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Forgotten, Found, Forgiven

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Forgotten, Found, Forgiven

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

by

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Artist Statement

My work deals with loss and the emotions entangled with grief. To do this, I incorporate text, found organic imagery, bound fibers, and hand-spun threads into my work. I relate these objects and materials to the stages of a woman’s life, which is a symbolic reference to the nymph, mother, and crone and the transformation from life to death.

The background surface of information in my two-dimensional work serves as a cryptic guide to the actual meaning of things. All the excerpted information comes from medical or general knowledge dictionaries. This ground of text is methodically planned but also spontaneously created by tearing through one layer to expose what lies beneath. The rough surface of the torn paper conceals and dilutes the imagery I place upon it. I see my surfaces as an artifice, constantly masking information and obscuring meaning. By hiding my imagery behind the words or hiding the text within my work I do not have to confront their emotional implications or full meanings. They are seen as visual imagery based on their aesthetic appearance as well as to be read literally.

I approach my three-dimensional work with same destructive manner. By letting the material and construction of piece guide my process I am forced to think only of the brevity of its existence in various stages of life. The forms are transformed and shaped by the elements of water, fire, and air leaving only a memory, whisper, or shadow of the organic shape they represent to me.
Forgotten, Found, Forgiven

Introduction

Art Education is an all-encompassing study of studio art. Throughout my undergraduate career I focused on art education, I strived to attain a practical understanding of studio disciplines. I learned the traditional terminologies and techniques. It was during this orderly process of collecting information that I discovered the significance of materials. I learned each tool had its strengths and weaknesses. Every medium could tell a different story. The sound that the pencil made as it moved across the page became more important to me than the mark itself. The weight of the pastel in my hand dictated what impression I made on the paper more than the color of the pigment. The surface of the paper pulled my focus and submerged my thoughts in tactile senses.

After earning my undergraduate degree, I wanted to continue my education and began looking at courses offered through Virginia Commonwealth University’s (VCU) Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts (MIS-IAR) Program. It was then that I decided to focus on mixed media as a way of integrating my interest in fibers, drawing, and painting. Most of my course work was dedicated to the study of mixed media as a way of adapting my knowledge and skill set to the materials being used.

Aesthetics and the Cycle of Destruction

Through the MIS-IAR Program I have come to see my work as process based. I synthesize information, images, and memories making them become tangible by their existence on the page. I have discovered forgotten information, found reason in simple yet universal
symbols, and forgiven painful memories all through a repeated process of making marks on a page and manipulating materials.

My work is about materials and their interactions with each other. By exploiting the transparent qualities of materials I manipulate them to serve non-traditional functions. I frequently use gel mediums, translucent rice paper, and encaustic to dilute my imagery in a transparent film creating a surface of suspended information. My work is strongly reliant on surface and the act of experiencing what lies beneath.

In both my two-dimensional and three-dimensional work organic imagery is utilized to create a recognizable and relatable image. These forms and imagery go through various stages of destruction relating to the cycle of life from birth to death. Each piece is a moment in this cycle. My work begins as a meditation in generally accepted ideas of aesthetics relating to the elements of art. As I progress through my creative cycle I have to destroy one image in order for it to take on a different stage of existence. I am excited by the unknown factor in this stage of deconstruction. As one layer or image is eroded another appears creating a history that tells the story of each piece from life to death.

Text, Language, and the Synthesis of Information

I first began developing my surfaces by layering newspaper text either by collage methods or various transfer techniques. My technique involved using a large paint brush to lightly stroke glue down on a support of paper. Then, I placed hand-torn vertical strips of newsprint directly on the glue. Once I felt the glue had become tacky enough to hold some of the paper to the surface, I would pull the newsprint from the page. This left only barcode-like bands of information too small and battered to be read. I used text and remnants of text visually
because of the distortion that is created on the surface of the paper by the record of their destruction. This method of distortion through destruction became the foundation for my mixed media process.

