Growing Cycles

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Growing Cycles

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

by

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**Artist Statement**

In my paintings and prints, I create to understand my experiences. I make layered, repetitive marks and gestures that consist of spherical masses, orbits, and cellular forms. The shapes represent aspects of reproduction and symbolize my thoughts and ideas about procreation.

In making pieces, I employ a mathematical system that describes growth patterns found in nature. I use this system as a way of echoing natural structures, as well as a way of focusing my attention. I create multiple small pieces and present them in large, gridded formats. These pieces are abstracted narratives of my thoughts and feelings.
Growing Cycles

Introduction

I am an artist and a teacher. As an undergraduate, I studied printmaking and painting at Grinnell College in Iowa. While there, I experimented with a wide variety of subject matter and media including painting, printmaking, installation, and performance. After earning my degree, I moved to Washington, D.C. to begin my career teaching high school art and to continue my journey as a visual artist.

As a practicing artist, I focus on circular forms that represent cycles. From a young age, I collected and studied round objects, such as pennies, balls, and gyroscopes. I was fascinated by their geometric similarities, their individual uses, and their unique movements in three-dimensional space. A penny is circular and can be spun on its side. A penny is nearly worthless alone but valuable when multiplied. A ball is spherical and can also be spun. It is a toy that has been played with for millennia, but it can also be a shape with practical mechanical uses. A gyroscope is also spherical but can be played with as a spinning top as well as determine directional orientation with physical stabilization features. It is used as a toy and as a tool. I soon noticed that when I played with and studied these objects my mind was freed to contemplate and feel. For these reasons, these objects came to influence my art and my philosophies.

As a busy teacher, I missed the physical action of drawing, painting, and printmaking. I also missed exploring my interest in cyclical forms and related ideas. To shift my attention to studio work, and further my education, I enrolled in Virginia Commonwealth University’s Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program where my concentrations were painting and printmaking.
Aesthetics

Repetitive rounded forms and gestures dominate my work. I use color to describe my thoughts and feelings, a mathematical sequence to help focus my gestures, and the passage of time to structure my process.

In my pieces I explore growth cycles. This leads me to create looping, organic lines and shapes. These shapes evoke orbits, eggs, and cellular forms. These forms and my creative activity allow me to express cycles symbolizing life paths, conception, and reproduction. Linear elements represent life paths and travelling from one point to the next. For instance, I create lines that represent my driving paths that connect home, school, coaching, and class. Some lines represent my journeys from the Midwest to the East Coast and to Sweden. My husband is a Swedish citizen. In recent years, we have lived together and apart. We have travelled back and forth to different homes. This travelling has influenced my thoughts about our physical locations, as well as feelings about our physical interactions.

In presenting my work, I arrange multiple small pieces into a gridded configuration. The evenly spaced grid allows each individual work to stand alone, as well as function as an element within a larger series. By grouping small works together, I am creating an artwork that can engulf the viewer’s scope of vision. I want to submerge the viewer into my world of cycles.

As I prepare to work, I carefully mix a combination of colors to reflect my thoughts and feelings. For me, neighboring or analogous colors on the color wheel, such as green, blue, and purple, represent calmness. Meanwhile, I use triadic or tetradic harmonies to represent energy. These harmonies are composed of three or four colors, respectively, that divide the color wheel evenly. An example of a triadic harmony that I use is composed of orange, green, and violet. In
addition, I use tints to represent more positive emotions and shades to represent more negative emotions. My color palette for each series becomes an intentional reflection upon my emotional state during the time of creation.

When I begin the activity of making a work, I choose what action I will use such as, cutting, masking, painting, or collaging. Next, I create looping shapes or lines while counting using the mathematically-based Fibonacci sequence to direct my movements. The Fibonacci sequence is a series in which each number is the sum of the preceding pair of numbers. The first pair in the Fibonacci sequence is (0,1). Adding these two numbers together will provide the next number in the series, which continues infinitely (0,1,1,2,3,5,8,13…). By counting as I make marks, I can focus on the mark itself and block out distractions. Through counting I create a rhythm, like a metronome in my mind. If my attention is broken, I stop and then start again from the beginning of the number sequence. I use this sequence because it has been used to describe growth patterns found in nature. So, by using this sequence, I hope to create naturalistic compositions.

