Kick Me

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Kick Me

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Kick Me

Human experience, particularly the trials and tribulations of growing up, is the foundation on which I build. In this body of work, I represent these somewhat unsettling times. I use flattened space, strong diagonals, and vibrant color to add energy to the compositions. An underlying structure of fragmented shapes suggests the incomplete nature of adolescence.
Kick Me

Introduction

In 2001, I began my graduate work. At that time, I was using a hit or miss approach to making art. There wasn't any formal or conceptual theme to my approach. I was just trying to make something that looked good. It took a few years, several classes, and a lot of experimentation before my vision came into focus. Since then, I have made quilts, mixed media collages, and paintings that embody the experiences of my middle school art students. The Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) was a perfect fit for me. It has brought about a growth of not only my art but also my teaching. In addition, it has opened up a network of professional colleagues.

Subject Matter

The life experiences of my students are the starting point for my work. Middle school is a period of transition from being a kid to becoming a young adult. Students are very concerned about peer status and a sense of belonging to a group. I find that this period of time offers universal experiences of growing up, and these are the types of situations and narratives upon which my work is based.

I choose aspects of everyday school life, uncomfortable moments, and periods of happiness in depicting these experiences. For example, in the collage Kick Me 2 (Appendix, 1), a student has his back to the viewer. His face is close to a wall and the
words *KICK ME* are written across the bottom third of the piece. This collage is about this boy’s self-loathing and withdrawing from others.

The cafeteria during lunch has been a source of much inspiration. Lunchtime is the occasion in the students’ day when they let their guard down and just have fun with their friends. My painting *Assembly Line* (Appendix, 2) portrays the lunch line. Groups of students are talking and looking around but no one seems to be going anywhere quickly.

Drawing inspiration from the place where I spend the majority of my day has enriched my work. Whether my art is based on specific students and incidents or just on everyday scenes, I have endless opportunities for ideas.

**Composition**

After deciding on the subject matter, I develop the compositional structure. I often incorporate diagonal lines, which give a sense of dynamic movement in a composition. Then, I work out the space or stage for an activity to take place. Working on the compositional structures first allows me to add the diagonal elements before adding the human drama of the figures. For example, diagonal lines establish a sense of perspective in my collage *Hall Pass* (Appendix, 3). Long strips of fabric and parallel areas of densely machine-stitched lines of thread draw attention to the back of a long hallway. Two students having a conversation divide the long diagonal lines. In my painting *Ha Ha* (Appendix, 4), the strong diagonal lines of the lockers are balanced by the skewed tile flooring. This makes the back of the hallway seem to advance, while the
left side seems to recede. This type of perspectival manipulation allows me to set a backdrop of mood for a work.

I also use the placement of color to imply a rhythmic movement in my work. I apply and place colors methodically so that they accentuate certain parts of the composition. An example of color manipulation is seen in my collage *Boy Eating* (Appendix, 5). The overall color is muted, however rectangles of high intensity color bring attention to the boys’ faces. I use formal devices to place importance on certain parts of a work.

**Material Matters**

Once I have thought about the subject matter and the basic composition, my next consideration is the media. I began my graduate work with the painting *Say Again?* (Appendix, 6) which was painted in acrylic. Because the drying time is so short, I was able to build up a surface rapidly. It was important to start this body of work through painting because I could see the results so quickly. Another advantage to painting is that any color is possible to mix and there is no final commitment to the first choice.

My paintings are built from contour drawings using a brush on canvas. After I complete the drawing, I work on the rhythmic relationships of the colors. I try colors in certain areas and usually change them a few times before I am satisfied. The edges left behind from the colors beneath the surface inspired me to scrape through some areas of paint to reveal the layer below, which adds areas of pattern and contrast to my paintings.

Materials add to the overall feeling of a piece. Even when a painting and a fiber
piece have the same subject or composition, people respond differently to them.

Paintings and quilts have vastly different textural and historical qualities. Paintings are associated with a long tradition of fine art image making. They are usually put in frames and exhibited on walls. Quilts are affiliated with women's work and craft since they were traditionally made as functional objects to keep us warm. I want to work with both these media because I am interested in exploring similar compositions with vastly different media. I want to see how just a change in media, with its historical connotations, can alter a piece of art.

My painting *Assembly Line* (Appendix, 2) and my quilt *Lunch Line #1* (Appendix, 7) have a similar arrangement of figures standing in a row. I completed the painting first, and liked the rhythmic, horizontal arrangement of the figures. So I decided to translate the composition into a pieced quilt. I cut the edges of the figures into more geometric forms. Then, I cut out photo transfers on fabric, of faces and arms, in a more organic manner and juxtaposed these pieced shapes.

