

Learning to Love Learning

David Orr, a 1985 graduate of the School of Theater, Film & Media Arts has an exhibition, *Perfect Vessels*, at the Mütter Museum through January 5th, 2017. Below is Orr's tale of how Philadelphia, his mother, and an elective class at Temple led him to this exhibition and where he is today.

Over the past two years, I found myself in the city of Philadelphia more frequently than in the previous thirty. I'd been awarded two Wood Institute grants to photograph at the Mütter Museum, and as luck would have it, had booked rooms in a hotel next door to what had been my college dorm (The Robert Morris at 17th & Arch). I found myself walking familiar routes, past familiar haunts, buying food from the same Wawa I frequented as a student (several Proustian reveries were launched by meatball hoagies).

Unsurprisingly, I found myself thinking about the city and how my experiences while a student here had shaped me to become the kind of person who would eagerly photograph and research at the Mütter Museum.

Part of the influence came from the inevitable cross-pollination with other students and their passions, both within Temple, and the city's many other schools. I, a film major, might end up in a discussion with an economics major and learn how factors I might have previously considered bean-counter minutia would in fact have enormous impact on the distribution platform for a film, and its eventual success or failure. Or I might fall into conversation with a philosophy major, stumbling upon themes that still resonate with me to this day. The Philadelphia College of Art (now University of the Arts) was my first contact with men and women preparing for the "Art Life," and opened my eyes to myriad disciplines. It quickly became a primary hangout for me.

But there were other ways the city shaped me. At the time I attended Temple, and in the immediate years after, Philadelphia was in decline. Mayor Wilson Goode bombed his own city in an ill-advised attempt to dislocate MOVE members from a house in West Philadelphia. Two prolific serial killers, Gary Heidnik and Harrison "Marty" Graham were avidly working the city. Dr. Martin Spector was arrested after body parts (including a human head) were found rotting in boxes on his doorstep. (A journalist I met years later in New York had written for the *Philadelphia Daily News* at the time and told me that so many bizarre things were happening — and so often — that "every morning felt like Christmas!")

Abandoned buildings could be seen throughout the city, and there was a powerful sense of industrial dread that permeated everything. (David Lynch, who attended Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, referred to his disturbing cult film *Eraserhead* as the "Philadelphia of the mind.") I spent a lot of time venturing into abandoned, evocative spaces (the "Kelly" swimming pool under the Fairmount Waterworks; Eastern State Penitentiary; the Domino Sugar Factory; nooks and crannies of the Northern Liberties neighborhood I later lived in). Many of these became filming locations for my projects, during and after my college years.

The aesthetic of the Quay Brothers makes complete sense to anyone who lived in Philadelphia in the '80s.

Despite being somewhat depressed (or perhaps because of it), Philadelphia had a thriving alternative music/club/art scene. I witnessed conversations in dive bars lead to rehearsals, which would then lead to performances. In front of paying audiences(!) This was revelatory: I saw that I could initiate and realize my own projects, without awaiting permission. I can trace those experiences to my founding a design practice in New York (*x2 Design*, with clients ranging from Chase Manhattan Bank to Revlon to Knitting Factory Records), my current directing career in Los Angeles, and my visual art career.

There was, clearly, much unstructured influence to soak up in the city at the time.

One of the best *structured* aspects of my college life was the elective course. Among the scramble for prerequisites and credit requirements, here was a chance to learn simply for the pleasure of learning. My mother had instilled the beginnings of this in me at a young age. Whenever I didn't know the meaning of a word, she would light up: "Let's look it up!" and head for our massive dictionary (with considerably more enthusiasm than me). The practice took — albeit somewhat in spite of itself — and I began to open to the subtle pleasures of learning things.

One such class was *American Photography*, taught by Miles Orvell. A group of fellow film students and I had joined en masse, primarily seeing the class as an opportunity to socialize (a reason I doubt Orvell remembers us fondly). And yet. When I speak to a good friend from that time, we both remember that class well, and with great appreciation. We remark on the worlds it opened to us, and the lasting impact of them. When giving talks on my photography, I often employ quotes I learned of via Orvell (Garry Winogrand: "*I photograph to see what the world looks like photographed*;" Susan Sontag: "*All Photographs are Memento Mori*").