Each work session, and each individual layer of media and marks in a piece, is controlled by a pre-determined time frame. I make this choice on the basis of energy level, the need to work within time constraints, or simply a decision about how long a work session will last. At the close of each work session, a single layer of marks is complete. There is no changing that layer. The only way that a piece will change is by adding additional layers in another timed work session. By using the element of time, I am able to slowly develop and add multiple layers of media and meaning to a work. Working within time units also helps keep a consistency to my mark making within each layer.

I create circular forms to present my subject matter and mix colors to symbolize my
emotions. I use a mathematical sequence to unify my gestures and I use time to direct my action and unify each layer. I combine all of these elements into my process to express my ideas and bring a body of visual information to the viewer.

Influences

My primary artistic influences are the works of Paul Klee (1879-1940) and Yayoi Kusama (1929-present). Paul Klee, a Swiss-German Expressionist, was a painter and a printmaker who created fields of color and superimposed gestural lines to describe his ideas and experiences. He was particularly influenced by his travels to Italy and Northern Africa. Klee used lines to describe movement and his travels. He used symbols to suggest a narrative. Often, his narratives described his thoughts about music, poetry, and art. Klee exaggerated and condensed the scale of his symbols according to their importance.

Klee’s small works were often composed of layers of harmonic colors and rhythmically patterned marks. They were abstract in compositional arrangement but often contained elements of representational symbols. For example, in his oil painting Clarification (1932), Klee blended loose layers of geometric shapes in red, green, orange, and blue. Here, he chose a harmonic color combination using two sets of complementary hues. This color combination created a visual sense of energy and movement. Next, he applied hundreds of painterly, spaced dots on top of the colored areas. The repetition of dots creates a visual rhythm across the surface of the painting. They are short gestural marks but because of the repetition their placement seems to be deliberate and controlled. The color of the dots is a darker hue than the lighter ground which creates a fictive depth. Like Klee, I also use color harmonies in my work to create a sense of visual movement. Klee’s vocabulary of shapes and lines is excessively repetitive. I also
copiously use circles and lines in my work to create patterned fields. For me, the act of creating these shapes and patterns is a meditative activity. Sabine Rewald, an art historian at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, describes Klee’s *Clarification* as “meditative.” (Rewald, 1) It is this feature of his work, whether it was meditative for him or not, that I incorporate into my work. Finally, like Klee, my artworks are primarily abstract but include a few representational elements.

The next artist who has had an influence on my work is Japanese contemporary artist, Yayoi Kusama. While working at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, MN, I spent time enjoying her exhibit *Love Forever* (1998). This exhibit cataloged the drawings, paintings, sculptures, and video performances she created while living in New York from 1958–1968. In the majority of these works, Kusama used repetition of brushstrokes across a large canvas to immerse the viewer in her obsessive world filled with polka dots and *Infinity Nets*.

The *Infinity Nets* were a series of paintings included in this exhibition. When creating these works, Kusama first painted an opaque field of color on a picture plane. Then, she applied repetitive semicircular and interlocking gestures that covered the entire canvas. Kusama is quoted, describing her *Infinity Nets* in an interview, as “without beginning, end or center.” (Dawsey, 46) These works exhibit a sense of obsessive mark making that reflects her long-term struggles with neuroses. Her intention was to replicate the dots, circles, and nets that she sees while suffering hallucinations due to her mental illness. I also use a strategy that recalls her obsessive approach in my patterned works. Although not based on mental illness, I make repetitive marks and gestures that result in fields of color and visual activity.

