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A Fugitive Sea

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A FUGITIVE SEA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MFA at
Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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BA, Yale University, 2002

Director: RICHARD ROTH
CHAIR OF PAINTING AND PRINTMAKING

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May 2007

Acknowledgement

Female

There is an amazon in us.
She is the secret we do not
have to learn,
the strength that opens us
beyond ourselves.
Birth is our birthright.
We smile our mysterious smile.

-Lucille Clifton

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Abstract

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By Marian Brunn Smith, MFA

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Major Director: Richard Roth
Chair of Painting and Printmaking

I make images that are fragmented like ominous dreams. Described with sensuous marks of paint, they demand intimacy but reveal vulnerability as they threaten to break apart before the eyes. This thesis examines my journey over the past two years at VCU and describes my artistic beliefs and visions.

The Big Three: Why I Make Art

I love art that grapples with the big three: life, death, and sex. It seems that this is what the world dwindles down to. Maybe add money in there but money invariably is linked to life, death, or sex, as is power, so really, we end up with those big three again.

All of the greatest artists, from Giotto to Matthew Barney, made or make art unabashedly about these things. I, too, am trying to paint towards sexuality, sensuality, sex, the body, love, the immense sadnesses, vulnerabilities, and joys of being a human being and of course the death and destruction that exists for each of us as a reality, banal, haunting or terrifying, everyday. From an uncomfortably personal place, I make art, unflinchingly, about physicality, instability, and a haunting sense of desolation. I must admit I am embarrassed at how seemingly important and serious that sounds. My journey through VCU has taught me that it is and it isn't.

Over the past two years, I released myself from a lot of rules and became a more independent artist. I discovered that being a woman is essential to my life as a painter and to my work. I leave here with a new family of artistic influences and with years of painting awaiting my arrival. Or rather, should I say idleness and life ahead of me? That question will be answered but first, my journey...

My Journey

When I visited VCU as a perspective student, the graduate students I met seemed like independent artists with solid studio practices and strong bodies of work behind them. Furthermore, WHAT they were making seemed fresh, alive, unique, and professional. Almost immediately, I recognized that I was still a student. I realized that I needed to become an independent artist. And I knew that VCU would give me the space in which to make this shift.

In terms of my painting, I had three problems. I was having a painting problem: using paint is hard and I just didn't know how to use it. I needed some conceptual footing on which to make my work. Everything I made was so self-involved and self-referential that I limited myself and made my person too exposed. Lastly, I had acquired so many rules about figuration and myself as a "figure painter". Held down by the traditions of figurative, narrative painting, I couldn't find the abstraction (both conceptually and visually) that I needed in order to communicate my ideas.

My studio just presented more problems. I couldn't figure out how to diversify my studio and work through my ideas, partially because my conceptual framework was so undeveloped. I didn't trust myself as the ultimate voice in my studio and in my painting.

Unfortunately, or fortunately, I realized these problems in the second week of school in my first year. Fortunately because it gave me a lot of time to figure it all out but unfortunately because I felt as though I was failing in front of an audience. I recognize now that this experience, which I no longer feel is failure, was a blessing in disguise. This battle of changing the direction of the work is one that most artists eventually face in the art world. I feel lucky to have learned about it on a microcosmic scale in graduate school. More importantly, I learned how to trust myself and pull myself out of that black lagoon of change, the change that is essential in order to get to a better, more complicated, and rich place.

That sense of failure I had also provided me with freedom. Because I wasn't proud of the work I was making, it became easy to shut everyone out of my studio. I was forced to rely on myself for every decision and to fully trust that only I knew what was right. It was a path that no one could see but me, no one believed was there but a small few around me. So, in my own studio, with my own self, I triumphed. And then, letting people in again didn't bother me because I already knew all of the criticism. I became both the ultimate creator and destroyer. My studio became independent-one problem solved.

In terms of the other problems, I just needed to release myself from a lot of rules. And so I found the rebel within me.

