

MISS CONCEPTUALIZING THE DREAM

BY

Sarah Kephart

Submitted to the graduate degree program in Visual Art  
and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master's of Fine Arts.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Chairperson

Committee Members

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Date defended: \_\_\_\_\_

The Thesis Committee for Sarah Kephart certifies  
that this is the approved Version of the following thesis:

SARAH KEPHART

Committee:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Chairperson

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Date approved: \_\_\_\_\_

My research rests upon examining the development of our cultural ideals of happiness, equality, and success: central tenets of the American Dream. Advancements in technology and science have drastically altered the way we structure our lives as well as the way we communicate with the world. Yet as our nation technologically progresses, evidence suggests that we are trapped in the past. Regardless of how far we move away from the idealized images that fuel this dream, the greater we remain firmly attached to its traditional and cultural norms of our past. Convinced by our commitment and faith in the American dream of yesterday, we must somehow match this vision with today's goals. Perhaps, Americans fear losing "naturalized" roles in our contemporary life and in turn hold too tightly to an incessant desire to what is comfortable, known, and established by traditional norms.

The identity of our nation was strengthened and had once prospered by our cohesive belief in the American dream. Yet by living in the past, to where we continually escape, we are only offered momentary comfort and security in our modern lives. This suggests that our past does not provide us with all the answers we seek today and should not therefore dictate our current and future behavior. Instead our past should be objectively viewed as a model, a tool that can assist and determine the choices we make to successfully contest with the current state of our nation and the world. Our perceptions of success, happiness, and high attainment can no longer rest in material consumption in the same way once believed to be true. Striving for a big house and the fancy cars cannot protect us from financial hardship, natural disasters, terror threats, and broken families. These material objects, can, however provide us with a temporary means of gratification and security, yet then they too dissolve into illusions and facades of our identity, security and happiness.

As one either bares witness to or personally experiences tragic losses of the unfulfilled promises granted by our devotion to attain, (or desire to attain) the American dream, one could become conflicted with whom to blame, themselves, or the system. No matter how disappointed one may feel or how spiritually unfulfilled one may remain when they seemingly "have it all" one may surprisingly continue the quest of attaining the dream. Therefore, it is my belief that if Americans, collectively, and along moral and ethical lines, were to reevaluate their current values and desires of consumption as means of happiness, the search would lead to the core of our existence to shed light on that which is of greatest value and importance, the human spirit.

Through this process we can learn to shed old patterns of living and reinvest in patterns that have been forgotten. We could then start fresh, anew. Together we could redefine the American dream, one that is rooted in values that are attainable for all individuals and sustainable for generations to come.

*Miss Conceptualizing the Dream* is an exhibition conceived to illuminate and reflect the conception and relativity of the American dream from both a broad and personal perspective. The title, accompanied by an appropriated depiction of *Christina's World*, a painting by the American artist Andrew Wyeth, function together as a way to not only advertise the exhibition, but to set the stage and tone of my ideals as made evident in the body of work. *Christina's World* exemplifies how I have been inspired, yet disillusioned by the imposed expectations to attain the *dream* through the costs it imposes.



These two aspects are essential components to the foundation of my work, for they detail my personal journey and self-discovery of identity within a much larger, cultural context. The myths and interpretations that surround *Christina's World* are not unlike those posed by the American dream. My perspective has always been that of Christina's willing inability to detach and define herself as a woman separate from her roles as mother, caretaker and wife. Although she seeks time to distance herself in terms of proximity from the home and her roles within it, she is drawn to gaze toward her house on the hill as if it were a mirror, reflecting back to her, her own self image. In what ever way Christina finds solace, she does not deny that it is her home and the

land that provide her with the security and resources she needs in order to survive and that ultimately give her life meaning.

