

Genevieve Wagner

Today I'll be interviewing John Masello, a recent graduate of Ohio State's MFA program and his solo show is going to be at the virtual Hopkins Hall Gallery starting on May 25. To access John's virtual show head to uas.osu.edu and check out the UAS from Home tab. Here you can see our virtual gallery as well as more interviews like this one. So first off John, can you just give us a brief introduction to who you are as an artist, and what this project is like?

John Masello

Yeah, Hi I'm John Masello I'm 26 and a Pisces. I just finished my MFA, and I was in the ceramics area of the art department. This exhibition, this project, it's a series of collages that I've been working on, and they're made from a lot of brightly colored synthetic material and apparel fabrics, some materials I use were adhesive, vinyl, clear vinyl, ripstop, nylon fabric, which is like that sleek fabric that's used in windbreakers, and some parachutes. I've been using a lot of like markers and pastels on paper zip ties, a lot of other plastics and found materials but with this series of work I was adapting to not having studio space to make larger 3d works as well as kiln access. And so I have my sewing machine at home and I've been making a lot of garments, since the shelter and place orders started and so I kind of wanted to make more pictorial things and combine a lot of the materials that I've been holding on to in piles and just do something with them. And I finished my MFA thesis recently and the part of the last sentence of it was challenging the viewer to look at them through, and I started to wonder how that could be interpreted metaphorically, as well as literally with materials and so I've used a lot of things that have like different levels of opacity, different translucency, and trying to play with layering to sort of figure out the Gestalt principles of like how we make sense of those things that we're looking at. And also too like, I haven't shown a lot of 2d work that I've made if anything like I barely really sketch, if anything when I were to mention their quick things and so trying to figure out, out of all these like materials I was working with like how they could effectively mimic like illusions of solidity or like how inescapable that like material identity of the parts could be. So this series of work tries to balance how the materials are like layered handle plays to complicated spatial understandings. Also like recently started to like be into, like, more, I wouldn't call it pictorial but like more abstract two dimensional works that aren't really explicitly referencing anything but sort of in our structure appear familiar in some ways.

Genevieve Wagner

I'm really glad you're still being able to work, kind of like alter your practice on being at home so it's great. You kind of touched on this but how do you select the materials you work with, when you're starting a project?

John Masello

So right away I'm really drawn to things that either like amaze me with their stupidly niche functions, or like completely confused me as to what they're meant to be used for. I'm drawn to really synthetic colors that find themselves together, not by choice but by like commonly associated contacts. And I really love garish tastes when it's expressed with confidence and like the brightly colored eyesore that you know you right away have that repulsion to but then the more you look at it, the more you start to like get over its immediate ugliness.

Genevieve Wagner

Love that. And then when you're choosing materials, how do you choose between using found materials or purchasing new things, or like creating your own materials like with ceramics?

John Masello

Yeah. A lot of it's very reactive and in the moment, depending on what I need that material to do. For example, on a couple of the collages I use cut strips of colored adhesive vinyl instead of just like clear tape to attach pieces together. But I think a lot about function when it comes to material choice, like what context it comes from or what its intended purpose, original purpose was, and then I tried to find a fun way to twist that either like call attention to the thing or to completely erase it. I also tend to get really hooked on learning new processes and hard skills and figuring out a way to like queer a step the traditional method can be a really generative groove to work and look through.

Genevieve Wagner

And speaking of learning new art styles so you got your BFA in ceramics, and you got your MFA in ceramics, but kind of like through your MFA you've dealt with new mediums not just like clay. So how did that like change and medium come about?

