

YOU WILL ALWAYS HAVE A PLACE AT MY TABLE

by

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It's time to eat is a simple phrase that holds a privileged comfort for satisfying hunger and a time for bonding, gathering, and reflecting. I write these words as I make homemade cavatelli pasta in my parents' kitchen; the flour has specked the computer screen, my clothes, and floor. The enjoyment of rolling the dough to make these small, ribbed delights will last several meals as it is dried, then frozen, to be later taken out and enjoyed again. These same notions of blissful family memories enter my smithed objects.

My art series, "*You Will Always Have a Place at My Table*," is a collection of one-of-a-kind, sensory-provoking cooking and serving tools inspired by my childhood memories of family dinner time. My thesis is influenced by Western 18th and 19th Century elaborate tableware that curate a landscape of personal identity rooted within objects, and traditions derived from rituals. Aristocratic dining slowed down the eating process to allow for establishing connections between the guests as the meal was intended to be long lasting with appreciation for the food and tradition. Like an event-filled dinner party from the past with consideration for etiquette and culture, a DelBrocco family dinner is filled with the sounds of vocal communication, the clattering of kitchen tools, and lively music in the background. Meanwhile, preparation is like a series of systematic gears operating in harmony as the meal unfolds. Like the many objects we assign a value, my art, while on display will absorb and collect the numerous fruitful memories spent at the table.

Welcome to my table.

YOU WILL ALWAYS HAVE A PLACE AT MY TABLE

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Art and Design
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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

by

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*To my Mom, Dad, Anthony, Nick, and friends
for keeping my heart whole and belly fed
throughout my educational journey.*

To those who created memories with me over shared meals.

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INTRODUCTION

Bonding over food brings people together. How we plate these delectable meals determines the meal's status and who will attend; whether it be for a personal or business date, eating can help deepen relationships by finding common ground within the act of dining together. Alongside the people dining at the table are an array of objects that lay a contextual landscape of social cues, cultural references, and notions of personal interests. Our diverse and evolving culture eats much differently than 50 years ago, when dining and food rituals still gave weight to preparing, serving, and consuming meals. At the DelBrocco family table and in my thesis work, certain items are arranged around the table that stems from each person in my family's needs and preferences, making each place setting unique to each family member. Tableware can slow down a meal's pace and encourages appreciation of the food served and the objects' craftsmanship; each is a conversation piece. Whether gifted or purchased, they have the potential to be veined with personal stories or prompt reflection of a moment in time. To connect this tableware with those occasions embeds a value of nostalgic memories. These eating tools tell visual, metaphorical, and sentimental stories through imagery, form, and physical interaction

My fascination with tools and objects has given me a new way of communicating through making. My art allows me to demonstrate how I learn about and experience the world around me, exemplifying my desire to connect sensory experiences with memories created around the dining table by considering each piece's visual, auditory, and kinesthetic experience. These cooking and serving tools provoke curiosity for object exploration through their interactive and aesthetic qualities.

This thesis work exemplifies my understanding of metalsmithing, capabilities as a maker, knowledge of historical and contemporary art, and ability to communicate through objects. My pieces stimulate thoughtful reactions to keep my audience engaged in a culture distracted by the digital world. The story each piece articulates, and their interactivity slows down our fast-paced lifestyle. I encourage the viewer to contemplate the work and make physical and mental connections with it.

RESEARCH

I have a deep appreciation for craftsmanship and a fascination with historical dining objects. I studied 18th Century European aristocratic tableware that curated a landscape of personal and cultural identity rooted within objects. These ostentatious historical table items, like a lion head water pour or an array of specialized spoons—slowed down the dining experience and kept us at the table longer, giving dining a ritualistic experience.

During the 12th Century, craft guild associations became popularized in Italy and France as a place for master craftspeople, like metalsmiths, to make and sell their work. These guilds were keen on regulating quality control and held high standards in their products' craft, material, size, and weights (Cartwright). Early implements of flatware, hollowware, and cooking tools were handmade by smiths in guilds. Today, the majority are manufactured and mass-produced at a much lower price.