As my artwork became more and more grounded in the use of text, I had to examine language and its impact on how my art is viewed. I began to study previous art forms by focusing on language-based art from around the 1960’s. Two artists emerged that strongly impacted my ideas about language as art and my views of my own work. They were the Argentine artist León Ferrari (b. 1920) and Brazilian artist Mira Schendel (b. Switzerland, 1919-1988). Ferrari and Schendel were able to explore and create a genre of art referred to as language based art. Glenn D. Lowery, current Director of The Museum of Modern Art said, “At a time when a good deal of western art was linguistically based, they addressed language as if there was no difference between signs, codes, words… they produced art objects that made language visual” (Perez-Oramas, 7). Their work speaks of language as a symbol or something even more simplistic, a mark on a page, yet that impression can hold many meanings depending on how the symbol is perceived in the context of the image. For example, Schendel worked with language in an almost cryptic manner, in which her mark becomes a code of simplistic symbols that read like a map with no key. It is at this point that her work developed a more graphic quality. She worked with a variety of different materials which gave her work a transparent feel. She transferred type on to thin sheets of Japanese paper, layered between acrylic sheets, giving the work the look of an encaustic painting. There is readable text that peeks through the various layers of information which seems to be arranged for purely formal reasons. This series for her was about “doing away with back and front, before and after, a certain idea of more or less
arguable simultaneity the problem of temporality, etc., spatiotemporality, etc…”, (Perez-Oramas, 62). I can relate to this as I create and destruct the space and surface of my artwork.

Ferrari created his language in a three-dimensional world of interconnecting spaces and forms. His work from the early 1960’s exhibits elements of being trapped or entangled in a line that is written or inscribed on the page. The line looks and feels like written language but cannot be read or translated, as in his piece Untitled (1962). He began working in three dimensions in which these entangled movements began to overlap and erode one another. He layered more lines on top of other lines, creating depth and space between the overlapping texted based forms. Now, his line was created in thin hair-like copper wire, yet it still read as fluidly as his drawn line in previous work. This can most clearly be seen in Reflecciones (Reflections) (1963). This undefined space that is created by the layers of information draws me into the image as I try creating a similar spatial ambiguity in my own work.

As I look at the work of artists like Ferrari and Schendel, I am constantly asking myself what is my relationship with words and how did my introduction to language affect this relationship. I like the way words look, feel, and taste but not necessarily the sound that they make when spoken by me, in my head or out loud. In order to analyze what this means to my work, I have to look at language as not only an auditory sense but a visual sense as well.

Within auditory language we have descriptive elements that include beats, counts, iambic pentameter, octaves, accents, and whispers. When we look at language from a visual standpoint we are met with a vast range of elements, such as the symmetry of haiku, Microsoft Word-Tahoma-42-CAPPED-BOLDED-ITALISIZED, the international symbol for poison, graphic design elements, and barcodes. The auditory aspect of my work addresses the meaning behind the words and the sound that they make when spoken. The visual aspect of the text in my work
relates to the elements and principles of art, such as line, shape, proportion, space, movement, and composition. Where these two factions align is what drives my process.

When I began learning to read in school speaking the words out loud caused me great difficulty. Even now, when I am looking at words on a page my brain breaks them up into little pieces, and then scatters them throughout my thoughts. I am left trying to pull the shattered sections together and I struggle to understand what the text is trying to say. My eyes move back and forth across the page trying to find something familiar that I can cling to as I try to decode the message before me.

I create surfaces in my work that mimic for the viewer what my brain does to the words on the page as I try to understand them. There are small sections or windows of clear understanding but chaos all around. As I collaged text, some words or parts of words flowed into one another overlapping and obscuring what lies beneath. The obscured language actually comforts me because I have studied, at my own pace, the information before it was laid on the page.

My surfaces only reveal parts of the whole, never the full meaning or content. I want my viewer to decode the scrambled message before them. However, no matter what their meaning words will have a different impact on the reader based on their past experiences and knowledge.

**Process Based Art and Working in Series**

As a way of harnessing words and text in a form in which they could be manipulated I began altering books. I altered my first book, *Who’s Who of American Writers* (1937), to be kept as a sketchbook outlining my artist research, media experiments, and compositional plans. The book called *Saturated Silhouette* (cover) (Appendix, 1), helped me to visualize my work as a
series to be seen as a whole rather than individual units, because of the ways the pages related to each other and the features of the book as a whole. This process also helped me to uncover a new way of looking at language as I destroyed the book by altering the pages of information to suit my aesthetic needs. I tore into the pages of the old book discovering text that appeared through the torn layers of information. I wanted my work to have this same visual and tactile sensation. The series that was born out of this exploration I call *Saturated Silhouettes*, which consisted of six 22”x14” images arranged into three groups of two images each displayed as if pages from a book.

