Hindsight

Submitted to the Art Department, Allegheny College,

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

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April 27, 2018

Project Board

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Artist's Statement

My series *Hindsight* is a study of various personal memories and past instances of myself, represented through cakes. Cake is a marker of change. A cake serves as the centerpiece for occasions such as birthdays, weddings, and anniversaries, signaling that there is a change in the person or people celebrating. Cake is present at goodbye parties at workplaces and at funerals. Cake represents celebration of the past and of the future. These pieces speak to loss of self, but also to celebration of memory. The series chronicles my development as a person coming into my own and understanding myself more as I grow older.

The individual five pieces each represent a specific moment of my life that stands out to me. Whether I was going through a large change in my environment or struggling emotionally, these are five specific moments that help to define me as an individual and have made me who I am today. The series travels from my intense anger as a child, to my overwhelming anxiety later on, to my suicidal depression as a teen, to my loneliness as a young adult, and finally culminates in my recently found happiness.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my friends at college, especially Natalia, for supporting me through so many changes and challenges in my life; without you I probably wouldn't be here. I came to this school without knowing anyone and over the years have developed so many friendships that I cherish and want to keep forever.

I would like to thank my brother and my best friend Ben for always letting me talk his ear off. I'm so proud of who you are becoming and how supportive you have been for me these past few years. I'm so happy that we've grown closer as we've gotten older. You're the person I can always complain to and discuss ideas with.

Thank you to my parents for embracing my artistic career despite my fears, and to my mom for pushing me to do my best. Thank you to my dad for all the emotional support and heavy lifting. And finally, thank you to my grandparents for lending their names to my pieces. I did not have the chance to meet some of you but you have all impacted my life in some form. I love you all so much.



Figure 1: Installation view of Hindsight

Cakes play a huge role in the life of the modern individual. Cakes are used to celebrate occasions like birthdays and weddings, to commemorate holidays, and even to console loved ones. I have been baking from a very young age, and remember several important cakes from points in my life to this very day. Two years ago I came up with the concept of combining my two loves – baking and ceramics – and have worked with this idea every semester since then. The idea was originally just to explore what would happen when combining such different materials: each piece that I make has unique burn markings and an intricate bubbled surface on the interior, and the remnants of the cake may come out as delicate charcoal or as some sort of glass-like residue. I find these unusual visuals to be appealing and intriguing. Over the time period of me experimenting with this technique, however, the meaning has evolved and changed into something deeply personal.

I developed a technique for producing these pieces long before I understood the emotional weight that they hold for me. The cakes that I have produced this semester were all constructed using box cake mix of varying flavors. I prepared the cakes following package instructions, however, instead of using an oven, I made use of one of the electric kilns in the art department. I programmed the kiln to remain at 350 degrees for several hours and in this way was able to produce cakes at a much faster rate than I would have using other methods. I also find this mode of production to be extremely fitting for the cakes, as they will return to these kilns once more.

After leveling the baked and cooled cakes, I fill the layers using a clay mixture that I have prepared. The clay "frosting" consists of Red Art clay powder, Hawthorn Bond clay powder, water, and a fiber added for strength in order to prevent cracking of the finished product. After distributing this between the layers I cover the entire cake in a thin layer of clay frosting, acting as a crumb coat. This is identical to the process of constructing an edible cake with your standard buttercream. After the crumb coat has firmed slightly, I add a thicker layer of frosting around the outside and create a smooth surface for which to decorate. I use 16 inch piping bags and standard decorating tips to add detail and intricacy.

Once somewhat dry, I cut a slice out of the cake so the audience can see inside. The decorated cake is placed inside the kiln and fired. While in the kiln, the cake itself burns out, leaving charcoal behind. The icing hardens as clay normally does and leaves a decorated cake-shaped shell, filled with dust and ash. I then paint the outside to add further detail and intricacy, resulting in a juxtaposition between a burnt, cracked inside and brightly colored and joyful exterior.



Figure 2: Robert, detail, showing the negative space and rough texture left after burning out the cake portion of the sculpture

Cakes as we know them developed a few hundred years ago, but foods similar to cakes but with a denser crumb have been around for thousands of years (Humble, 10). The modern light and airy cake is a symbol of luxury, for in order to construct such a confection one must have both enough time to waste on a labor-intensive yet nutritionally empty food, and also be able to acquire ingredients that were once far too expensive or time-consuming for the majority of people to obtain, such as butter and sugar. In medieval times, sugar cost between $50 and $85 per pound and was rarely consumed because of this fact (Levene, 84). Since, it has become so mass-produced and easy to access that it is thoroughly embedded in the Western diet. The rich taste of cake is comforting, familiar, and luxurious all at once, and therefore worthy of being the centerpiece of important celebrations.

