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Delayed Reaction

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Delayed Reaction

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

My work is a response to random happenings that provide me with opportunities for creativity. I intuitively handle my materials and media, and have developed a personally symbolic palette. I never know exactly how a piece of art will turn out.

I begin my paintings by taking photographs of various places or by working on site. My imagery typically consists of landscapes from the mountains of Virginia to the coastlines of Italy. I am attracted to views that are visually soothing, such as sleepy towns, moonlit mountains, or commonplace activities. In referencing these views, I use bright, non-naturalistic and personally symbolic color to emphasize my moods and my emotional responses. I want the viewer to see a painted reality based on emotion and imagination.

My Precious Metal Clay (PMC) jewelry pieces are inspired by themes related to the sea. Seashells and spiral-shaped forms are frequent motifs in my pieces. The sea and motifs of early peoples dependent on the ocean provide endless subject matter to pick from when creating each piece of wearable art.
Delayed Reaction

Introduction

My students will often ask me: *How did you know that you wanted to be an artist when you grew up?* My answer is often glib and does not seem well thought out, as I respond, *I like art.* Fortunately for me, my audience is mainly composed of second or third graders who take my brief response for what it is, I do like art.

I do not recall a specific event or influence in my childhood that promoted my affinity with visual arts. However, I remember more than one grown-up saying to me that I was an artist and I believed their words. My father is creative and works as a carpenter, and has spent most of his life creating environments for our family and others to live in comfortably. My mother has always shown an appreciation for painting, and she collects local artists work as well as my own. Being surrounded by art loving parents has certainly affected my life.

A decade ago, I signed up for a printmaking class with Virginia Commonwealth University’s (VCU) Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program. Printmaking was not a media that I had much fluency in and I was eager for more exposure. However, that would be my last class for several years due to my husband’s gastric cancer diagnosis, which ultimately ended his life. Later, I applied to the MIS-IAR degree program, to honor Eric. He had also been an educator and I decided to use his life insurance money for tuition. Not an easy decision but I am at peace with it, and I think Eric would be pleased.

My areas of concentration were painting and jewelry. I was well-versed in painting but new to jewelry making. I had always thought of myself as a “two-dimensional artist” and
painting fit that description well. Jewelry making required three-dimensional features that are seen from multiple viewpoints. So, this media pushed me out of my comfort zone and helped me explore a new area of creativity. No longer was my art making skill relegated to just paint and canvas, but as a bonus some of my work was wearable.

Aesthetics

Chance occurrences are what motivate me to create art, whether it is working on a painting or a piece of jewelry. For example, setting up an easel outside in the elements or firing in the kiln can both be unpredictable. I also rely on my intuition to guide my hand as I choose colors to paint or pick beads to string. I rarely sketch out ideas so I do not know what the result of a piece will be. My spontaneous approach allows room for exploration within each media. Often, mistakes and random events turn out to be opportunities.

I paint using my photographs and from plein-air sittings. Photos allow me to choose imagery from the moments that I have captured with my camera. I refer to the responses to my photos as *delayed reactions*, since I may not use the image for several years in a painting.

Painting outdoors provides unexpected and chance opportunities that I often incorporate into a work. For example, I will alter my palette and imagery as the sun sets or a shadow recedes. The coloration and imagery in my painting develops over the course of the sitting. I use a personally symbolic and non-naturalistic palette. I assign my emotions and thoughts to various colors and respond to views with high-keyed hues. For instance, a strip of cobalt blue may appear for no logical reason at all in a landscape. Blues remind me of my attraction to the ocean, a theme found in both my jewelry making and painting.
To me, painting landscapes is a subjective experience. My works are about my response to a view rather than a replication of a view. I am not always able to articulate in words why I want to paint a certain landscape but usually they are scenes that are soothing to me. Simple, quiet moments inspire me to further explore my emotions through color.