Kusama completed each of her *Infinity Nets* in one sitting, as if each work reflected one emotional event. I create each layer of my works in one sitting, using time as a function of
compositional structure. Some of Kusama’s *Infinity Nets* are just a few feet wide, while others are more than thirty feet wide and can encompass the viewer’s field of vision. Her smaller *Infinity Nets* present patterns and rhythmic marks that seemed to be more controlled and conceptually reminiscent of Klee’s easel-sized and intimate pieces. Like Kusama, my works are often presented as large installations but are developed by creating small units where I use a more controlled gesture. These smaller pieces call to mind Klee’s mark making and format as well. Both Klee and Kusama began their pieces with fields of color and then used line to create rhythm and a sense of movement. Like me, both artists were inspired by their personal experiences. Kusama was inspired by her hallucinations, and Klee was inspired by his travels.

Another influence on my work includes concepts pertaining to the mathematical number series, called the Fibonacci sequence (0,1,1,2,3,5,8,13…). This sequence was stumbled upon by Leonardo Fibonacci (1170-1250), an Italian merchant who is known for introducing the Hindu-Arabic number system to the West. Fibonacci proposed the sequence as the hypothetical growth pattern in successive generations of reproducing rabbits, although the sequence was named for Fibonacci centuries after he used it. The series has proven to have unique associations with particular growth patterns in nature. For example, counting clockwise and counter-clockwise bracts of pinecones yields consecutive Fibonacci sequence numbers, such as (8,13).

I have chosen to use the Fibonacci sequence because of its numerical representation of growth. I use it as a counting guide as I create each layer of a piece. I repeat the numbers in the sequence to myself as I place circles and loops in my pieces. In this way, I hope to create an overall infrastructure to my artworks that resemble growth systems found in nature. As stated by Nikhat Parveen, biochemist and Assistant Professor at Boise State University,

The Fibonacci numbers are Nature's numbering system. They appear everywhere in Nature, from the leaf arrangement in plants, to the pattern of the florets of a flower, the
bracts of a pinecone, or the scales of a pineapple. The Fibonacci numbers are therefore applicable to the growth of every living thing, including a single cell, a grain of wheat, a hive of bees, and even all of mankind. (Parveen, 1)

Another scholar and expert on this subject is Bulent Atalay. He is a retired professor of physics at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, VA. He studied the interplay between art and science throughout his career. Atalay described that when using the Fibonacci sequence to create artworks that “at the microscopic level and at the [macro]scopic … some of the same shapes, symmetries, and regularities appear.” (Atalay, 14) By using this sequence as part of my underlying compositional structure, my artworks look similar from a distance and up close. They are meant to evoke systems of microscopic and macroscopic realities.

By combining the approaches and outcomes of Klee and Kusama, and my use of the Fibonacci sequence as a creative tool, I present works that address a range of literal and figurative elements. My desire to create layers of meaning led me to make work on a small scale over a range of specified time. The images are then combined and presented as large scale installations. The shapes and forms, placed according to the Fibonacci sequence, represent growth and layers of experiences surrounding conception and procreation.

**Series I: Printmaking and Mixed Media**

My first series, *Contemplating Conception 2010* (Appendix, 1-1d), is made up of forty-five, 4” x 6” monoprints on paper. This series was created over three months as I reflected on my desire to become pregnant. I overlapped organic shapes which were symbolic of conception and procreation. Each color described my mood or emotion while I was working. The shapes consisted of gestural orbits that I cut out, masked, printed, or collaged on paper while counting in accordance with the Fibonacci sequence.
As a series, I wanted to create a sense of movement and growth from one detail to another. Although I used different techniques and materials in the individual works, my overall compositional arrangements and concepts were intended to unify the series. I used tints of primary triadic colors to make lines and orbs that overlapped in different layers. The shapes were placed on the paper as I rhythmically recited the Fibonacci sequence.

While creating this series, I reflected on my feelings of being away from my husband. I was feeling trapped by my situation in life. I was ready to conceive physically but practically it was not time. So, to represent my feelings of being trapped, I photographed myself in fetal positions and then placed the photographs inside some of the printed and drawn orbital shapes.

