has participated in over 60 individual and group exhibitions in the past 15 years. He has won several “Best Ceramics” awards at juried exhibitions nationwide. But one of the more significant events in his extensive career is his participation in the SOFA exhibition for four years. SOFA is an exhibition of over 100 juried galleries from all over the world. The gallery chooses the artists that will appear, bringing with them between 10 and 20 artists apiece. Each year SOFA hosts three events, in New York, Santa Fe, and Chicago. For artists, SOFA exhibitions are “three of the larger events for collectors of sculpture and crafts in the world,” says Hansen. The beauty of Hansen’s work is that it asks its audience to think rather than making an absolute claim. Art that contains, as Hansen’s does, a high concentration of pop culture, can easily turn into social critique, yet Hansen avoids this absolutism. “I’m enough of a postmodernist to believe that visual or written language is a pretty imperfect communicator of meaning,” he says, “and so I’m fine with people bringing their own stories to the work. I know what mine was, but for me it’s more important that [the piece] be interesting than for people to know exactly what I meant when I made it.”

2 As quoted by Craig Adcock, “Steve Hansen’s Ceramic Sculpture” Ceramics Art and Perception No. 73, 2008.
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Although Hansen’s work is cleverly in- novative and new, he remains true to his Midwestern roots and infuses each piece with the nostalgia, austerity, and functionality he remembers from visits to his grandfather’s farm in Grand Marais, Minnesota. Remaining true to your background is essential in creating honest art, says Hansen: “I think as an artist, there are a couple things that are im- portant. One, that you are true to your nature and nurture, and make work that’s personal. The other is that if you’re really obsessed with what you do, it tends to come out in your work.” Hansen very readily acknowledges his work as an amalgamation of his interests. “I try to have a feeling for the Midwestern self in the aesthetics I bring,” he says, “and combine that with a feeling for what interests me. Art history, politics, religion, pop culture, and Greek mythology all get thrown into the mix.” Hansen explores his fascination with pop cul- ture in his more recent work, much of which incorporates concepts from advertisements from the 1950s and 1960s. Describing Venus, he cites the example of how Greek mythology has been conscripted into pop culture: “There’s really a surprising number of products named after Greek gods and god- desses”–Venus razors, Ajax cleaners, even Mars candy bars.

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