Figure 1. 16th Century steel and iron-gilt French fork, knife and pick set



Figure 2. 17th/18th Century fork, knife and spoon set

Before the 17th Century, if attending a dinner party in the West, you would bring a personalized custom flatware set made by a smith. Through excavations of London plague pits, evidence has shown that even the poor carried at least a personal knife for eating; they usually had a wooden handle attached to the tang of the knife (Lupton 28). It was not until the 17th Century that these sets would include a fork, spoon, knife and were folded up in a way that protected the blades and tines.

The fork was first mentioned in the 11th Century; it was solid gold and two-pronged and not widely accepted as fingers could do the same job. Lupton tells a tale of a Greek bride who ate with a fork at her wedding and years later died of the plague as God's punishment for her not using what God gave her: fingers. King Louis XIV was the first known to provide a complete serving set to all his guests except a fork. Kings Louis XIV did not include forks as he preferred to use his fingers, unlike other cultures that ate slippery foods like pastas where forks were culturally accepted. (Lupton 123). By the 18th Century in Europe, a napkin, plate, goblet, knife, spoon, and fork were all considered essential to eating. In America, during the 19th century,

“Probably less than 1 percent of Americans households could claim to own even a single silver spoon. A hundred years later, more than a hundred different forms for knives, forks, and spoons in thousands of distinct handle patterns, made in solid silver or silver electroplated onto base metal, were being produced. The abundance of serving and eating utensils was widely available and accessible not only to the elite, but the entire American middle class” (Lupton 176).

As a result of the Industrial Revolution and mass production, middle-class Americans were given a cost-effective opportunity to adapt the European tradition of collecting an array of dining and serving pieces. This consumer mindset can be linked to the nineteenth Century desire for distinct flatware patterns and designs (Lupton 176). Like emblematic markers in a Rococo painting that provide focal points of more profound meaning and contemplation, my thesis work creates a landscape of family symbolism inspired by family memories. It reflects the explicit traits of my dining mates.



Figure 3. 18th/19th Century formal European place setting

As place settings grew, so did the distance between people at the dinner table. Guests began to consider personal hygiene, good manners, and body etiquette, which helped to formalize not sticking fingers in a shared bowl to grab food. As societies advanced, particularly under Western influence, "cutlery transformed the animal act of eating into the refined, human ritual of dining that bespeaks our culture's deepest beliefs and values" (Lupton 104). New designs for these dining tools evolved to accommodate food handling, social customs, and advancing fashion trends.

I do not feel that holiday meals taste different with the array of serving equipment that adorns the tables. However, the tradition of setting the table and the ritualistic behaviors that follow make the meal feel more special to embrace the process and honor the ingredients and labor that went into the meal.

CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCES

In recent years contemporary artists have put more emphasis on concept and content than function. Frankie Flood utilizes the processes of mass-produced objects in his motorcycle-influenced pizza cutters through high craft and sleek designs, and Kim Cridler uses her sculptural artwork as a method “to record and extend our lives” (Cridler).

Frankie Flood

Frankie Flood is a great example of a traditionally trained metalsmith who uses advanced technologies and tools in the production of functional objects to create one-of-a-kind artworks. Flood’s designs incorporate several different media and techniques, including machining equipment. Flood’s series of pizza cutters are influenced by motorcycles and his desire to connect everyday functional objects that surround him with his art. Flood explains in a written document,



Figure 4. Frankie Flood, *Series One Pizza Cutters*, 2004

“My work investigates one of a kind objects and their role in a world based on mechanical reproduction. Industry has removed the aura from objects and stripped them of their individuality. My pizza cutters seek to demolish the sterile conformity of mass-produced objects and represent the stylistic and flamboyant embellishment of groups who live on the fringe of popular culture.” (The Alienation of Labor 4).

Flood's words inspire me, and like him I find inspiration from the history of metalsmithing. As an artist, I reflect on the array of unique serving ware from the aristocratic tables that spoke of style and narrative-based concepts. Humans have developed ways to make their daily tasks easier through the use of tools. The act of making connects us back to our ancestors through applying the same techniques and processes

used before advanced technologies and mass productions. This has helped shape the metalsmithing field.

Flood speaks to our core value as makers...