The Rebel Within Me (or In My Studio Without Any Rules)

During the summer between my first and second year, I had a lot of time to think and look and read and write. It was an exploration of what Mark Shouka defines, in an essay he wrote for Harper's magazine called "Quitting the Paint Factory: On The Virtues of Idleness", as idleness, "...the great wilderness of inner life". Shouka goes on to say that

Idleness is not just a psychological necessity, requisite to the construction of a complete human being; it constitutes as well a kind of political space, a space as necessary to the workings of an actual democracy as, say, a free press. How does it do this? By allowing us time to figure out who we are, and what we believe; by allowing us time to consider what is unjust, and what we might do about it. By giving the inner life (in whose precincts we are most ourselves) its due. Which is precisely what makes idleness dangerous. All manner of things can grow out of that fallow soil. Not for nothing did our mothers grow suspicious when we had "too much time on our hands." They knew we might be up to something. And not for nothing did we whisper to each other, when we WERE up to something, "Quick, look busy." (58).

Within all of this idleness, I started recognizing how many rules existed in my studio and how restricted I felt by painting. I envied the artists around me who seemed to have freedom about what they made. Learning about Arthur Danto's death of Painting (with a capital P, that monstrous entity of rules and regulations, greatness and expectation, the linear history of one thing leading to another) allowed me to redefine painting (with a lower case p) as a place where anything goes.

With this information and my idle brain, I realized that there are no rules except the ones that I determine are rules. And this began to release me. I tried to find metaphoric ways to discuss the body that weren't "real" in the three-dimensional world but rather spoke about something more emotional, a sensation of an experience instead of the experience itself. I played with scale and with cropping. I let go of worrying about flesh and I allowed myself to outline a figure. In recognizing that the figure wasn't "real", the space didn't have to be "real" either. It was more important to me that it emoted and communicated a feeling. And so abstraction and mark making and play with paint crept in slowly to the work.

I no longer needed restrictions for what could and couldn't come into my paintings. I pushed the content away from self-reference and allowed poetry, politics, dreams, current events, places, traditional narratives, anything to influence me. I was making work about the world, about anything that touched me, about anything I wanted.

So, with this slippage and freedom, I began a more abstract, oblique path to the emotional content I was trying to communicate. I began to use paint without restriction and with a lot of playfulness. Funny enough, I realized that learning to use paint and communicating ideas with the material in a metaphoric and more abstracted way was not something that I was going to solve in graduate school. In fact, I hoped never to get to a permanent solution but instead be constantly searching and questioning and learning. Within this journey, I redefined my rules as:

1. The only rules I abide by are the rules that I make and impose on myself. Therefore, I am entirely responsible for my own sense of restriction and freedom.

and

2. The only things that define me as a painter are how I see (literally and figuratively) the world and how I make things that reflect that vision.

As A Painter

Still, as a painter, I recognize that the history of painting is a restrictive and expansive responsibility and gift that I must bear and cherish. The figures I love from the past: Giotto, Duccio, Fra Angelico, Rembrandt, Velasquez, Bonnard, Picasso, Guston: continue to define standards in my studio and to determine my steps into the future as a contemporary artist. I am convinced that seeing the Giottos and Fra Angelicos and Duccios in Italy during my sophomore year of college solidified my life as a painter. And my love affair with these artists has continued to burn passionately and brightly without a moment of hesitation. Acceptance of the restrictions I exist within as an oil painter, or maybe better, embracing the standards I must uphold and push beyond as an oil painter makes sense to me. It is the more cynical, rebellious, questioning authority part of being an artist for which I must fight.

And I have doubts about how applicable oil paint on canvas is in today's art world. I worry that this medium is so restrictive and tied to history that it cannot contribute with power and potential to the future of art and art making. At the same time, the transformative, magical, and unendingly metaphoric qualities of this material seem incredibly potent (in an ironic way) in today's reality-based world. Within a painting, there is no gravity, no forces of nature, infinite possibilities and no rules. Anything can

exist in a painting. Sometimes, I feel like the goal of art making is merely to say what you want to say regardless of medium. Sometimes, I am not so sure but I continue making pictures with this oil and dirt. And I really love thinking and dreaming and creating this way. Maybe that is enough. At some point, I will figure this dilemma out. Just not today.

Defining myself as a painter is about how I see. I communicate this vision through oil paint on canvas, gouache on paper, and photography. I consider myself a painter, not based on the medium that I use, but rather because I make images about WHAT I see, HOW I see it, my sensations of that experience, and my memories of that experience after the moment has passed.

