I have always enjoyed working with happy colors, lots of happy colors and lots and lots of detail, like this piece here from one of my first year drawing classes.

I used whimsical motifs and I chose enjoyable subject matter, and I avoided heavy or controversial concepts. And I did it instinctively, without ever really understanding why.

What I didn’t have up until now
were the words in my vocabulary to be able to understand
that what I was actually trying to do was generate positive affect and emotion through my aesthetic choices.

So the first step in figuring out why I actually want to make these things and how to go about doing it with more intent
lies in defining what “happy” is in the first place and why it’s even important.

It turns out that trying to pin down the meaning of happiness is not a new thing.

The first two sources I was looking at for research on happy objects and happy design both referred back to the philosopher John Locke

so I looked him up a little further and delved a bit into his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* published in 1681. 1681.

This notion of positive affect and emotion has been a going concern for over 3 centuries!

This was a real validation moment for me, realizing that happiness carries this amount of philosophical weight historically.

Anyway, I think John Locke sums it up very nicely with this quote:

*“The necessity of pursuing happiness [is] the foundation of liberty. As therefore the highest perfection of intellectual nature lies in a careful and constant pursuit of true and solid happiness…”*

What he’s saying, in a nutshell, is that the goal of every rational human being is just to set their life up to the unique set of conditions that affects them the most positively.

We all have different ways of going about it, but ultimately, we’re all after the same thing, our own comfort and happiness.

Just as an aside, this achievement is considered to be an important enough part of modern civil liberties that Locke’s phrase
“The pursuit of Happiness” even made it into the American Declaration of Independence.

Okay, so enough with the ancient philosophy. We’ve established that achieving “happiness” is a valid concern and has been for a long time, so how does that tie back to aesthetics?

I’m going to say that a part of the pursuit of personal happiness is found in creating a comfortable environment for yourself in the areas that you have control over.

This includes the selection of both art and functional objects that you choose to put in your space and how their aesthetic impact helps generate the emotions you want to feel in the space.

I mean there are whole schools of interior design that are aimed at generating different affect, from Danish modern to shabby chic to industrial grunge.

What makes a “happy home” environment will vary greatly from person to person.

William Morris, the famous designer and craftsman from the Arts & Crafts Movement in the mid to late 1800’s has a famous quote that fits here

“Have nothing in your home you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.”

My paraphrase on that is

“don’t have anything in your home environment that doesn’t make you happy or add to your comfort.”

Don’t have anything in your space that doesn’t generate positive affect.

But exactly how do we do that?
How do we individually define which aesthetic objects will bring happiness and which ones won’t?

I started my research reading an article from the Affect Theory Reader with the promising title “Happy Objects” written by Sara Ahmed.

 She states in it that “To be affected by something is to evaluate that thing.” (Ahmed 31)

We evaluate it against our known experiences and against our other objects.

Just in the use of the word “evaluate” here,
she is agreeing with my view that aesthetic responses are cognitive in nature,
they are evaluated against the vast rolodex of information that we build up in our brains over our lifetime.

It is really, really hard to escape the speed at which the human brain can process information.

I mean it still processes while we’re sleeping, so I’m going to say that it’s definitely involved when we’re awake and evaluating an aesthetic stimulus.

So instead of using the term pre-cognitive that we’ve been kicking around, I’m going to suggest pre-conscious as maybe a better fit.

There are three general categories so far that I’ve found documented so far as methods for making this evaluation of the affect of an object.

We evaluate objects against our previous interactions with similar objects and how we’ve been conditioned to respond to those.

We evaluate objects against our own internal emotional states.

And we evaluate objects based on our physical interaction with them.

Back to John Locke again, who unified these ideas into the concept of “taste”.

“For as pleasant tastes depend not on the things themselves, but their agreeability to this or that palate,…so the greatest happiness consists in having those things which produce the greatest pleasure.”

He likens artistic taste to physical taste based on mouth and in that light, these three categories make up a complex palate that we use for “tasting” aesthetic experiences.

There is an entire branch of cognitive psychology that deals with learning and behavior.

I took those classes as part of my psychology minor for a previous degree.

One of the articles I read online now about perception and happiness talked about principles of operant conditioning that I studied back then.

The idea is that we learn how to respond to things over time based on whether or not our previous responses have brought on desirable feedback or undesirable feedback.

For example, if someone comes up to you and says “Wow, those jeans look amazing on you!” the value of those pants is going to go up slightly in your mind.
If enough people keep sending that positive message every time you wear them, there’s a good chance that that brand or that particular shade of indigo is going to become an ingrained aesthetic preference because of the positive emotion associated with being admired.