John Masello

Yeah. So, I do have like two degrees in ceramics now and humorously enough haven't been working a lot with ceramics, the past year and a half or so. But I think I realized that I just really love to find like a certain kind of process that has like infinite variables, and then run with it. And so before grad school I was slip casting with a ton of interchangeable plaster mold pieces. And even though I knew that process really well I would get different results each time and I could sort of create different challenges for myself but after a while I feel like I hit a wall, and I started to feel really bored with it. I felt like there was only so much I could say or do making vessels. And during my second semester of grad school I started to work with materials that I had been drawn to for a while, but never had any idea of what to do with them. And in hindsight it was that I started to miss apply these materials specific approaches but at the time I felt really lost and unsure of myself for why I was even making art but as unfamiliar as it was it was more fun than making vessels for me every step of the way. I feel like I just stopped relying on like my hands and the hard skills that I built up and instead start using my eyes more, think more critically about what I could use the work to say instead of having it just be a demonstration of hard skills, but I've always been interested in the materiality of things around us and curious as to how they're made for the first time I felt like I was using art making to share that curiosity when I started to work interdisciplinary. Instead of kind of like, to expand a little bit on that like making pots just felt really simple for me like there was an end goal, it was comfortably reliable process and it didn't have a lot of structural issues or variables, and I felt it wasn't enjoyable to me anymore because I spent too long nitpicking the same things and so in grad school I threw a wrench in all of that, by making things like barely held together, combining different processes and materials and then constantly reworking things. I had to figure out like if I was really interested in prioritizing ceramics, as like the number one material in my work or if it was just

something that I'd stuck with because I knew it so well and I'd spent so much time working in it. But I started to apply like that logic of ceramics, that material transformation, the investment in process and surface and construction, to other materials so I don't really think I ever left it. But it feels like a lens now that I'm looking through to see outward instead of just looking inward, if that makes sense.

Genevieve Wagner

Yeah, yeah, that's really special. It's really cool. And you kind of discussed this, but, you mentioned with these new collections of works that you're showing at Hopkins Hall, that you're exploring deceptive potentials of material identity. So when working How do you exactly discover like the identity of a material, and how is this identity different than a human identity and is it a fixed or is it more fluid?

John Masello

When I'm playing around with a new material I start by looking at its intended purpose or the context it comes from, and how what it's made up facilitates that function. I'm also looking to find what a specific material can do more effectively than any other material for that purpose. And I'm also really interested in surfaces and the connections between how it looks, versus how it acts. And then what assumptions we project onto it because we've seen it similar elsewhere. I think it's really different from human identity, and not only because we're a lot more complex than like plastic and fabric, but I think it's a critique on how identity can be perceived like there's no way to know everything just by looking alone. I think all identities are fluid whether that's talking about like human identity or material identity and the fluidity of how that identity is perceived or detected across different contexts settings is kind of what I'm most excited about with this work especially like in these new collages.

Genevieve Wagner

I find it really exciting to think about these things like identity and not thinking of it in a, you know, human centric perspective so I'm really enjoying that.

John Masello

It's easy to like, pick up on what you notice when it's not about humans.

Genevieve Wagner

Yeah no totally, yeah.

John Masello

And this happens to me a lot where I'll be walking, and then out of the corner of my I'll see something and think it's something else and then turn it locally to find out it's something totally mundane and ordinary but that like potential of that magic that "Did I see what I thought I did?" become like a really important lens.

Genevieve Wagner

And also, I know that you've worked in iterations, so often using like the same material and making multiple works for that material over an extended period of time. And so when you're doing these iterations do they help you like learn more about the medium you're working with? Are they almost like paths of discovery and understanding for you?

