

# A Table for Visual Generation

## Black Table: Blackboards and Chalk

John Owens



From early childhood, blackboards seemed mysterious and omnipresent. Reminiscent of a blank slate, they contained elements of unknown written knowledge and diagrams. Since the first student held a charcoal stick and a piece of cloth or parchment, the teacher would write, the student would copy. The blackboard was a space for the presentation of ideas, concepts, and dreams. One could write, present, and erase.

When writing on the blackboard, mistakes were expected and corrected. Initially, we were eager to go to the blackboard, to be on stage, to present, perform, and entertain. Later, we were reluctant to write on the blackboard for the same reasons. We realized we were being judged, critiqued, and tested. The blackboard became a symbol of authority. The blackboard's content was and continues to be subjected to public scrutiny.

Blackboards are nostalgic. The blackboard elicits feelings of early school days. The blackboard is part of our consciousness via its consistent use in the American educational system and a major contributor in the creation of individual identity of young minds. The blackboard is a billboard of Western culture. A person knows its expected use. One only has to drive along any highway in America to see a billboard and its message. I see the blackboard as a preliminary form of mass media.



Figure 1

There is something symbolic about the sound the blackboard emanates when you drag your fingernails across its surface. All of these things connect us to our childhood memories.

“A STORY ABOUT PICASSO TELLS OF HOW WHEN HE WAS A SCHOOLBOY HE WAS TERRIBLE AT MATH BECAUSE WHENEVER THE TEACHER HAD HIM WRITE THE NUMBER 4 ON THE BLACKBOARD, IT LOOKED LIKE A NOSE TO HIM AND HE'D KEEP DOODLING TO FILL IN THE REST OF THE FACE. EVERYONE ELSE IN THE CLASS SAW A NUMBER ON THE BLACKBOARD; PICASSO PERCEIVED A FACE.”<sup>1</sup>

The modern day equivalent is the dry-erase board, but somehow it does not evoke the same feelings as the old blackboard. There is something about the way chalk feels. The sound of chalk as it is moves across the surface of a chalkboard. Chalk powders into dust. Its marks can be smudged, erased, and redrawn (Fig. 1).

The use of the blackboard in my tables is reminiscent of its function (Fig. 3). It reminds me of my grammar school days and the handwriting lessons presented on its surface. My use of the blackboard is intended to evoke a nostalgic quality. I am counting on the viewer's past experience with the blackboard. I want the viewer to remember the feelings it summons while in the presence of my pieces. This provides a venue for viewer interaction and self-identification with the piece on more than the visual level. It allows for the viewer to make an emotional connection.



Figure 3

It has been said that the creation of a good idea is formed by connecting two previously unrelated ideas.<sup>2</sup> I believe it is in the ability to form connections without pre-judgement that allows free creative expression. Marshall McLuhan once said,

“Artists in various fields are always the first to discover how to enable one medium to use or release the power of another.”<sup>3</sup> I allow the media and materials to influence my work. The materials become part of the creative dynamic and are part of the piece.

It is the artist's willingness to experiment and take risks that opens doors to personal expression. My decision to display the blackboard tables hanging on the wall is an example of this risk taking (Fig. 3). It hints at the historic use of the blackboard but the artwork still reads as a table to the viewer. This creates a dynamic through the combination of two unrelated ideas. The nature of the blackboard surface accesses the dialectic in a familiar way. By observing the viewer's interaction with the dialectic, I can observe the results, reflect on form and function, then exploit this knowledge as raw material for my creative process that can be eliminated (erased) or push it further.

1. Shekerjian, Denise. *Uncommon Genius: How Great Ideas are Born*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991, p. 99.  
2. McLuhan, Eric and Frank Zingrone, ed. *Essential McLuhan*. New York: Basic Books, 1995, p. 291.  
3. Holtzman, Steven R. *Digital Mosaics: The Aesthetics of Cyberspace*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997, p. 175.

Fig. 1. John Owens, *A Palate of Sustenance* detail, 2000.  
Fig. 2. (left) John Owens, *Table for Visual Generation* exhibition photo, 2000.  
Fig. 3. John Owens, *Table for Visual Generation* exhibition photo, overview, 2000.