On one hand, being a painter, for me, is about seeing the world with clean eyes. It is about noticing color and light. It is about seeing the back of a truck with a pink wooden board tacked onto it and seeing a painting. It is about capturing the essence of someone by creating the sensation of that person-even at the expense of their appearance. It is about remembering the view from bed: an expanse of comforter: bringing that memory into my image making and creating with it a mountain range, a vagina, a memory that the viewer climbs over, slips into, or permeates through.

I consider reading and walking down the street and watching movies all part of my seeing experience as well. This is just a more figurative definition of seeing. The New York Times as well as poetry and books are part of my visual stew. The memories of certain

people, places, or experiences are also part of my collection. I allow myself space to dream about what these experiences mean or what I want them to communicate. I have even used my own dreams. For example, I had a dream about lifting a body from shallow green water like a descent from the cross. The man had drowned because his legs (made of tubes) had filled with leaves and suffocated him. This image resulted in the initial idea for my painting “An Apology to Anna Nicole Smith”.

I write in my sketchbook and bring all of these visual ideas together. Recently, I found a picture in the New York Times that really moved me. When trying to describe this in my sketchbook, I wrote:

Mens’ hands reaching for dead head

Stars above his head and moon beside him

Mountain of men reaching

REACHING: extend, thrust, touch, grasp, strain, ravish*, seize, rape, plunder, rob,
overcome by emotion.

And this is how I came to articulate my ideas about my painting entitled “Ravished”.

I want to talk about being a human but I think this comes out through a woman’s eyes. I am starting to believe that being a woman influences how I interpret and “see” the world around me. This statement is not one that I can logically or tangibly describe. An accumulation of my images, over time, compared with other female and male artists will

determine if this statement is true. I just feel as though my images are speaking about feminine-ness. I know that when I look at other female artists' work, I feel an affinity and a deep amount of understanding. I often think, "Oh! I have had that exact same thought!"

Some may say that this attitude is stereotypical but I say it to acknowledge and understand differences. I think difference keeps us fresh, diverse, flexible, open, thinking, challenging, questioning. Camille Paglia, in her book Sexual Personae, grapples with the difference between men and women, men being "genitally...condemned to a perpetual pattern of linearity, focus, aim, directedness. He must learn to aim. Without aim, urination and ejaculation end in infantile soiling of self or surroundings" (19). The basic metaphor of a woman, on the other hand, is "mystery, the hidden" (22). Paglia argues that because a woman cannot see her genitalia, she learns tolerance for ambiguity and holds power as a vessel into which men must deposit. She gives voice to the fact that the inherent natural differences between men and women result in many differences of attitude and perspective. While Paglia's arguments are at moments extreme, she articulates perhaps why I feel such a closeness and familiarity with the images and objects other female artists make and why I feel that being a woman is important to my art making. My images are mysterious, hidden, and left to be discovered. Reading her book led me to explore my shadowy dreams and the idea of a fugitive sea.

A Fugitive Sea

As a woman, I inherited a tradition that could be described as a fugitive sea that continually shifts and dangerously dissolves below me. My work is not based on monumentality but rather on transient, in-between moments that are simultaneously grievous and unremarkable. Persephone, poetry, sirens, witch burnings, baths, and Japanese block prints exemplify this tradition and, together, symbolize the range of disciplines, tones, and experiences that inspire the framework for my storytelling.

Using the female body, I make images that resemble fragments of ominous dreams. Described on canvas with sensuous marks of paint, they demand intimacy but reveal vulnerability as they threaten to break apart before our eyes.

With pieces of flesh held precariously together by skeletal bone, long spaces of silent emptiness punctured by flocks of sensually drifting birds, and banal moments of light on a sheet or of discarded Hershey bar wrappers strewn on a floor—I want my work to seduce.

Picasso said, “Every act of creation is first of all an act of destruction”. I love this quote because across literature, women are depicted as the destroyers of men. So, as a female painter making images about sexuality, darkness, dreams, and destructions, this quote by

this giant man makes me feel incredibly mischievous and empowered. The more powerful I can be as a painter and consequently as a destroyer of image after image, the more the issues of sexuality, violence, vulnerability, the raw, the haunting, the female, will come out. I want my paintings to resemble a series of destructions, obliterations and sacrifices that add up to a completed, complicated, and full whole.