John Masello

Absolutely. And working in iterations was something that like my advisor had been harping on me about for more than half of my grad school time so I'm glad that someone else is noticing that finally that I'm finally doing that. Iterations they helped me learn more not only about like the artwork or the structure of it but my own affirmations, like in the tile spacer works. The first time I tied any of them together, I'm just being so cautious about not bending them holding them straight up just doing everything I could to prevent any of the knots from like snapping. And it's funny like the more I work with it, the less precious I started to view it. And even if some of them did break in it's just like three seconds of work to like fix it. And then I just uninstalled my thesis work, or like picked up the last of it the other day and I had a bunch of concrete blocks and so I put those in and then I just threw all the tile spacers on top like not even really caring and then just hitting the road. So I just thought that was kind of funny how this sheet, manufactured a piece of plastic thing that you know I've been working with for so long and so cautiously drilled all the holes and untied and just kind of like, get in the car. But each iteration, in addition to like learning more about like the structure and how these things work and also how I work with it kind of become like a critique of the previous one, especially when it comes to like material and structural risks, I find that the things that I wanted to avoid the most in one iteration are what I put on full focus, next one. And, and it really helps me sort of see like the fluidity of these parts that I'm working with and like the potential there.

Genevieve Wagner

It's a speaking of the tile spacers, you exhibited in the 2020 MFA Thesis show this winter at Urban Arts Space and regarding this piece, going to have like some links to your Hopkins Hall piece, you use the yellow tiles spacers to do like different structures and shapes. And so what did you learn about this material when you're making these different structures, often structures that like they look like other things but they aren't because you're using like a tile spacer? So can you speak a little bit to that?

John Masello

Yeah, I learned a lot about how the different arrangements they can be put in will affect the drape of the fabric or like the textile once it's all done. In my written thesis I had a section where I had images of some of the different arrangements of them before deciding on the like plus x shaped pattern that was their final arrangement. But learning like a lot about the flexibility and like how they connected since the pattern that they were tied into, on each you there's four holes to ones and then to bend at the bottom, and clustering them into like clusters of four that would make a square could then just have a different language of how they would come together. I was referencing a lot of like crocheted blankets, granny squares are pretty commonly square. And so having that language carry over into what ultimately is a textile or fabric made out of completely different materials was a visual connection that I wanted to be present in the

work. But before one of the arrangements that I did not commit to to like kind of make it easier to understand, I had all of the used shape like just tile spacers. But like a grid where they're all in the same arrangement, and where I had needed to drill the holes for that it wouldn't have draped a symmetrically, if anything, it would have been like a bamboo placemat or like corrugated cardboard where it wants to bend in one way, but not in the other. And so I knew that if I wanted this to reference, some kind of fabric or at least had that immediate connection too, I need to like kind of get over a lot of like the baggage of those different arrangements and I had to figure out one that could do the most, and one that could imitate fabric and the way it drapes most effectively.

Genevieve Wagner

Yeah, I found that really fun about that piece because it's like you look at this thing and it looks like it could be like, you know, a blanket, like something crochet, but it's made of plastic, and that's really it's a fun like disconnect but I love it. And so every research on your practice or write about a connection you made between Susan Sontag essay *Notes on "Camp"* and then the works in your MFA thesis show. Can you speak a little bit about this connection to Sontag's essay?

John Masello

Yeah. So right away like the connection to the Sontag quote, I was thinking a lot about like the shorthand vocabulary that I use when I'm talking about or thinking about my works and so, where I have the tile spacers tied into the rectangular prisms I was calling those bricks because they imitated the proportions of a brick in the thesis works. They were both yellow, whether it was inherent or painted in the concrete. And it was all of these visual similarities and structural similarities too but it wasn't a brick, it couldn't function like a brick it sort of took that language and its name but it couldn't really contribute to that. And so, that quote I feel like was a really good example of like how to share that shorthand language. When she says cam' sees everything in quotation marks, it's not a lamp, but a "lamp". And those quotation marks immediately make you more suspect of like what it is. And then like as I started to research more into camp, a lot of a common thread that I found was this interested in artifice, and that like partial assimilation into a normative context, and the more I researched it the more connections I saw in my own logic to art making. So I started finding more writings about camp and using my practice to respond to how camp can be interpreted. Trying to dissect it and really stretch it out, but part of my written thesis is reacting to other scholars and artists and how they have to find camp, especially because I don't think it should be singularly defined. And so the Sontag example was kind of the first of many in like this nexus that I'm stringing together, to kind of locate what camp can be and how it can be recognized without trying to define it. So I'm figuring out the logic of camp and how it fits with my own like hardwired approach to art making and living like my own sense of humor. And so it's been really interesting to read what other people through different lenses are picking up on about camp and then think well, maybe in art, it doesn't have to always do that maybe in my work, I can sort of cherry pick a little bit and set up room for incongruencies.