I began my backgrounds by arranging pages torn from an old dictionary with text that related to the idea of saturation, erosion, and decay, as in *Saturated Silhouette 6.2* (Appendix, 2). I worked with stencils of silhouetted figures and spray bottles of diluted inks. As I formed the images on the page, I immediately began working back over the images with gesso, acrylic paint, coffee, and gloss medium to destruct and obscure the images as well as build up the layers of information. As the materials were added to my page, I used tape to block out areas and divide my composition into sections that aligned with the natural angles of the silhouetted form.

Through working on this series, I came to feel that process was more important than the outcome of the final image. I began to think of my work as a map that directs me to a final point. This concept of art being a journey and not output lead me to research the ideas behind process based art.

The contemporary Virginia-based artist Bill Fisher (b. 1957) was my first introduction to the idea of process based art. His work stood out to me for many reasons including his imagery of destruction and decay, the use of text-like marks through his work, and his ideas.
Fisher’s work became a visual and conceptual influence in my next series of nine works entitled *River Rocks*. In *Tranquil Course (River Rocks)* (Appendix, 3), a piece from this series, I simplified my subject matter in order to let the materials be my guide. This piece is indicative of the series as a whole, in which I used diagrams or blueprints that came from previous studies, and sketches of the way water flows through a river directed by rocks. I used a stencil to repeat information, focusing on the positive and negative space created on the surface. I used the same stenciled image for each of the nine pieces, which ranged in size from 8”x8” to 24”x32”. I cropped and re-organized the stencil for each of the images, eliminating or obscuring parts based on compositional configurations. I layered these stencils on top of dictionary pages that I cut in to small sections ranging in size from 1” to 3”. I then mounted these collaged pieces to birch panel by applying paste with a knife. This series brought my attention to how paint, gesso, gloss medium, and wood stain reacted to the edge of the paper. The torn edges of the paper absorbed the medium at a different rate than the smooth untouched paper causing a saturated effect along the fringe that helped to define the collage texture.

After completing work on the *River Rocks* series I found myself thinking about my materials and their function as a stable building block in my work. In this body of work I combined materials such as gesso and oil-based wood stain with no real consideration of their chemical nature, which in turn caused my pieces to be archivally unstable. I also began to worry about the toxic nature of the materials in terms of my own health. It was for these reasons that I turned to water, with its purifying yet erosive qualities, to inform my work. I realized that water was a natural tool for my working process. It washed away layers of material while at the same time created a surface with a transparent record of my process.
I came to realize other ways of bringing my ideas about surface and content together. This began with a new way of altering books, which made concrete my current way of creating mixed media surfaces.

I began my exploration of my subject, water, by first altering a book I call *Process Journal #1* (Pages 27 and 28) (Appendix, 4). The altered book helped me to transition from thinking about collage surfaces as sections of paper placed together to creating the surface as a whole, in which I could manipulate and change the work by tearing through layers of information. To start, I glued all the pages of a book together in sections of four to five pages. I left the glue to dry and I bonded the pages together with a vise to prevent the book from buckling or losing its shape. I removed the clamps after forty-eight hours and found that the pages had become molded together. I pulled each section apart, which tore and ripped the pages leaving parts of one page permanently glued to another. The distressed surface appealed to my tactile senses. The torn paper formed deep gouges in the pages of the book. I ran my fingers over the page and felt the ridges created on the surface. I could read parts of the words but not the whole of the information.

In order to create the rough, tactile effect that appears on the pages of *Process Journal #1* on a flat panel surface, I enlarged the copied dictionary text to four different sizes. I copied and cropped the pages and enlarged them to 24”x24”. I continued to crop and enlarge this same section until the final pages were in a range of 800 to 1,200 times the size of the original copy. I layered these four pages, one on top of the other, using a paint brush and glue. I then waited a few minutes until the glue became tacky. Then, I tore through layers of text leaving only a shadow of information on the panel. The text was skewed and distorted with words leading into other words creating a complex and spatially ambiguous ground. In the final step I used water to
saturate the paper which allowed me to easily peel away parts of the papers. These areas of peeling paper reacted by channeling the pigment over the surface. The water pooled up in areas and flowed freely through others depending on the amount of texture it encountered on its journey.