My work is made up of dichotomies that stem from this initial conflict between destruction and resolution. In some ways, I want to create cohesion. I want each painting to exemplify a unique sense of color mood, allowing each image to become its own world. Light and darkness function on both a formal and a conceptual level in my work. Formally, they structure certain decisions in the painting. They both can stand for any infinite number of things including purity, revelation, exposure, concealment, harshness, dreams, the unknown, evil, and death.

I use lightness and darkness to disintegrate images as well. I want to undermine my desire for cohesion with marks of paint resembling the remains of a bloody battlefield. For example, in my painting “Witness”, the structure of light to dark dictates the structure of the painting. Colliding with this value structure is the distinct color change between floor tile and rug. The patterning of the rug (and to a lesser extent the patterning on the tile) has been painted, painted over, rediscovered, obliterated, accented and drawn out so that it unglazes and sparkles. I wanted to create the sensation of it appearing and disappearing,

sliding off the canvas and holding the image still, and as image and mark making all at the same time.

My images are also fragmentations. I am inspired by the fragmentation that happens in dreams and nightmares. There is something haunting, terrifying, and seductive about the dark secrets that rise in our minds at night. They pick through our thoughts and put things next to each other that reveal something more true than anything in the daytime could. Dreams are so out of control, wild, unbridled by society. I try to mimic dreams in my paintings by superimposing different images on top of one another. I allow these images to be illogical. In my “Saying and Seeing” painting, the penises are literally fragmentations: they are decapitations. They lie on a platter and the viewer simultaneously looks down at the table and out over it, at a window into a starry night on the upper left hand corner. Simultaneously, this image is an American flag, hanging downward. However, the penises begin to resemble people or bombs that are standing or launching upwards. The whole idea of penises on a platter is nightmarish and fractured.

I think that being uncomfortable as a viewer can be very important. I would like my viewers to feel vulnerable, uncomfortable, and disturbed. After all, the injustices and sadness and violations and humor in the world about which I am trying to speak make me feel vulnerable. Often, we see vulnerability as weak or bad or too uncomfortable. I feel that when you are truly vulnerable to something, you are actually seeing that thing in its complexity, as it is, as it exists, and you are closer, perhaps, to understanding that other

thing. Recently, instead of telling the viewer something, I have tried to be more vulnerable in my imagery and mark making. I have tried to ask more questions to create freedom and openness in the image in order to make it more available to the viewer. Questions like when is a painting finished? Am I allowed to make this image? Is this image really as disgusting as it appears? Why have I made this thing? Am I being coy? What is it that I am trying to say with this image?

I want to unpeel the viewer. My paintings should be a sensual experience, in the paint handling and the image and the concept behind the image. They tease and they shock. As I have continued to make them, aggressive and violent imagery has appeared. I have pushed that stuff out in the front on purpose. I am trying to find the range in my voice. I want to be able to say many things in many ways with many different tones and intonations. So I am learning to sing and scream about teasing and terror with a few brief words and with volumes.

Poetry, Politics, and the Personal

I never considered myself a particularly political artist or a political person until I came to Richmond. I separated my involvement with the world from my studio because I didn't want to be a political artist. I didn't want to be labeled a feminist because the implication was militancy, intensity, irrationality and a lot of other words that I can't mention in this paper. In the past year, I realize that I want to be IN the world, not a far-off observer of it, and that I have strong opinions about many things, not just intense international news. I want to be as in touch with the New York Times as I am with TV, movies, Hollywood gossip, and the coffee shop news next door. I want to live in a large and expansive world that includes both the serious and the funny, the unjust and the absurd, high and low and everything in between. Bringing these responses into my studio has given me freedom in my image making and in my concepts.

For all of my interest in external events in the world, my love for the very internal act of writing poetry led me to painting. Poetry inspires my dichotomous and illogically combined ideas: stars and a skyline of Boston inside a Japanese bathhouse, three dimensional figures within an eastern perspective space, hands reaching from the depths of the ocean to grab onto a woman, being able to look down at figures and out at a landscape at the same time. It is more about the space between ideas, what they say together, in combination, rather than each one on its own. My goal is to make the painting read of

something bigger. In other words, I want my paintings to act as visual poems, full of metaphors, similes, illusions, alliteration, and space, all pointing silently to the unstated idea. Emily Dickinson wrote “Tell all the truth but tell it slant-/ Success in Circuit lies” (494) and as much as this pertains to poetry, it pertains to my paintings as well.