Genevieve Wagner

And honestly, talking about camp once again, it could create a lot of hybrid forms I would call them. And do you think of yourself as like altering the like identity of these materials, or are you just like using materials to make a new form?

John Masello

I think it's a little bit of both, with the tile spacer work I was engaging with the identity of those objects that are really surface level. The form I found them in was mostly retained except for the holes drilled and their inherent color was celebrated in how I painted bricks. Well, the concrete blocks can't call them bricks to a really similar color, but I feel like I was more interested in showing how the tile spacers can be recontextualize to form something else, and using the repetition of their form and attachment to create a visual harmony, based on how they fit together. Part of the research for my thesis, I read part of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, and she writes a lot about repetitions ability to normalize and that signification is created through these repeated instances, and I didn't even know what a tile spacer was or like I didn't know it was a tool that existed before seeing a bunch of them at the habitat restore. But finding alternative ways to use them shows like the fluidity and how they can function from one context to another and the repetition is not only the thing that makes the pattern but it helps it imitate something.

Genevieve Wagner

It's really exciting to hear like you applying different essays and things or reading to your artwork, I always love like hearing when artists have like these great like literary, or like essays that they use to inspire their work, because then you can like go and read that essay and like connected to your piece.,

John Masello

And then to even see like how that train of thought starts to like break or formulate a slightly different thing from the original source essay.

Genevieve Wagner

All right. One final question just like on your Ohio State experience in general. So as an MFA student at Ohio State, how have you benefited from cross departmental collaboration between your fellow students and professors, so this can mean between like different departments within the art department or if you like collaborate with folks in different departments at Ohio State, and then how is this like aided your artistic discovery, as an artist?

John Masello

Well, I definitely learned to be less stubborn about my work in grad school, to be honest I kind of treated it like a bubble, where I knew that I didn't need to sell work or make work that like was commercially appealing or things that were like perfect and resolved, right from the start. So I started to experiment a lot with things that were new to me. Like my first semester I took a 3D modeling course, and then learn like the software and how the 3D printing process works, not because I had any specific plans for it but because it was another skillt. I'm really happy that I chose like a huge state school and an R1 University just because any like area of study that I

wanted to like explore they have. And so I'm really glad that I took that like omnivorous approach to grad school because I feel like I didn't know what my work was about for a while, but I wanted to develop the skills to express it when I was able to see it more clearly later. And I also like to kind of learn how much fun it can be learning like an entirely new process, and like that challenge of trying to shed all the like idiosyncrasies that you've built up, for me it was through sculpture and ceramics, but then to find them again later in a new form of material. I feel like I've learned a lot about myself in this program just because I spent so much time getting out of my comfort zone. And also too like, compared to where I went to undergrad this MFA program has a lot more people in it. And so just being around all these different voices and artists' perspective so there's a lot more ways to make art than just what I knew. I remember, like when I first walked into the thesis exhibition I thought it was so cool how like the 15 of us would probably never all be shown together again in the same way, but just like how we all follow these different trains of thought to get to where we are. Just by being exposed to like more people, more practices it's really, it made me more reflective about what I do, and like my own thinking process.

Genevieve Wagner

Really glad to hear, that was beautiful. So thank you so much John for your time and for this fantastic discussion. I hope you stay safe and stay healthy and congratulations on your solo show.

John Masello

Thank you. Genevieve and the urban arts and summer series for letting me do this.

Genevieve Wagner

Of course! Have a great day.

John Masello

You too.