My interpretation of Christina's thoughts and desires exemplify my personal struggles as a female and what it has entailed to detach myself from the pressures and demands bestowed upon me at the earliest stages of my development. Due to my empathy for her 'perceived' position, I was compelled to embed my own image over that of Christina's by mimicking her posture and attire, turning the image into *Sarah's World*. As I have grown older I've felt the socially accepted demands of women in our society further re-enforced. The aggressive nature of advertising continues to project traditional gender roles assigned to women by marketing products that reflect her position and roles within the home. They also infectiously portray unrealistic depictions and expectations of the manner in which women are to look and behave. This leaves many of us feeling inadequate and insecure about our appearance or our own individuality. These traditional norms, however, do not coincide with the realities of today but are re-packaged as normalized truths that continue to deny our society development. These ideals are in actuality disturbingly unnatural, disappointing when not met, and more often than not simply unattainable. With that being said, why is it that women continually invest in these ideals as though they were "her" desires? By reaching them, will they provide the "happily-ever-afters" hoped for? This example of reinforced norms of behavior is similar to the way we continue to invest in the ideals of the American dream as though it is "our" dream, the only dream, or means in life that can fulfill our lives and bring us true happiness.

To abandon societal and cultural norms and discover for myself a greater meaning in life — by not investing everything in "the dream" — has been frighteningly unquestionable. I realize that a set of predetermined roles and goals is far less complicated than crafting them on my own. Therefore, I have naturally *missed* conceptualizing about the dream and in doing so I discovered I too have been programmed to desire true love, marriage, and owning a home with 2.5 children. However, I have managed to discover that there are other things more attainable, more achievable and of much greater value than investing my entire existence in one idealized perception of happiness. As Americans, we are blessed with many freedoms and choices and it is my decision to be free to define what happiness means to me, and what I am in pursuit of finding.

Therefore, *Miss Conceptualizing the Dream* is a body of work that utilizes the iconographic power embedded in the objects that symbolize the American dream to illuminate the commonalities we share as believers and as dreamers. The objects depicted are a single family-sized house, a station wagon, and a chandelier form assembled out of household furniture and objects found inside the home. The three sculptures are specifically designed to question the assumed strength of these material objects as cultural constructions of “the dream.” Each piece is representational in appearance and is seemingly functional due to its form and scale, yet they are nothing more than exaggerated façades that are as fragile as a faded memory. These objects do, however, function as a way to subtly magnify our desires to attain these materialistic items as proof of our success and ability to live the dream. The viewers naturally embed their own perceptions, memories and interpretations into each piece. Viewers reflect a certain part of themselves in the way they identify with the objects. This suggests the many ways our identities are constructed through materialistic objects. If we could detach our personal identity invested in these materials as our means toward personal achievement and fulfillment, only then could we discover a deeper sense of self and discover what is truly important to value in life. This emphasizes the idea that we cannot continue to look to the past in hopes that what were once established pursuits of happiness will forever remain constant. Instead we can responsibly sift through our history and decipher what patterns are worth repeating and what values we must hold onto to foster a new pursuit of happiness.

As our great nation swings in the boughs of the greatest recession since the 1930s, we are all witness to the multiple accounts of people losing their jobs, homes, cars and other possessions. Yet amidst this crisis, an unforeseen opportunity to reexamine our values has been presented as a way to reveal what people have worked so hard to find, time that can be used to invest in our families, friends and neighbors. These trying times have shed light on the aspects that are not only of greater value, but that remain as constant truths. And yet as these opportunities arise, will we be willing to make fundamental changes in our belief systems, or will we simply pick up the pieces and carry on as usual, believing and aspiring to *have it all*? Change, regardless of what that may be for an individual or for a nation as a whole, is by far one of the most challenging actions to face. Fortunately, we are given the gift, the strength, and the

decision to either permanently better ourselves by changing our ways, or create change to temporarily adjust to situations and pray that life will carry on the same way as it did in the past.

*Miss Conceptualizing the Dream* presents the following works detailed as a way to **not** give up on what has long defined who we are as individuals of a great nation. The work in the exhibition is, however, intended to inspire and encourage one another to hold onto what is of great value and find hope that together we can, and will, make great changes in generations to come.