Memories fall under this category, too.
You might have an aesthetic affinity for a certain shade of blue because your grandma’s kitchen was painted that color and you learn to associate it with comfort and cookies.

We can also be conditioned by social influences, whether we like to admit it or not.

If our group of friends agrees on the desirability of a certain aesthetic choice, there is a good chance it will rise in desirability for us as well as we come to associate it with friendship and inclusion.

Where we live or our cultural heritage can also impact our emotional responses to aesthetic cues.

Living in a culture where neutral wall colors is the norm will pre-dispose us to being more comfortable in neutral rooms because we have been conditioned to think of this as normal.

There is also an economic factor that can come into play where we associate status with cost and learn a preference for an object that costs more even though it may be no more useful or pleasing to the eye than another less expensive item.

There’s a great section in the book *Design For Emotion* that talks about how these operant reinforcements build into mental landscapes, where our collections of experiences become landmarks on the map that guides us in how we respond.

The bigger the emotional impact of a previous choice, the more prominent that landmark is and the more it will guide our future responses in similar situations. (Van Gorp 24)

Much like a hungry rat will learn to push a lever to obtain food, or Pavlov’s dogs would start salivating at the sound of a bell in anticipation of a steak, we learn to respond to aesthetics in ways that will bring us the emotional rewards we seek.

Another major and perhaps more personal part of our aesthetic palate is based on how an object relates to our own pre-existing internal emotional state.

For example, because I tend toward anxiety, with a constant internal monologue running in my head all the time, happy objects for me are the ones that have a calming, balanced aesthetic.

I’ve had enough negativity in my life that I am drawn to simple, pretty things with a decidedly feminine overtone and a touch of whimsy that makes me smile.

Inevitably, these are the aesthetic influences that also make their way into my pieces and will in turn make my work appeal to someone with a similar internal emotion state to my own.

Someone more sedate and calm by nature will likely find my work silly, or plain and boring and will in turn be affected more strongly by objects that offer more mental stimulation and intrigue.

Sara Ahmed notes another interesting twist on this concept of internal emotional state in her *Happy Objects* article.

She says that objects can “learn to be happy” by association with what she calls unattributed happiness. (Ahmed 33)

This is where your existing strong emotional state can come to be associated with an object regardless of your original affinity for it characteristics.

For example, if you’re having an absolutely stellar day, the weather is great, you just got an A on your project, you got a full 8 hours sleep for the first time in ages and while you’re feeling amazing and like everything is right with your world, you encounter a new type of flower on your walk to school.

Because you are already happy, your affect will overflow onto the flower and it will become associated with happiness in association with your mood.

The last method for evaluating an object and how it makes us feel is perhaps based more closely on John Locke’s analogy of individual taste buds and physical palate.

As a craft artist, positive aesthetics goes beyond just a visual appeal and also gets into the tactile nature of objects

(how soft the handwoven silk scarf is, how the ridges on a twisty cup feel in your hand, how perfectly the ring fits your finger).

There is an emotional response that can be elicited by how well an object fits with your particular physical characteristics.

Function can also have an emotional aesthetic impact in craft objects as well.
There is satisfaction in pouring a can of beer into a blown glass mug and having it filled to just the right amount,
there is comfort to be had in how the length of a scarf ensures that it wraps around your neck with the perfect amount of tail to tuck inside your coat.

On the flip side, something can be the most appealing visual object in the world,
but if it has an extremely negative tactile experience it will lose its value as a happy object.

Think along the lines of injury or allergens caused by a beautiful object or how extreme comfort found in an unattractive object can elevate our evaluation of its aesthetics.

So a quick case study to summarize.

The daisy motif is a simple, bright, colorful motif that tends to elicit a definite affective response in many people. Seeing them makes some people smile and others roll their eyes with disdain.

Those who love them may associate them with a memory of a particular garment, enjoy their association with youthfulness or appreciate the simplicity of the five-petal design.

Those who find them kitsch and mundane may have been scorned at some point for wearing them or using the motif as a decorative element.

Negative affect could also be associated with a physical reaction for those allergic to pollen.

As an artist, it’s an impossible task to create work that is universally emotionally appealing, but if we are aware of our design choices, we can create art that resonates intentionally within a particular audience.

So that’s all great, but what does all this have to do with the art I want to make going forward?

It means that I want to try to work with more intentionality to create happy objects that generate positive affect.

I want to make functional things that feel good in the hand, as well as having a harmonious, balanced, design with enough visual intrigue to be interesting without being cacophonous.

I want people to feel the emotional thrill of using the good china, of incorporating “special” objects into their daily routines.

I want to aid others in their pursuit of happiness.