The development of cakes, and in particular boxed cake mixes, closely follows the development of the American economy and culture in the 20th century. The housewife of the first half of the century often struggled with baking, largely due to unclear instructions and nonstandard measurements. In an effort to meet this need, several companies developed pre-packaged mixes in order to cut out room for error. The most famous of these at the time was that advertised by Betty Crocker, a fictional persona created in the 20s to make the advice given by the company eventually called General Mills seem more homey and genuine (Marks, 9). Betty Crocker debuted her cake mix in 1947 and revolutionized home baking culture (Marks, 166). Never before had cake been so accessible to so many. Thusly, homemade cakes began to pop up more and more frequently in celebrations and became a firm dessert staple in the American diet.



Figure 3: Dirk Staschke, Confectional Façade, 2012, ceramic and wood, 96" x 48" x 9"

Only a few decades preceding the advent of the boxed cake mix, art involving food began in earnest with *The Manifest of Futurist Cooking* in 1930. This guide brought meals into an

artistic context by integrating visuals such as lights and other sensory inputs such as perfumes into eating (Marinetti, 5), while also calling for the setting of the table to be harmonious and an extension of the food itself. Much more recently, artists such as Dirk Staschke have been producing cakes in ceramic. Contrary to my own work, Staschke's ruminates on how eating "passes from desire to cultural excess" (Seckler). Content-wise, the emotional and sentimental nature of my work is more similar to other ceramicists such as Trevor King, whose series *Notions* involves recreating poorly drawn images of pots that his grandfather rendered for him. His work brings his love for his late grandfather and sentimentality regarding his past experiences into an artistic context via the use of emotional and expressive vessels (King).



Figure 4: Jessica Stoller, Still Life, 2013, porcelain, china paint, luster, enamel, medium-density fiberboard, 65" x 47" x 23.5". This piece involves many kitsch elements, including ceramic cakes.

With the visual nature of my pieces, one can draw connections to movements such as pop art and the concept of kitsch. Kulka struggles to construct a concrete definition of "kitsch," yet makes clear that it largely has to do with bad taste, yet has a wide appeal (Kulka, 19). Kitsch is at

the same time personal due to its connections to sentimentality, yet it is the kind of personal appeal that many can resonate with, making it universal at the same time. This is a phenomenon I also find in *Hindsight.* These pieces are undeniably about specific moments in my own life, yet millions of others have experienced similar or near-identical feelings. Despite the difficulty in nailing down its definition, the outward appearance of my sculptures – brightly painted foodstuffs sitting on pedestals – is undeniably kitschy.

Pop art is described by Livingstone as "an art of external appearances […] dedicated to the dispassionate deification of the common object" (Livingstone, 19). As I have mentioned previously, thanks to such conveniences as boxed cake mixes cakes are an exceedingly common sight in America. I have removed the cakes from their original context, a celebration, and put them into a place largely considered serious and academic: a gallery. The burning of the cake leaves only what most consider to be the best part of the dessert, the icing, but I have removed any sort of pleasure that it may bring taste-wise, rendering them completely divorced from their original intent. This approaches the ideas put forth in *Simulacra and Simulation,* in which context my sculptures are simulacra removed from reality (Baudrillard). A simulacra is a copy of an object whose original has been lost. The originals of my cakes – before they went into the kiln, with the cake still present inside, have been lost forever. Left in its place is something that appears nearly identical on the outside, but when inspecting the interior the differences become apparent. The original unfired versions of my sculptures, in turn, are copies of real edible cakes. In this way my sculptures are twice removed from the original, becoming simulacra.

I've recently been able to fit my art into a larger context, but for a long time I struggled to understand what my own artwork meant. I seemed only to know that I really enjoyed making it and wanted to continue to do so. Whenever I was asked about the meaning of my cake

sculptures, I would say that I felt neutrally about them and that their meaning was open to the audience. This was generally true at the time and the best answer that I could muster, as I didn't particularly understand them myself. This semester has been somewhat of a revelation for me as I finally understand how these cakes fit into my life and my development as an artist.

I am a person who is preoccupied with the past. I am constantly thinking about things that have happened to me, how I should have handled them differently, how things used to be, and how I got to this point in my life. I am particularly interested in the concept of my past selves. As I reflect on my past selves, I am fascinated by the emotional differences between who I was last year when I was incredibly happy, or who I was when I was fourteen years old and suicidal, or who I was when I was nine years old and constantly angry at nothing in particular. I'm fascinated by the complex series of events and interactions that have shaped me throughout the course of my life, and how any slight change may have resulted in a person with a different set of beliefs and feelings. Because of this, the fleeting nature of my personal situation is striking to me. The sculptures that I have produced celebrate some of these moments in my life.

I have come to the realization over the past few months that my cakes have to do with loss, be that of a person (myself or otherwise) or a time in my life that I cannot go back to. In this way they serve as memoirs and reminders. The decorated image of a cake tells the audience that an event has happened, but the burnt and cracked interiors suggest something old or from a long time ago. They are sad objects. They are reflective objects. It took several years, but they helped me understand who I am as a person and how I operate mentally. It is because of this reflective aspect that I have named my project *Hindsight.* As I worked with my cakes in this new light, knowing that they were about my own experiences, everything fell into place and I was able to produce sculptures much more confidently knowing that every detail had a specific meaning.