Sometimes I use a particular poem as the entire inspiration for a painting, as in “On Reading A Newspaper For The First Time As An Adult”. The painting is named after a poem, written by Sharon Olds, who talks about the loss of a lover, regret, and the memory of her past. The poem’s wording guided my painting, particularly the lines “...that sitting waltz with the paper,/ undressing its layers, blowing it/ opening and closing its delicate bellows,/ folding till only a single column is un-/ taken in, a bone of print then/ gnawed from the top down, until the/ layers of the paper-wasp nest lay around him by the/ couch in a grayish speckled dishevel” (Sharon Olds). From these words, I infused the image with ephemeral gray colors, the seated figure, the feeling of a dance, the destruction of a gnawed bone and the nest-like quality of the paper mass.

While I no longer let my personal life determine my subject matter, I feel that my work has become more intimate. My own responses to poetry, to the world, to what I see, to what I hear, to what I dream are partially what make my work uncomfortable. I, too, feel incredibly uncomfortable, almost ridiculous making the paintings sometimes (why are these images coming out of me, I often ask...) but in making this work, I feel that, strangely, it is as if I am discovering myself.

Artistic Influences

Guston is one of the best examples of someone who allowed himself freedom on the canvas to create images that articulate so poignantly a sensation, a feeling, pulling on uncomfortableness, on death, and life and sex and love. All of his paintings are based on perception, from his tiny child's head bobbing at the edge of the table to a small window of blue in back of large still-life objects. His images are challenging and confrontational. KKK members and eyes watch the world, pieces of bodies float, feet come out of mouths, and spiders capture heads. At the same time, the figures do banal things like paint, lie in bed, and sit. These images bring together inner emotions and external events like war and death. It is this combination of an abstracted and representational language through which to talk about the intensity and banality of the world that I love.

I look at a lot of art, though. I admire Amy Cutler's whimsical images. Yun Fei Ji and Chiharu Shiota reflect my interest in dreams. Kiki Smith and Kara Walker press the haunting, disturbing, and feminine content forward in their work in a way that I would like to in my own. Tala Madani speaks to the political and thinks about painting in an unprecedented, aggressive, and unique way that resonates with me. Luc Tuymman's loose brushwork and his range of subject matter in painting inspire me. In terms of paint

application, I want such a range in my work that I look at everyone from Velasquez and Rubens, Rembrandt, Bonnard, Matisse, Guston to Basquiat, Pia Fries, Lisa Yuskavage...

Of all the contemporary artists, I feel the most challenged by Matthew Barney. The level of complexity and thoroughness and obsession and imagination in his work is so high. He allows anything and everything to happen. His images are so emotive, his objects so metaphoric and beautiful. His work is based in so much fact about things while simultaneously being about our visual experience, the world and life, death and sex, the body, the disturbing. For me, he is by far the artistic one to conquer.

My Future

Jerry Saltz once said described Matthew Barney as “ a mystic exploring his own inner cathedral-someone as surprised, I imagine, as anyone at what he finds”. As I make my next step forward, I feel that I need to start building a similar structure, allowing myself to increase the complexity of my studio and to get deeper into the things that influence me. I need to start building a world. It reminds me of one of my favorite books: Donald Hall’s “Life Work”: in which he defines his writing as his “work” and work as “chores and jobs”. His is a life of artistic and creative work that he implies is his life force, his energy, his passion, his soul, and his everything. At the same time, his memoir reveals that the making of art is really only secondary to the making of life. He acknowledges that without life and love, the Red Sox, pets, friends, a garden, sex...there is no art. The making of art becomes, in a way, only work, only the thing we do that allows our lives to happen.

As I leave VCU, I feel clean, alive, and fresh with years of work within me. I am looking forward to making art, reading, dancing, singing, working, and exploring the world. At VCU, I have built a doorframe for my cathedral that I am going to walk through in May and begin my life... and life work...as an artist.

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VITA

Marian Brunn Smith was born in 1980 in Schenectady, New York. She attended the Emma Willard School and then went to Yale University for her BA in Art. After a year of living in New York City, Marian went back to school for a Post-Baccalaureate degree in painting at Brandeis University. There, she applied for graduate school and was accepted at Virginia Commonwealth University. Marian currently resides in Brooklyn, NY.