My working palette is generally warm and usually muted which helped to define the inconsistent surface. I applied much of the coloration using spray bottles of ink washes. These washes of color ran over the text and changed the consistency of the paper. A rag was used across the surface to dry up the pools of color and this caused the printed ink to lift off the surface of the paper, leaving a negative void in its place in the shape of the text it formally contained. The series *Immersion* is a record of this process as can be seen in the image called *Stū - pə - ˈfak - shən (Immersion)* (Appendix, 5).

The series *Debunk (Dē - ‘bəŋk)* began in the same way as my previous series. For my imagery I used the female figure. These drawings were created from life but in two distinctive methods. In the first method, that can be seen in the piece entitled *Maŋ - ˈgō (Dē - ‘bəŋk)* (Appendix, 6), I drew directly onto the collaged surface letting the tears and folds of the paper dictate how the image was placed. Bumps and folds of the paper became lips or contours of the nose, torn edges of text were formed into the angular lines of the shoulders and arms. I used a bold, hard outline around the figure and then built up the figure with earth-toned pastels and conte. The faint image allowed the text to show through and remained a key element in the piece.

The second method of working with the figure, as seen in *Rēˈə - jʊst’ (Dē - ‘bəŋk)* (Appendix, 7), allowed me to work in much the same way I work with layers of text. I created quick gestural marks on transparent rice paper, not stopping to turn my page or think about
composition and placement. I saw the figure as a line. The figure drawn from multiple views was layered on top of itself creating a ghost-like image. The line drawings were then transferred with glue to a wood panel to which text had already been applied. I then worked back into the figures with the earth-toned pastels, conte, and light washes of watered down acrylic paint and ink. The final ethereal effect was created by the images as they interacted with the dripping saturated background of information and colors.

**Content and Re-Appropriation of Imagery**

I continued to work in this format but in a smaller scale with my next body of work called *E- mal - gə - 'mā - shən*. *Amalgamation* means the act or process of joining, uniting, or merging two elements together. I related this to the material being used, encaustic and oil paint, and the way it must be fused in order to hold imagery. The *E- mal - gə - 'mā - shən* series is based on the multiple re-use of figurative images in a smaller format. This series began as an experiment that led to my discovery of encaustic and paraffin wax as a surface material. Encaustic paint can help to create a varied surface and when layered with other material it reinforced the transparent nature of my artwork.

At this time, I was going through the mental shock of my mother becoming gravely ill with something we could only assume was a progressed stage of breast cancer. She and my family were in Little Rock, Arkansas and I was here in Richmond. I needed to create work but my thoughts were so overwhelmed with my mother that I had trouble focusing. In order to concentrate on my work but not content, I began to reuse old images.

For the *E- mal - gə - 'mā - shən* series I focused on language that related to reuse, syndication, and distribution as can be seen in *Mī′- nəs* (*E- mal - gə - 'mā - shən*) (Appendix, 8).
I layered the reused figure drawings onto 6”x6” panels of collaged information. I then encased that image in wax, freezing it in time and memory. The image appears subtly through the deep yellow sepia-toned wax. I etched back into the wax using various tools. This marking, caused by carving back in to the wax, left deep gouges in the encaustic. Later, I filled these gouges with oil paint in a process which was similar to rubbing ink into an etching plate.

I continued working in the above format in my final 6”x6” panel series entitled, Prāp - a'gā - shān. I focused on the idea of propagation being a cutting, root, or seed of a plant that is reproduced creating another version of itself. After my mother’s sudden death, I was overwhelmed by the flowers that people sent. The imagery was everywhere I looked and it became an element of my grieving process. I dried the flowers and watched them go through their own stages of having life to being drained of water and eventually to death. They become brittle and delicate. I wanted to capture this process of life to death in my work.