As a way to express aspects and interpretations of my feelings concerning conception, I developed motifs that were repeated throughout the series. For example, Figure 1a. is a two-layered, red, monoprint of phallic and cellular forms. In Figure 1b., I also depicted cellular forms symbolizing cells or female reproductive organs. I chose close values of blue to describe a calm feeling. In Figure 1c., I added a silhouette of my body in blue on the left-hand side, and a black and white photograph of myself deep in thought on the right-hand side. Both of these self-portraits were integrated into the looping, orbital lines of the composition. Finally, in Figure 1d., I incorporated silhouettes of myself again, but this time I overlapped cut out paper eggs and then added them using a chine-collé process. These images are part of the larger series and are indicative of the repeated imagery.

**Series II: Painting and Drawing**

My second series, *Cyclical Journey 2010* (Appendix, 2-2d), is a series of thirty-five, 5” x 7” drawings and paintings on paper. I used watercolor and acrylic, and mixed colors to
create triadic, tetradic, and analogous color combinations. These three-color and four-color combinations created dynamic harmonies. These harmonies contrasted to the calming effect of the analogous combinations which helped me suggest movement and energy. The circular forms were created in a looser, quicker, and more irregular manner than in the previous series. I used black contour lines to unify and link the shapes throughout this series.

This series was created over seven weeks. I continued to think about conception and procreation, but now my thoughts were a bit darker and more erratic. My goal was to consciously examine my daily emotions and experiences over an extended period of time. So, during this time, I completed five paintings every week. Each painting captured events and thoughts from more than one day.

In Figure 2a. I used analogous colors of violet and blue watercolor, and black acrylic. I painted orbits in light tints and outlined them in black acrylic. I wanted to present the violet and blue spheres as calming colors that are then contained by the black contours. This approach was intended to show my feelings of entrapment.

In Figure 2b, I used analogous red and orange watercolor, and collaged pieces of red and orange watercolor paper eggs throughout the piece. I recited the Fibonacci sequence as I created irregular-sized and spaced orbital lines over the surface of the picture plane. These densely-packed red and orange eggs represented my angst and frustration. I felt myself holding the brush tightly and tensing my shoulders as I created these small circles. Next, I cut into my painting and rearranged some elements that were then stapled on top. I used staples to symbolize the rawness of my feelings.

In the next piece, Figure 2c., I painted opaque, looping forms on a blue-green ground. I created a four-color harmony of the complementary blue and orange, and red and green to
symbolize the energy and movement it was taking me to literally travel through each day. Each color mixed challenged me to create harmonizing areas within the small piece of paper. Finally, I unified the piece with black ink contours.

In Figure 2d., the horizontal looping forms are more relaxed and imply phalluses and clouds. I mixed colors to loosely create a triadic harmony of the primaries red, yellow, and blue. I allowed some of the white paper to show as a way to symbolize a sense of physical space and movement. This piece and my manipulation of color symbolized my mixed feelings and dreams of conception.

**Series III: Printmaking**

My third and final series, *Breathing Out Loud 2011* (Appendix, 3-3d), is a series of fifty-five, 5” x 7” monoprints on paper. This series was created in the spring. By this time, my husband and I had decided to wait only one more year before trying to conceive. This decision had a calming effect on me. Now, I was feeling less trapped and more optimistic about having a baby. In addition, I was feeling more comfortable with my creative process. For these two reasons, I took a calmer and slower approach to each of my prints. My color schemes in this series include: analogous, monochromatic, and two to four-color harmonies. Rather than using staples to attach collaged pieces, I began to hand sew pieces together.

Before I began printing, I sat down and cut out paper stencils of spheres, eggs, cells, and phalluses. Then, based on my mood, I carefully mixed three colors of ink for each work session. In Figure 3a. and 3c., I used stencils for the various forms in the multi-layered works. Each piece was monochromatic and was comprised of several tints and shades to present a range of values. This range in values symbolized my range of positive and negative emotions. While
making this piece, I felt joyful, challenged, and hyper-focused on the possibility of becoming pregnant in the near future.