“the “act of making” is an innate characteristic that embodies what it means to be human. Making is the ultimate way to connect things; making connects the hand and mind, it connects unrelated fields of study to form new solutions, and it connects people. Making is [a] way to connect to others, solve problems, be creative, and communicate ideas through the things we create” (Meet the Makers).

When cooking, I find myself constantly looking to elders and old recipes, veering away from the overly saturated advancements in technology to find the traditional way something is done. In exploring tradition, I do not go as far as to grind the grains to make flour or mill my metal for the art forms; I do yearn to find a way to reconnect with the hands that created these traditions.

Like Flood, I have always been fascinated by how objects are made and the mechanics of machines. I have a deep appreciation for highly engineered, technology-assisted artwork, which contrasts with my making process. I tend to veer towards hand labor and create each component from stock materials. This past year I have invested in a pulse arc welder that has given me a unique opportunity for ways to connect materials together that would not be possible with soldering.

This small advancement into my toolbox of knowledge has opened my eyes to alternative ways of making that differ from tradition. When designing the *Wine Vessel: Family of Four, Patience, Aerating for Flavor*, the bracket structure encasing the steel ball on the outside was tack welded in place then soldered to ensure the spokes were aligned. Without the welder the fabrication of this design would have been difficult to assemble. This is because supporting each of the spokes at an angle extended off the vessel would be nearly impossible without reflowing the other seams.



Figure 5. In progress image of *Wine Vessel: Family of Four, Patience, Aerating for Flavor*. Detailing or welding process

Kim Cridler

Kim Cridler is a metalsmith and object maker who uses her art as a method to talk about her childhood and family instead of photos; “she views possessions as a story just waiting to be told, and her artwork combines the historical functionality of metal with contemporary art to tell a story” (Russell 1). Cridler states, “the process of transforming something so common and functional into art is “actually very tricky,” requiring a delicate balance between understanding the historical use of an object and using that understanding to create contemporary art” (Russell 1). Like in my thesis exhibition the tableware are expressions of familiar forms rooted within historical dining objects and their functionality. The root of each design refers to those recognizable forms while expressing notions of my family in a playful manner.



Figure 6. Kim Cridler, *Pithos (storage jar)*, 2020

MY ARTWORK

My series *You Will Always Have a Place at My Table* is constructed primarily from mixed metals, cord, wood, and enamel. The sensory-provoking cooking and dining ware are displayed on a handwoven checkered table runner that rests on top of a six-foot handmade mahogany dinner table. The main techniques found in this body of work are fabrication, raising, forging, hot and cold connections like silver soldering, pulse arc welding, riveting, handmade screws, stone setting, and surface treatments including texturing, patination, and polishing.



Figure 7. Thesis instillation *You Will Always Have a Place at My Table*

With consideration for craftsmanship, material integrity, narrative, this body of work is a physical representation of my family members demonstrated through design and style. These art objects on the table define “place” as a reminder of tradition and togetherness rooted within space and time spent at the dinner table. My thesis is a landscape of cooking and dining tools that are welcoming and encourage

visitors to gather around to bond and generate conversation. Methods that keep my audience entertained are unique physical interactions, surprising mechanics, and playful designs.

Mechanisms and Playful Designs

Though the impetus for my thesis derives from the prolonged dinners found in historical aristocratic meals from the 18th Century, I intend to encourage contemplation of experiences and associations that promote communication through play and object exploration. When I first began this series, my pieces were more functional as dining objects. As the series progressed, I pushed each design away from the inspired form's traditional function to create entirely new interactions influenced by DelBrocco personalities. During the “1930s, many Surrealist artists were arranging found objects in bizarre combinations that challenged reason and summoned unconscious and poetic associations” (The Museum of Modern Art). I challenge my viewer to think beyond function and explore each piece’s form, beauty, and newly inventive purpose. I encourage the viewer to observe each element from all directions to better understand how each piece is to be engaged. For example, the *Salt and Pepper Shakers: Talk With Your Hands, Shimmy Shakers* are two half-round dispensers with thirteen screw hinges that make noise as you move and shake them. Like the *Whisk: Get Shimmy with it*, where the ball bearing spins, moves and shakes encouraging fun and playful actions like dancing in the kitchen when prepping a meal.