Through the course of conversations with my family I found that my mother’s breast cancer most likely was linked to her being exposed to Diethylstilbestrol (DES). DES is a synthetic hormone that was given to women from 1940 to 1970 as a way to prevent miscarriage. The hormone was later found to have severe side effects on the women who took them. It was also discovered to have a negative impact on women who were exposed to DES in the womb. This generation of women that was affected by DES are known as the Daughters of DES. My mother was one of these women. Her exposure gave her a 40% higher likelihood of her developing breast cancer. The breast cancer that she developed went undiagnosed for many years and by the time it was discovered it had already moved to her lungs which was the cause of her death. The fact that my mother did not seek help or find the cancer sooner, through regular doctor visits, is something that I have to personally deal with and find a way to forgive. These
aspects of forgiveness and grief are incorporated in the work. For example the background of my pieces in the Präp - ə'gā - shōn series deals with information about the drug DES and its effects found in medical journals, dictionaries, and drug reference books. My work became a research project to find, filter, and analyze this information in order to come to some state of acceptance or at least acknowledgement of what happened to my mother.

I worked with plant imagery in this series in two formats. In the first technique, which can be seen in the images 'Strāk-chōr and 'Trēt-mōnt (Appendix, 9 and 10), I began by layering sketches on transparent paper over the collaged background. These pieces were layered with wax and etched into to define the contours of the flowers. I worked oil paint into the images causing the lines to be trapped by the wax. I then added several more layers of wax to the surface on top of the oil paint. This layering helped to make a softer surface and gave the organic imagery a stronger illusion of depth. This allowed me to paint back into the images with oil paint. I found that the oil paint melted at a much lower temperature than the wax which caused it to separate and spread across the wax, as I used a heat gun on the surface. This way of working with the heat gun became an extension of the sprayed ink I used in my non-encaustic pieces. I could create a similar dripping effect that helped to reinforce the torn edges of the paper and the delicate nature of the flowers I was attempting to capture.

Another technique I used was similar to my earlier use of masking film, which can be seen in 'Ka-tā-,gōr-ē and 'Fī-bōr (Appendix, 11 and 12). First, I collaged and painted a background of text. Next, I applied a layer of wax across the surface before any visual imagery was created. I then masked off sections of the surface with painters tape. I could then freely draw the silhouettes of the living, wilting, and dead flowers on to the surface. The positive image of the silhouetted form was then removed, leaving an opening for me to imbed colored wax. The
tape was then removed revealing the background of what lies beneath the wax façade. I developed a way of applying thin layers of wax back on top of this stencil-like form, then etching back into the image to create impressions or marks of the contours of the flowers. The images were then heat-gunned to create a more saturated and flowing effect of the waxed surface. The process of working on these images allowed me to think about my grief and understand how the death of my mother was going to forever impact my life. I looked at the flowers in their various stages of life and began to think of the stages nymph, mother, and crone in a woman’s life. I saw the seeds or pods as nymphs struggling to survive. The roots and blooming flowers are metaphors for a mother propagating her future. The cut, wilted flowers represented crone which ultimately symbolized wisdom and sorrow.

In my final body of work created in the MIS-IAR Program I took the flower imagery and manipulated it into the form of a book. These books were blank pages of non-information in direct contrast to my other two-dimensional work which relied strongly on textual and visual information. This series, Ri - ’lēs: Weightless Whispers (Appendix, 13-16), also related back to my study of Mira Schendel and her piece entitled Trenzinho (Little Train) (1965). Her piece was a Japanese paper book of blank pages strung from two different walls giving the pages a weightless feel which leaves the viewer to interpret the pages freely.

Ri - ’lēs for me is my voided space. After my mother’s death, I continuously went over the moment in my head to try and understand the events as they happened. I wanted so badly to help her to let go, to relinquish, to not have to suffer but I couldn’t articulate it to her or my family. I wanted her to feel calm and free, so I have created this sculptural piece for her. I did not incorporate any words into this work because I wanted the silence in which to think.
These books of non-information expressed to me the fragility of the delicate flowers. I bound the books with small stake-like rods. The first small books were bound with matches. The rest were bound with sharp skewers or pencils, depending on the size. These books were then laced together with various fibers. The first with jute and thread, the latter with hand-spun fibers I made from mohair and angora.