In jewelry, I sculpt a decorative, one-of-a-kind object to wear. I design my jewelry to be practical because it is to be worn on the body. Regarding functionality, there are limitations on size, shape, and construction of a piece. I use motifs that reflect ocean life as well as early cultures. I infer my own interpretations of symbolic notation as a way of expressing my own feelings and ideas.

My processes for two-dimensional and three-dimensional art could not be more dissimilar. My painting involves my response to the world through my personal view. I free myself to express and record my reactions on canvas. With painting, practicality does not enter into the equation for me. I paint as big or small as I feel the subject is warranted. In contrast to painting, jewelry requires more planning and the technical issues are more demanding. Another difference is that my paintings are not seen by others on a daily basis but I am usually wearing something that I made out of PMC.

Influences

Several years ago, my late husband agreed to go with me to a retrospective of Edward Hopper’s (1882-1967) work at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. Hopper was an American Realist who primarily painted views of modern American life. We attended the show a couple of months before we knew that my husband’s cancer had returned for the final time.
My sports loving spouse had heard of Hopper and wanted to take a look. Normally, our weekends were filled with athletic related activities with our children, so it was a special and welcome break for us to journey into DC to see art.

I had briefly touched on Hopper’s work in art history classes, particularly the classic diner scene, *Nighthawks* (1942). In this composition, the night shadows were given dramatic emphasis, and a man and woman sit closely together but do not appear to be communicating with each other. I sensed a feeling of loneliness which was the intended interpretation for this view, and a frequent motif of Hopper’s.

Hopper often depicted lighthouses, city street scenes, gas stations, and restaurants that were isolated or sparsely populated. His cityscapes and landscapes showed an anonymous America, no real landmarks are visible yet each painting feels familiar. Many of Hopper’s ideas for his paintings came to him while riding the elevated railroad into New York City. He glimpsed ordinary people going about their routines early in the morning and evening, later he recreated his memories in suspended animation on canvas. He felt that the shadows and light during those two times of the day were easily translated and manipulated for expressive purposes.

Reflecting back, I related to Hopper’s subjects of solitude, that I saw that bittersweet day in the museum, as a precursor to the isolation that would come with being a young widow. However, I did not feel the influence of Hopper’s work for several years. More recently, I discovered my interest in plein-air landscape painting. Like Hopper, I saw the landscape as subjective and able to hold meaning. I exaggerated shadows to express emotions and responses to views. In a letter to Charles H. Sawyer, Director of the Addison Gallery of American Art,
Hopper explained that: “My aim in painting is always, using nature as the medium to try to project on canvas my most intimate reaction (my emphasis) to the subject as it appears when I like it most; when the facts are given unity by my interests and prejudices.” (Renner, 9-10) My intentions mirror Hopper’s goal of intimate reaction, I am the painter in control of the subject matter.

Another influence are the painterly watercolors of John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), the great American portrait painter of his time. He was so successful with his oil portrait commissions that he took long breaks to Europe and the Middle East to capture scenes in watercolor. Works from 1902-1911 are filled with quick, gestural brushstrokes of light and shadow. Although his palette was more naturalistic than mine, I did incorporate some of his painterly technique into my work. Some of his motifs were of quiet moments, reclining figures, and sunlit buildings. It was these views, which conveyed a sense of familiarity, that influenced my work. His gestural, loose brushwork appealed to me as a way of translating a view in a personal way. He was exploring and responding to his environs, as I was also doing in my work. Sargent’s scenes of leisure and landscapes of foreign countries seem to give him a freedom with painting that was not accessible to him with his commissioned work. Both Hopper and Sargent, manipulated color, light, and shadow to capture the viewer’s attention. I strive to attract my audience in the same way.

The imagery in my Precious Metal Clay (PMC) jewelry focuses on man-made spirals and the biomorphic aspects of ocean life. I originally was inspired by a spiraling Celtic motif as designs for my jewelry. However, after researching, I found that fundamental spiral designs went back almost 5000 years. Spiral designs were found on Neolithic, hand-carved stone
spheres, such as ones found at the settlement of Skara Brae in the Orkney Islands off the
Northern coast of Scotland. It is not clear what these stone objects were used for but many other
ancient civilizations also used a spiral as a symbol. For me, these spirals connote the path of life,
from the beginning to the end.