The house, (which we can all identify with) is built of 2 x 4s and EasyGard Housewrap® with aluminum storm windows and a white front door. It is positioned next to a 1978 station wagon that was cast using white plastic sheeting. The EasyGard Housewrap® logo that is repeated over and over again emphasizes the notion that we invest so much of our sense of comfort and security by wrapping ourselves in dreaming of owning a home as way to protect and define who we are.



As the viewer investigates the house in the round, they are confronted by the fact that there is no back wall to the form. What is revealed, is the framework, a skeleton of a seemingly whole structure that emphasizing the fragility of its construction. Lights are positioned in the back in such a way, so that when the viewer freely walks about the open interior, their shadows are projected onto the front façade of the house, visible to anyone viewing the front exterior of

the home. We cannot deny that the home, (whatever size or shape that it may be) is one thing that we all share in common in one form or another. Memories of childhood and the experiences of growing older are ignited by the interiors of domestic spaces and reside in us all. Therefore our shadows reflect and magnify memories, and illuminate a common link that we share within the four walls of a structure we call *home*.



The station wagon parked next to the house symbolizes a time when the suburbs were first developing and growing families moved out of the city to raise their children in a peaceful environment. The demand of large and multiple vehicles for each household drastically increased, so that each member of the family could perform the tasks of daily life. The vehicle functions in similar ways today, but instead it is more symbolic of one's social status and wealth as opposed to transporting a family of four. The plastic sheeting used to create the car in the exhibition magnifies the fragility of its structure and the sense of security we perceive a car to provide. At the same time it depicts a shell-like form.



This represents a sort of shedding of past ideals we invested in these objects as sound structures that protect and provide for our families. By doing so, one can view these objects as functional necessities as opposed to tokens that define us. Therefore, two lights are positioned inside the car and are set with a timer to the rhythm of a heartbeat. These lights illuminate the hollow interior as a way to suggest that there is still hope in the growing development of our nation, but it will take time and courage to reassess the value we place within the elements we perceive as a means towards happiness.

The final element of the show sits opposite the house and the car. It is a spot lit chandelier-form assembled out of household furniture and multiple objects found within the home. The piece is viewed in the round and is 9' x 5' x 5' in dimension. From the ground up are four dining table chairs turned upside down where a kitchen table rests upside down as well on the inner legs of the chairs. Atop that is an upside down coffee table with a bar stool that sets in the upright position where a hubcap and candelabra form the highest peak of the chandelier. A plastic chain is clasped at the top, jetting 32' into the air where it is then attached to exposed



This creates an illusion as if the chandelier, (which weighs nearly 350 pounds) is actually *suspended* in space. Once the primary form of the chandelier was established a multitude of objects such as books, dining ware, pillows, toys, spiritual figurines, a toaster, flowers, and much more were adhered to the surface, painted white and coated with white candle wax. A string of white beads are draped around the chandelier and dozens of candles were mounted all throughout the piece.

The chandelier was designed to illustrate and illuminate commonalities we share by incorporating identifiable objects, which in one way or another resonate either directly or indirectly with the viewer.



It is excessive in its construction, alluding to the way we tend to surround ourselves with material objects that either comfort us with memories or exist for purely aesthetic or functional purposes. Upon investigation, the viewers are compelled to search the piece to identify objects in the chandelier and thereby engaged with the work. The viewer is also inspired to find value and meaning in the objects they identify with. The way the piece is assembled emphasizes the way we feel when our lives seem to be turned upside down due to conditions we can or cannot control.

This sculpture details and magnifies the experience that when life gets tough it is our family and friends we value and turn to for support and guidance. We cannot turn to material items to find answers and the unconditional love we need when the going gets tough. Therefore the chandelier is symbolic of “the light.” A light that can, if our hearts and minds are open and willing to see, will guide us along the darkened path that can lead to change. As individuals living and believing in the strength and prosperity of our great nation, we can see the light of hope and faith in a new day, a new tomorrow and together we may ultimately construct the light of a new American dream.