These books, once bound, were then transitioned into their flowering state using fire. The act of burning the books is as important to me as paint, encaustic, or ink on my other two-dimensional works. The fire was my medium. The fire is not easily controlled but can be manipulated with water. The spray bottles I used in my previous work were used as a tool to put out the fire and caused it to smolder as it took over the pages of the books. These pages became very delicate, crumpling as the water was dried out of them revealing a petal-like structure. I began to sculpt and transform these destroyed piles of paper with spray starch and a hair dryer. This manipulation became my vision in which I could create each burnt, saturated page into a weightless whisper of an organic form. They don’t resemble any particular flower or root but rather they represent the material they are mimicking with their dry brittle surface and petal-like structure. They are no longer books to me but forms that fall and float through the air as they propagate their surroundings with their crisp, brittle edges of falling matter.

This final state of sculptural material manipulation is the direction I now see for my work. I like the idea of hold something in my hands and changing its form into something else. I want to work hands-on with materials, focus on process, and embed meaning into what I create. My work is a process of discovery. As I create work I am continuously trying to determine if it is in its final stage, or if not, what needs to be done. My work is a process of analysis that begins with materials and ends with a product, with content balancing somewhere in the liminal space.
between the two. This balancing act drives my process and pushes me to new and exciting forms, surfaces, and materials.

Conclusion

Through the MIS-IAR Program I have discovered my quest of creation is driven by process. My work is a process of discovery, with each new step and element I must reassess how my work is seen, displayed, and interpreted. I have come to realize that even my two-dimensional work can be read as an installation based on the way I align and group the pieces together. I find the idea of working with a group of images, information, or objects in a site specific space intriguing and I would like to further develop my work within an installation format. My installation works have led me into a new direction and ideas of possibilities.

These ideas and possibilities would not have come about without the knowledge gained through my courses in the MIS-IAR Program. I was able to structure my learning in a way that let me explore and create a working process that suited my creative needs and aesthetics. Through this journey I have discovered forgotten information, found reason in simple yet universal symbols, and forgiven painful memories all through a repeated process of making marks on a page and manipulating materials.
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Megan Lea Mattax

EDUCATION:
2011 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA. Specialization in Mixed Media and Painting.
2004 Bachelor of Arts, University of Arkansas, Little Rock, AR. Specialization in Art Education.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE:
2006-Pres. Art Instructor, Henrico High School, Henrico County Public Schools, Richmond, VA.
2004-2005 Art Instructor, North Heights Elementary, North Little Rock School District, North Little Rock, AR.
2004 Art Instructor, Cabot Junior High North, Cabot Public Schools, Cabot, AR.

RELATED EXPERIENCE:
2004 Art Instructor and Curriculum Coordinator, Share America, University of Arkansas, Little Rock, AR.
2003-2004 Studio Instructor, Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, AR.
2002-2004 Art Education and Fibers Department Assistant, University of Arkansas, Little Rock, AR.

EXHIBITIONS:
2010 What Lies Beneath, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA. At Plant Zero, Project Space Gallery, Richmond, VA.
2010 All Media Show, Art Works Gallery, Richmond, VA. Marjorie Perrin, Juror.
2010 All Media Show, Art Works Gallery, Richmond, VA. Sally Bowring, Juror.
2009 Studio Open House/Small Works Show, Private Show at the residence of Jan Johnson in benefit of the VCU Mayan Arts Program, Richmond, VA.
2009 All Media Show, Art Works Gallery, Richmond, VA. Elisabeth Flynn-Chapman, Juror.
2009 Mixed Media and Drawing, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church Parish Hall, Richmond, VA.
2009 Think Small 5: 5th Biennial International Miniature Invitational Exhibition, Artspace Gallery, Richmond, VA. Jessica Sims and Shann Palmer, Curators.
2009 All Media Show, Art Works Gallery, Richmond, VA. Mike Guyer, Juror.
2009 Bookart, Artspace Gallery, Richmond, VA. Michael Pierce and Ginna Cullen, Curators.
Public Collections:
2004  
*Woven Landscapes*, Courthouse Concepts Inc, Fayetteville, AR.

Locations of Work on Line:
http://www.flickr.com/photos/studio_mlmattax/