In addition to these man-made spirals, I have also found inspirations and conceptual
connections to the natural spiraling in sea shells, and the curvilinear forms found in sea life. I
was originally inspired by the ocean due to the wide ranging colors in the sea. However, the
colors led me to notice the forms found there. In my jewelry, not only do I incorporate spirals
from shells but I impress various patterns into the PMC, with rubberized stamps and ordinary
household objects. For beading or coloration in a piece, I select the naturalistic blues and greens
of water. Sea colors are varied in their aquatic hues, so finding beads to complement my pieces
becomes based on matching colors. This approach is in contrast to my emotional and intuitive
method in painting. In these jewelry pieces, unexpected results from the kiln are often
incorporated into a final work.

Canvas

I am most at peace when sitting alone with my painting accouterments surrounding me. I
intuitively make subject matter choices that will chart the course of my day. Sometimes, I work
outside on site. However, I often take photographs that I will use later in the studio. My
intentions for painting have always been direct, I paint what immediately appeals to me visually
and emotionally. Often incidental pieces of information found within landscapes are what
inspire me, such as a sand-colored sleeping dog or a woman hanging out laundry.
It was a temperate day in the Cinque Terre region in Italy when I took the photograph for *Boat House* (Appendix, 1). Strung along the top of the house was a series of fluttering, plastic flags that gave a jaunty and carefree look to the whole place. Small craft boats were stacked on top of racks awaiting rentals from tourists. However, it was the contrast of the brilliant blue door against the antiquated stone work that immediately drew my attention. So, in this painting, I emphasized the visual contrast by using high-keyed and complementary blues and oranges against neutral grays.

*Roman Dog* (Appendix, 2) was also created from a photo taken, from an Italian side street, on the way to dinner one evening. I was struck by the interplay of the soft, early evening light and shadow on the door frame. Then, I spotted the sleeping dog below an ancient stone doorstep. This image was one that I thought of often after that trip and I decided to translate the view and my memories onto canvas.

When choosing the palette for *Roman Dog*, I originally referred to the photograph. However, I became frustrated with my choices because the naturalistic colors did not represent my feelings related to this view. So, I stopped referring to the photo and chose high-saturated reds and oranges as the base colors. I then added touches of bright whites, cobalt blues, and neutral grays. This personalized palette allowed me to be more expressive and to heighten my memory of that early summer night. At this point, I began to rely on spontaneous and intuitive choices of color as a way of expressing my emotions.

It occurred to me that Edward Hopper had also added his own interpretations of mood based on hue for his final paintings. His color choices provoked the viewer to interpret a somber quality in many of his works. Some of his works include earth tones, such as brown and grays,
that showed light and dark contrasts and emphasized values.

Besides his manipulation of color, Hopper also developed compositional strategies to direct the viewer’s attention. In the painting, *Automat* (1927), he depicted a yellow-hatted young girl sitting alone at a table, her legs visible underneath. She is staring down at a cup of coffee and there are a series of reflected lights in the window behind her in the upper left-hand side of the canvas. Hopper’s positioning of the girl on the viewer’s right, and the reflections on the left, are similar to techniques I used to direct my viewer to locate the reclining dog at the bottom of my painting.

The painting, *Washer Woman* (Appendix, 3), was also inspired by a photograph taken in the Cinque Terre region. In this work, I limited my palette to various shades of greens, whites, grays, and yellows. I had spotted laundry drying in the warm air all over Italy. I became fascinated with these sun-drenched buildings, soft shadows, and rows of linens. These commonplace views prompted me to emotionally respond through color and simplified form, as reflected in Sargent’s watercolors.