I use commercially printed fabric to create my quilts. Like many quilters, I collect fabric, as well as use it. I've been drawn to fabric since I started sewing with my grandmother at an early age. When I use fabric for a quilt, I select the pieces by looking for color, value, pattern, and the weight of the fabric. These are the same formal elements that I use when drawing and painting.

A large gestural figurative drawing on paper is the starting point for my quilts. Then, I draw hard-edged, geometric lines and shapes over the original drawing in order to create the structure for a quilt. The final drawing is the exact size of the quilt and is cut
Apart into sections. These sections are then used as templates when cutting the fabrics. They fit together collectively as a puzzle but because of my imperfect craftsmanship they often don’t line up exactly. This gives a fractured appearance to the figures. I was intrigued by this development and turned my relative inexperience into an essential feature of my work, which enhanced my conceptual focus.

I stitch the pieces together and quilt the layers with contrasting colors of thread. Then, I employ computer transfers for the faces, hands, and feet for the figures. I take digital photographs and import them into the computer. The photos are manipulated by cutting out parts, incorporating scale change, multiple copying of images, and adding filters using Photoshop. The use of filters allowed the photographs to have more texture and appear less photographic in origin. The images are then printed on T-shirt transfer paper and ironed onto the fabric to be used in the quilt. These body parts and multiple copies of body parts are sewn with a sewing machine, layer over layer, to create a fragmented collage on top of the quilt.

**Artistic Influences**

My influences have changed as my work has progressed. However, they have all led me toward a bridge between fiber and painting and drawing. I am interested in the narrative quality of Faith Ringgold’s (b. 1930) paintings and Miriam Schapiro’s (b. 1923) work has inspired me to think about adding fabric to my paintings and drawings. But, I am perhaps most drawn to the work of Romare Bearden (1911-1988). His work strikes a chord with me because of the similarities between piecing fabric into a quilt and putting
image fragments together in a collage.

When looking at Bearden’s work, I am mainly concerned with three ideas: energy, combination of material, and the use of faces as masks. In his collage *The Dove* (1964), Bearden suggests life in an overcrowded and poor but lively city by incorporating many different photographs and a vast array of textured surfaces to achieve a complex composition. I used the same angular lines and multiple textures in my quilt, *Lunch Line #1* (Appendix, 7). In contrast to Bearden’s allover approach to composition, I chose high key colors for the foreground and more neutral colors for the background. This allows the viewer to be aware of the figure-ground relationship of the forms. I feel that if I had chosen similar colors for the entire surface, my narrative would have been more difficult to read. By using neutral colors for the background, it recedes, and the figures stand out.

I am also captivated by Bearden’s use of fragmented imagery to make up a scene. In *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away* (1966/1967), Bearden depicts three people in a rural scene. The face of the seated figure in his composition is made of fragments from as many as fifteen different images from magazines. Because the images were derived from numerous faces, the scale, points of view, and color are all different. I incorporated this technique into some of my work because I want the faces of the people I portray to be ambiguous. I want the situations of my work to be specific, not the individuals.

In my first collage, *Two Days Before the Sadie Hawkins Dance* (Appendix, 8), I wanted to combine elements of photographs into a composition. Photographic fragments were incorporated to represent the faces and arms of the two girls. I used photographs to make the girls seem more real. I want the viewer to readily identify with representations
of actual people. Unlike Bearden, who used many sources for faces, I only two sources for each face. I manipulated the photos and put them back together in the faces of both girls in the collage. The overlapping facial fragments were used to convey the idea of masks. These two girls are placed in a situation where they have to ask a boy to a school dance. They put on masks of courage, while their body language reveals their insecurities. One girl is leaning towards the edge of the picture plane as if she is ready to run away from the scene. The other girl has her back to the viewer, her arms are drawn in to her torso and she is looking over her shoulder, suggesting that she is quite shy.

Bearden used his experiences of childhood as inspiration. His work reflected the conflicts and hardships faced by African-Americans. Scale changes and distortion in the figures were used to communicate the turmoil of the time. In comparison, I have used my middle school students as my subject matter. This is a time in many people's lives that is filled with turmoil and feelings of alienation. For instance, the collage *Reflection* (Appendix, 9) depicts a young girl's face, which is skewed as she gazes upon her reflection. This unsettled fragmented face suggests her sense of low self-worth.