Plate 1. *Salt and Pepper Shakers: Talk with Your Hands, Shimmy Shakers*, 2021

While designing, I question the function of dining utensils in relation to food and the cultural and customs we live by. I utilize traditional metalsmithing techniques even at the cost of saving time. My making processes begin with the mechanism or internal structure. Once that is designed, I fabricate components from flat sheet or wire, either silver, brass, or copper.

It is exciting to problem-solve how to fit and assemble a piece with various components and techniques; some of my works, like the *Candle Stick Holder: Timekeepers*, have more than 300 different parts. These candleholders keep track of the time spent at the table. Each of the half circles with a stone represents one hour. As the candle burns, you can raise the platform the candle sits on to maintain the height of the candle. A tension spring mechanism allows the candle stick to move up and down like an elevator. The handles pull out and then lock into the indexing holes on the outer plates. There are hinged half circles that have a stone set on each one, decreasing sized. They align with the location of the holes serving as a visual, indicating an hour of time passed.



Plate 2: *Whisk: Get Shimmy With It*, 2021



Plate 3: *Candle Stick Holder: Timekeeper*, 2022

Narrative

There is a poetic transformation in raising a flat metal sheet to a vessel that blends historic smithing and my methods of making. I am very fond of historical designs with narrative imagery that speak of a moment in time captured within the piece as a relic. The Met Museum explains that the 1785 Neoclassical style sugar bowl and creamer by Paul Revere Jr. “is engraved with bright-cut bands of tasseled swags and wavescroll ornament. According to family tradition, these objects were made as a gift for a Virginia bride” (*Sugar Bowl*, Paul Revere Jr.). These pieces are linked to a family as an heirloom through designed with elements popular at the time. Whereas the sugar bowl by Marc-Etienne Janety, who was the first silversmith to work in platinum, uses narrative imagery in “the crispness of the details, seen in the relief of the satyr and nymph and in the various decorative motifs, reflects his technical mastery of the medium” (*Sugar Bowl*, Marc-Etienne Janety).

Like in the Revere and Janety sugar bowls, my *Sugar Cellar: A Sugary Sea* embraces a narrative of communicating place and family through a regional landmark. Inside the sterling silver lid is a Champlevé enamel depicting the Newport Bridge in Rhode Island. The summer before moving to Greenville, NC, I took a picture of the beautiful sunset while sharing dinner with my parents to celebrate their wedding anniversary. I designed the sugar bowl lid to uphold the enameled image of the Newport bridge to speak of place through containment or securing the memory in the form of a reliquary. I pierced out the sunset using positive and negative shapes to illustrate the design, then sweat soldered it down to a flat sheet of silver, ensuring no gaps. The silver base is a very large area, making it very challenging to



Figure 8. Paul Revere Jr., Sugar Bowl, 1795



Figure 9. Marc-Etienne Janety, Sugar Bowl, 1786

control the piece during the soldering process and while firing to prevent the enamel from chipping off as larger pieces or bending like a potato chip.



Figure 10. In progress, *Sugar Cellar: A Sugary Sea*

Following this I used the process of depletion gilding to bring a fine silver skin to the surface of the metal. I did this more than 20 times. The enameling application requires washing enamel to remove the impurities. I then use a very small 000 brush to push and place the small granular enamel into the metal sheet's negative spaces to create a layered painterly sunset. The process of enameling took several long and tedious weeks. The lidded bowl was designed to hold sugar as a metaphor for preserving fleeting moments. After completion, I wrote:

Capturing bittersweet fleeting moments.

Waves crash and pass like our daily routines, a constant changing of tides.

Temptations of overindulging in sugary sweetness, temptations to daydream into a setting sun.

The creation of meaningful memories spent amongst loved ones sweetens the darkest of days.



Plate 4: *Sugar Cellar: A Sugary Sea*, 2020

Family Representation

I place this body of work on the table to create a portrait of my family, it defines familial space, and provides a context to connect with my art. Accessibility and placement are critical in creating a context that is welcoming and easy for my viewers. The complex design and highly refined metalsmithing techniques used are a visual metaphor for that labor, excitement, energy, and individual personalities that represent a traditional DelBrocco family meal. The heavy mahogany table alludes to bonding, importance, and deep roots in my family of four.