In Figure 3b. and 3d., I used a similar stenciling process but also included sewing. In Figure 3b., I used a combination of the complementary orange and blue, with the analogous yellow and green. To me, these color combinations created calm energy. In Figure 3d., I used only the analogous color combination of red, violet, and blue. These colors are calm to me because they are neighboring colors. These colors also helped me symbolize violet flesh and red blood. In both pieces, the first and second layers were created by placing cut orbits onto an inked plate. In the third layer, I hand sewed orbits onto the surface.

My approach to each of the three series was the same. I started with a line, mixed colors, and counted the Fibonacci sequence. I explored my thoughts and emotions, and expressed them in visual form. However, I chose different colors, combinations of imagery, and compositional arrangements in making each large work. The printmaking and mixed media series describes my experiences of feeling trapped. The darker shades represented my negative feelings, and the three four-color harmonies represented the swirling trapped energy I was feeling. There are a few pieces within the series where my emotions began to calm down, and I mixed more positive tints and calming analogous colors. The drawing and painting series describes a darker and more erratic range of my thoughts. To me, the darker shades and wider black lines are more aggressive and negative. Lastly, the printmaking series is a relaxed approach expressing my hope to become pregnant. I used lighter tints to represent more positive feelings, and analogous color schemes to give each piece a calmer appearance. Series I, Series II, and Series III collectively create a record of my emotions.
Conclusion

Since I began the MIS-IAR Program, I have found myself in a new emotional place and time. I have learned a variety of new techniques, and it has been rewarding to share these techniques with my students. Throughout my coursework, I created abstract, expressive pieces in printmaking, drawing, and painting. I examined one theme over a designated period of time. My art became a visual journal of my life experiences. This program has helped me return to my studio roots and continue to grow. It has allowed me to thoroughly investigate my art making process. Without the program, I would not have been able to speak accurately about my creative process inside and outside of the classroom.
Bibliography


Appendix

List of Figures

Figure 1. *Contemplating Conception*, Forty-five monoprints on paper, 4” x 6” each, 2010.

Figure 1a-d. *Contemplating Conception* (detail), Forty-five monoprints on paper, 4” x 6” each, 2010.

Figure 2. *Cyclical Journey*, Thirty-five drawings and paintings on paper, 5” x 7” each, 2010.

Figure 2a-d. *Cyclical Journey* (detail), Thirty-five drawings and paintings on paper, 5” x 7” each, 2010.

Figure 3. *Breathing out Loud*, Fifty-five monoprints with mixed media on paper, 5” x 7” each, 2011.

Figure 3a-d. *Breathing out Loud* (detail), Fifty-five monoprints with mixed media on paper, 5” x 7” each, 2011.
Figure 1.  *Contemplating Conception*, Forty-five monoprints on paper, 4” x 6” each, 2010.
Contemplating Conception (detail), Forty-five monoprints on paper, 4” x 6” each, 2010.
Figure 2. \textit{Cyclical Journey}, Thirty-five drawings and paintings on paper, 5” x 7” each, 2010.
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Figure 3a-d. *Breathing out Loud* (detail), Fifty-five monoprints with mixed media on paper, 5” x 7” each, 2011.
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EXHIBITIONS:
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2008 FCPS Artist Teacher Exhibition, Ernst Cultural Center, Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale, Virginia.
2001 Kate Wallestad: Looking Back, Terrace Gallery, Grinnell, Iowa.
Juried Student Salon Show, Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell, Iowa.
Two 2, Two Man Show, Terrace Gallery, Grinnell, Iowa.
2000 Juried Student Salon Show, Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell, Iowa.
Kate Wallestad: A Look Ahead, Terrace Gallery, Grinnell, Iowa.
1999 Juried Student Salon Show, Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell, Iowa.

NON-COMMISSIONED PERFORMANCES AND INSTALLATIONS:
Waiting for a Feeling: Collaborative Interactive Installation, Near an Unnamed High School in Alexandria, Virginia.