All of the pieces that I have produced this semester are named after my grandparents, who have all passed away. The pieces go in chronological order, both in terms of stages in my life and the order of their deaths. In this way, my cakes have a dual meaning all connecting back to the concept of loss: the objects themselves portray instances of myself that have been lost to time, but they are also connected to important people in my life who I have lost. Even though two of my grandparents died before I was born, they lived on in the stories that my parents and extended family told me. In my formative years I saw my grandparents regularly. They helped me explore the world and made sure to instill a strong moral code in me. I wouldn't be the person I am today without their influences. The loss of my grandparents and the loss of my past selves are inseparable, hence the names of my pieces.

Similar to the technique used in Marinetti's *Manifesto of Futurist Cooking*, in which the table setting would optimally coincide and enhance the food to be consumed, I used found objects such as cake plates and trivets and customized them to more reflect the pieces to be set upon them.



Figure 5:From left to right: Robert, Anne Marie, and Alphonsus

The first cake, *Robert*, reflects upon the time when I was about nine years old. This was around the point in my life where my mental health began to worsen, although at the time I did not understand what was going on or why I felt the way that I did. I was constantly wracked with

anxiety and developed a deep-seated anger at the world. I was extremely irritable and snapped at people when they spoke to me. I have since learned that this was a childhood sign of depression. The top of the cake is covered in spikes to reflect this prickliness, and painted in shades of red and black to match the emotion. The cake plate that it sits upon was coated with a mirror-effect paint in hopes that it would emphasize the vertical nature of the piece with a reflection that continued downwards.

The second piece is *Anne Marie*, representing myself at eleven. At this age the anger gave way to pure social anxiety, as I switched to a school with a class size ten times bigger than my previous one. At the time I was extremely concerned with other's opinions of me, because it was very difficult for me to find a niche in my new school. I've coated the cake in a shiny silver paint that alludes to a mirror, for during this point in my life I took in information and trends from my surroundings and tried my best to mimic them outwardly. Internally, however, I was struggling greatly with my new setting. The stand is geometric and angular, reflecting the strong geometry of the cake. This cake is a recreation of an actual one I made for a project on Egypt in the sixth grade. That one was about twice as big and weighed around fifty pounds, requiring my father to carry it into my classroom for me. Throughout the emotional turmoil of growing up I have always kept my love of baking.

When I began high school, my depression skyrocketed. The school that I attended was intensely competitive and highly stressful, and I was struggling. I began to self-harm at fourteen. I designed the third cake, *Alphonsus*, to reflect the scars left on my arms. The cake is covered in concentric and overlapping scratches. This cake is covered, reflecting how isolated and shut-off from the world I felt at the time. At this point in my life I was very suicidal and lacked any

motivation to continue with almost any of my studies or hobbies. However, when possible, I would bring in cupcakes to school to celebrate my friends' birthdays and the like.



Figure 6: George (left) and Hilda (right)

The fourth cake, *George*, is named after the person my paternal grandmother married after her first husband died. This cake represents my 18-year-old self, starting out at a college several hours away from home without knowing a single other person within a two-hundred mile radius. The immense loneliness I felt in my first few years attending Allegheny has left a great impact on me. In this loneliness I once again struggled with my depression, but managed to overcome it with the aid of the friends I eventually made. I coated the plate in a matte black paint to reflect the feelings of isolation. The plate's inherent intricacy alludes to the detailed and complex flowers on its top. The flowers represent my attempts to appear outwardly strong and keep my mental struggle contained.



Figure 7: George, detail

And finally, the last cake, *Hilda*. This cake represents me in my current state: finally happy. Finally able to understand myself and why I create the art that I do. Finally flourishing, as represented by the dainty flowers that adorn the top of the form and spill down the side and onto the tray it sits upon. My grandmother Hilda was the one I was closest to out of the five. My family took care of her for a very long time as she slowly lost her battle with cancer. At the time it caused me immense discomfort to see her in that state, but as I grow older I am more and more grateful for the experience. It was humbling. I have so many precious memories with her and she was a huge part of my childhood. I loved her dearly.

Hindsight chronicles my life and my emotional development, culminating in the person who I am today. It is sad, yet triumphant, as I have overcome so much. My preoccupation with

my past used to be a hinderance to myself, as I was unable to live in the present. As I grow older, however, I begin to realize that it is important to remember. I am able to deal with these emotions in a constructive manner in the form of my art. I can turn my struggle into something beautiful.

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Dirk Staschke, *Passing Time,* 2011-2016, ceramic, wood, and acrylic sheet, 8" x 14" x 14" , Winston Wächter Fine Art, www.artdirk.com

Jeff Nebeker, *Cake with Cherry and Cookie Ring*, ceramic, 5" x 5" x 5", Elliott Fouts Gallery, www.efgallery.com

Jessica Stoller, *Still Life,* 2013, porcelain, china paint, luster, enamel, medium-density fiberboard, 65" x 47" x 23.5", P.P.O. W, www.artsy.net