The materials I use, such as the black and white cording, support my personal style as an artist, as a tool to create a narrative within my objects, and to represent my family. The black and white check used in the vessels' stems, the teapot handle, and serving spoon and fork is a 32-strand polyester cover with an 8-strand parallel nylon core frequently used for climbing, making it highly durable and flexible. I use this material where the hand holds the pieces as a metaphor to describe my family as supportive, stable, and strong as a unit.



Plate 5. *Teapot: Have A Cup of Tea*, Screwball, 2021



Figure 11. Detail *Teapot: Have A Cup of Tea*, Screwball

The four vessels honor and express my family members' personalities and preferred beverages. As a play off the margarita salt rim, the *Margarita Vessel: Family of Four, Continuous Resilience* has 60 hinges on the top to speak a repetitive and self-disciplined nature. The *Martini Vessel: Family of Four, Balancing Act* uses a wide range of techniques including raising, forging, piercing, prong setting, and fabrication of a ball bearing casing. The Martini vessel stands tall and alludes to delicate handling as it balances on a ball in the center of the vessel. If the martini is tilted off-kilter, the ball will fall. I

considered how one usually interacts with a martini glass, with slow and steady hands being careful not to spill it, or if you are anything like me, you wear half of it on your shirt.



Plate 6. *Margarita Vessel: Family of Four, Continuous Resilience, 2022*



Plate 7. *The Martini Vessel: Family of Four, Balancing Act, 2022*

Visual cues are found in mechanical movements in these sophisticated and playful objects. Like the *Beer Vessel: Family of Four, We're Not Playing Games Just Taking Chances* is a metaphor for resilience, to never give up; a play on the ball and cup game. The *Wine Vessel: Family of Four, Patience, Aerating for Flavor* has a channel containing a steel ball running on a track that circles the cup. As you swirl the vessel, like aerating your wine there is a nod towards memories. In this piece, I used the metalsmithing technique of chasing on the lower half of the vessel to create four indented flower petals. Chasing is a traditional metalsmithing technique of hammering metal sheets from the front side using steel chasing tools and a chasing hammer. With the chasing tool adjacent to the metal sheet or form, the hammer is tapped on top of the tool to create a pattern or recesses. The hand of the maker is how tradition will carry on. Tradition and ritual take time and patience, and so does the craft. As I sat for hours repeating the process of historical makers, my arm became heavy. I felt full; my mind and body were

present when I worked and disconnected when I wasn't working. I really enjoy the rigorous processing in my making.



Plate 8. *Beer Vessel: Family of Four, We're Not Playing Games Just Taking Chances*, 2022



Plate 9. *The Wine Vessel: Family of Four, Patience, Aerating for Flavor*, 2021

I am challenging my viewer to think beyond surface function and explore the object's form, beauty, and newly inventive purpose. As my family grows and we branch off into our own lives, it's warming to feel that sense of connection rooted within sharing and being together like the *M&M Cutter: X-actoly One Half, Sharing Between Siblings*.



Plate 10. *M&M Cutter: X-actoly One Half, Sharing Between Siblings*, 2021

CONCLUSION

Community is very important to me; as a child I was taught that fruitful relationships are developed around the dinner table — a time for togetherness and feasting. Connections will grow deep if you tend, feed, and nurture them. Building upon relationships with people you love is essential. I intend for my work to be the impetus that reminds my viewers to slow down, reconnect, and build new memories with those that gather around their dining table.

Like art, sharing a meal with others has similar outcomes; they both provide an opportunity for conversation, can unite people across cultures, and serve as an opportunity to learn the unfamiliar. I reference elements from historic aristocratic dining table displays and the engaging dining events that accompanied these genteel experiences as a means of reference to ostentatious and well-crafted objects into a space that allows people to feel comfortably connected.

Through moving parts of the pieces and communal engagement, my work slows down the dining experience to keep one at the table longer, like gatherings from the past. Subtle surprises and excitement will help fill my viewers' bellies before leaving the table as if they enjoyed a traditional DelBrocco style meal, where the unexpected is always expected.

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