This exposure to a diverse range of American artists and photographers—all with their own discrete worldviews, approaches and aesthetics—proved to instigate a sea change within me. In a single "serving" I learned of a wide artistic world. And I picked up a valuable lesson: there is no single, "right" way to approach an artistic problem. Seeing disciplines as diverse as those of Berenice Abbott, Diane Arbus, Robert Frank, Dorothea Lange, Gordon Parks, Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, Edward Weston, Garry Winogrand, etc., quickly impressed upon me the myriad ways in which photography and art practices can manifest themselves successfully. And how these individual paths taken informed and shaped those bodies of work.

This has served me well in my endeavors, and has been reinforced by my membership in the Directors Guild of America, where members are given the rare opportunity to hear other directors speak about the craft to peers. I've never heard two directors describe their arrival at the solution via precisely the same path. Each approach taken is radically different from — even in opposition to — another. And yet, to be on that stage discussing a project, they have clearly found some success in that path. The message reinforces what I learned long ago: there is no "correct" way to a creative solution, only yours.



David Orr

Which leads me to what brought me to the Mütter in the first place.

In my art, I often explore symmetry, both formal and conceptual. I've long been fascinated by the way repeating a form creates a newer, balanced whole (discovering, as Brian Eno put it, that "repetition is change"). I'd applied this to several subjects (books, power lines, symbology), and discovered that this work dovetailed with ways we create systems to make sense of the world. On an aesthetic level, we are hard-wired to find symmetry attractive: we are, ourselves, symmetrical. This, and the fact that structural symmetry has thrived through centuries of evolution, is why central principles of classic architecture and industrial design begin with symmetry.

During this, I'd learned that if one photographed then mirrored half a human skull facing camera, it balanced perfectly without signaling that it had been manipulated (as we immediately notice in a human face so altered). I began to look for subjects to photograph. You'd be surprised at how many skulls will turn up if you ask around, particularly in Los Angeles, where one quickly learns that skulls are where the interests of physicians, medical illustrators, students, artists, and rock & rollers intersect. After exhausting those avenues, I began to seek a larger collection. A colleague, knowing my connection to Philadelphia, recommended the Mütter Museum. It's worth mentioning here that, even in the weird Philadelphia of my youth, the Mütter's reputation was formidable. Pre-internet, one heard only tales of a lady whose corpse had turned to soap; a skeleton where the bones had fused together; the world's largest colon; slices of Einstein's brain; etc. It sounded like a place to go on a dare, or to avoid altogether. Now, it just seemed fascinating.

At first I was reluctant, as I knew the museum to be full of specimens that are dramatically asymmetrical to begin with (Museum director Robert Hicks had told me that to a physician "asymmetry seen from the foot of the bed" is immediate evidence that something is drastically wrong with a patient). But I liked that the histories of these skulls were known (if the history is murky, you probably don't want to know where they came from—see "Dr. Martin Spector," above). And then I had a realization: there was a counterintuitive beauty in photographing something "misshapen" and rendering it balanced — by repeating "mistakes," I was coming closer to perfection.

The idea of a skull as a container was something I began exploring almost as soon as the project began. Obviously, it is a jar for our brains. But I was also thinking of facial symmetry, then the classic image of the Rubin Vase (that is also two faces in profile). I began to think of vessels one sees displayed in museums: exquisitely crafted utilitarian objects now regarded as art. I saw how skulls are vessels for our consciousness (they are where we process the sensory information we collect, then build our unique model of the world). There were also linguistic links: words for "head," "skull," and "bowl" were often identical, or coming from the same root. It turns out that skulls have been used as drinking cups as long as man has existed. Victors often drank from the skulls of the vanquished. For centuries, Tibetan monks have sipped from *Kapalas*, cups formed from skulls that are meant to reinforce the idea of impermanence. Lord Byron drank from one, and wrote a poem about it, *Lines Inscribed Upon a Cup Formed from a Skull*.

As you've probably picked up from reading the above paragraph, one of my favorite aspects of making art, easily equal to the aesthetic execution, is the research aspect. Besides being a handy impulse when one needs to create catalogs and give talks, it makes the experience infinitely richer. And my interest and excitement in learning these things can be traced back to the sense instilled in me that there is joy in learning. Some of it comes from Mom, and that once-dreaded, now beloved, dictionary. Some of it comes from those long, meandering conversations I learned to love in school. And some of it comes from the world opened up to me by an elective class taken three decades ago.

Thanks, Mom; thanks, Philadelphia. And thanks, Miles.



"Syphillis" from Orr's Exhibition, *Perfect Vessels*, at the Mütter Museum through January 5th, 2017.