I show a variety of experiences and emotions of adolescents in my work. Some of my work is quite light-hearted. *Giggling Girls* (Appendix, 10) is about two girls sharing a pleasant moment on the way to the school bus. I changed the scale and color of the photos of the girl's faces so that they wouldn't reference specific students, instead they represent adolescents in general. In this collage, I created windows by cutting two rectangles in a mylar overlay for the image. These rectangular, vibrantly colored windows are positioned over a portion of the girls' faces to draw attention to their eyes. I
want the viewer to speculate about the girls' inner selves by making eye contact. The windows also function as a compositional device and are bordered by heavily stitched lines.

Faith Ringgold is another contemporary artist who inspired my work. She gained notoriety for creating story quilts. I find her use of simplified shapes, contour line, and flattened perspective to be the type of visual language that works for my narrative ideas. I have also adopted Ringgold's use of shallow space and diagonal patterning.

Ringgold's ideas for her paintings come from her childhood experiences. She often features people that she knows. Students and their life situations are starting points for my work. My painting, *Best Effort* (Appendix, 11), is about an overweight student who was teased repeatedly about his tight clothing. His response to the torment was to crumple his paper and break several pencils. Another one of my paintings that tells a story of kids teasing is *Ha Ha* (Appendix, 4). In this painting, a student is unknowingly wearing a note on his back while another student is laughing at his expense. A couple of onlookers are annoyed at the scene. By using a narrative approach, I give the viewer a glimpse into the everyday lives of adolescents.

As my paintings progressed, I began to struggle for a way to make fabric work with my paintings. I knew that Faith Ringgold sewed on fabric as a border for her paintings. But, in my work I wanted the fabric to be incorporated as an integral element, not just a border. So I began to examine the paintings of Miriam Schapiro, who was part of the Pattern and Decoration movement of the 1970s. In her work, Schapiro used commercially printed fabrics collaged into her paintings. She also alludes to pieced quilts
by creating in paint traditional quilting block patterns. I was inspired by the idea of the incorporation of fabric and paint together.

Through Schapiro’s influence, I have combined traditional quilting and sewing techniques with my formal art training in creating mixed media works. *Hidden* (Appendix, 12) was my first large mixed media piece. I drew contour lines on a mylar sheet, which I then sewed onto fabric. Large, selected areas of the translucent mylar were removed to reveal the color and pattern of the fabric. As a result, the mylar, along with the stitched lines, function as a linear element in the composition. I added painted and drawn details on top. The outcome is a work that combines elements of quilting and painting and drawing.

My work has been impacted by a number of sources. The paintings of Miriam Schapiro and the mixed media collage work of Romare Bearden have challenged me to explore the combination of various materials. Faith Ringgold has inspired me to look around at my life in school to find the narratives in my students’ everyday lives. These influences combined with my experience in the MIS program are what have inspired me to move forward in my own artistic endeavors.

**Conclusion**

Now that I’ve completed the MIS program, I plan to continue working on quilting and mixed media collages. I want to incorporate more texture and materials into quilts and continue to bridge the gap between quilting and painting.

This program has brought about a change in my thinking. When I was at VCU as
an undergraduate, I took a large variety of classes to enhance my teaching, which would in turn enhance the learning experiences of my students. Those experiences made me a better teacher. This time I took classes to enhance myself as an artist. I gained knowledge but more importantly, I gained focus. I truly benefited from my experience in this program.
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Education:

2006 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies
Virginia Commonwealth University
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1994 Bachelor of Fine Arts
Virginia Commonwealth University
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Teaching Experience:

2002-present Art Teacher, Liberty Middle School
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Hanover County Public Schools
Mechanicsville, Virginia

Honors:

2002 Teacher of the Year
Cool Spring Elementary School
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2001 Hanover County nominee, Elementary Art Educator of the Year
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1998 Sallie Mae First Class Teacher Award
Cool Spring Elementary School
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1990 Dean’s Scholarship for Academic Merit
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Exhibitions:

2006

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*First Place Award*
Amie Oliver, juror

2001

*Hanover County Art Educators Exhibition*
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Virginia Art Education Association, (VAEA)
Presenter, VAEA State Conference, 2002
*Spider’s Games: weaving*
Co-presenter, VAEA State Conference, 2002
*Thinking Through Art Curriculum and Related Concerns*
Co-presenter, VAEA State Conference, 2000
*Jungle to Jungle*

1997-present
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Cooperating Teacher for Virginia Commonwealth University student teachers
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