While visiting Greece, Sargent painted a watercolor entitled *Corfu-Lights and Shadow* (1909). This composition was painted using zinc white, which was chosen to emphasize the shadow of the trees on a sunny side of a small outbuilding. He used other whites that were less intense on other parts of the painting. Zinc white is a very bright and strong white. In *Washer Woman*, I used zinc white and titanium white to paint the many linens. I used titanium and zinc in order to create a contrast of whites in the folds of the laundry.

Using paint to express myself has become a second language to me. Whether painting outdoors or in the dedicated studio space built by my husband, Tom, it is my goal to record my
intimate reaction to a variety of views. It does not matter if I am sitting under a tree here in Virginia or taking pictures abroad in Europe, something at some point compels me to pick up a brush and create on canvas what I see and feel.

Jewelry

Unlike the peaceful feeling I get when painting, making jewelry is more stressful because of technical issues. For example, PMC needs to be manipulated quickly before it dries out and cracks. However, I learned to control the materials and work the kiln to make wearable art.

Ocean Bracelet (Appendix, 4) is a PMC cuff bracelet. To create the cuff, I used an empty soda can as a form. To incorporate both the ocean and the spiral theme, I morphed ocean waves into spirals as the surface imagery. The imagery was made of PMC cut-outs that I placed on the cuff. Then, with a specialty tool that has a ball tip, I stamped multiple indentations along the length of the bracelet, similar to barnacles, to create a textural finish. Lastly, I added a few blue, ocean-colored Swarovski crystals, gluing them into holes that I made in the clay before firing.

Spiral Coil Ring (Appendix, 5) references Skara Brae-inspired spiral imagery, while also being reminiscent of a child’s hand-built coil pot. This pot sits on top of the hoop of the ring and is stamped with a crisscross design from an ordinary fly swatter. When I first started jewelry making with PMC, I experimented with as many textures as possible, and the fly swatter became another tool to use. In making the mount, I started by rolling a tiny length of PMC into the spiral shape for the bottom of a coiled pot. Then, I continued to roll out several pieces of PMC layering each one on top of the other to continue building the pot walls. After I finished with this little vessel, I turned it upside-down and attached it to the ring with some slip. I fired it twice
reattach the coil pot, and then polished it in the tumbler.

*Biomorphic Ring* (Appendix, 6) was mistakenly created with two ring mounts. I originally rolled out a long piece of PMC to create a vertically designed mount that would extend up to the knuckle on the wearer’s finger. After firing once, the ring was too fragile, so I created a new mount using a larger irregular shape of PMC and attached it over the original mount. I used the same ball tool to create indentations for texture, and added cutouts mirroring my design in *Ocean Bracelet*. By allowing the clay to create its own natural shape after simply rolling a few times, it became curvilinear and biomorphic. This unexpected result was welcomed.

Jewelry making was the last discipline that I thought I would be attracted to while studying at the graduate level. Little did I know how challenging, frustrating, and rewarding the jewelry creation process was for me. Each piece I created represents hours of labor. Choosing new directions based on whether my piece survived the kiln had its own effect on the outcome of the jewelry. In other words, my labor and ideas only played a part of the outcome of a piece, the firing in the kiln can take a piece in unexpected directions. However, my motifs and themes remained consistent with my interests in the ocean. PMC jewelry making forced me to connect with chance happenings and stay present in the creative process.

**Conclusion**

The MIS-IAR Program has helped me to see myself as a practicing artist, and allowed me to explore other media. Developing a diverse body of painting and jewelry has confirmed to me that I can create as well as teach. I always tell my students that I am in school, too. I am learning new ideas and keeping my skill level current.
Each course gave me new ideas to take into the elementary classroom. These ideas have been as simple as sharing a new way of organizing paints or translating a challenging three-dimensional jewelry making technique into a kindergarten clay project. This program also provided me with convenient after school graduate courses that I would not have been able to take while working full time as a K-5 art specialist. Presently, my own work continues in the same direction of inspiration. My pieces are tangible emotions and memories of places that I wish to return to someday.
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