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Reflective Curiosities

A thesis 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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Table of Contents

Artist Statement iii

Reflection 1

Aesthetics 2

Influences 4

On Fabric 6

In Glass 9

In Painting 10

Conclusion 12

Bibliography 13

Appendix 14

List of Figures 14

Images 15

Resume 24

Artist Statement

My craft work and paintings reflect my life experiences and personal curiosities, particularly those associated with the natural world. Every day, I am bombarded with a constant flow of visual impressions and ephemeral experiences. There are some that demand attention by virtue of their sheer power, such as the repetition of line in a plowed field, the color of nautical landscape at twilight, or the intelligent behavior of crows. Like a tourist who buys a souvenir to capture a moment, I try to capture instances of profound experiences. I interpret these moments through a process-oriented approach to media.

Fiber, glass, and paint are the vehicles through which I explore the natural world. In these media, I layer materials. The first layer of media establishes a foundation, the next layer affects perceptions of the first, and additional layers add to the visual experience. As each piece reaches completion, the composition is the sum of all parts. Coupled with my understanding of layering as a creative process is my acknowledgment that life's layered experiences shape me as a person.

Reflective Curiosities

Reflection

Reflecting on my childhood memories, it seems each was a glimpse into my future relationship with art. As a child, I was unaware of myself as an artist, yet I created out of an internal drive. One of my earliest memories is sitting at my child-sized table and chair with my 32-color watercolor paint set and a stack of paper. I painted, and I painted a lot. As a four-year-old, I would lay fabric on my dolls, cut the fabric following their shapes, and hand sew their clothing. I also remember collecting paper boxes, cutting through them, stacking them, making levels, and creating spaces for my dolls. My family resources were limited and I made do with materials I could find around the house. It was a natural way of doing business. I continued my play into adolescence, making my own clothes and decorating my room.

Though, I never had an opportunity to take art in elementary or middle school, my mom pushed me towards the arts because she knew my talents needed nourishment and it would be a way to make a living. She encouraged me to take art classes in high school, where I explored different media and discovered my passion and fascination with the arts of different cultures.

In my adult life, it was my mom and her vision for my future that prompted me to enroll in the School of the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), where I completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Interior Design. Later, as an interior designer at Baskervill and Son, Architects, I created public spaces far beyond what I dreamed of as a child when creating cardboard box houses for my dolls.

Later, I was married with children when I rediscovered my passion for making art. So, I earned a second Bachelor in Fine Arts degree, in Art Education at VCU. Teaching art has become a natural way of life. When I first started teaching, I truly felt that I had won the lottery

in life. I was teaching what I felt passionate about and realized that I was not only helping children with their art making but I was also creating the future advocates of the arts. My philosophy became about opening as many doors for these children as possible. No one I knew had such a captive audience and impact, and I felt it was destiny that brought me to this job.

After teaching for a few years, I found there were techniques that I needed to brush up on and also techniques I needed to learn. As a teacher, we are required to take college level courses as part of our licensing re-certification. I enrolled and took classes through VCU in their Off-Campus Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program. As I embarked upon my coursework, a whole new world opened up. Not only was I learning new techniques to engage my students but I was relating to my inner voice and finding the need to create! I chose craft studio and painting as my concentrations as a way to reflect my experiences.

Aesthetics

From early childhood, I learned that nature is a big component in sustaining life. My work is prompted by my experiences which typically occur within the natural environment. Nature is the common thread that runs through my pieces. I want to express the harmony that I see in the formal relationships of pattern, form, balance, and color. I search for harmony to reconcile the pain I have experienced in my life.

Using a process-oriented approach, I build levels of complexity one layer at a time. I relate these layers to my multiple life experiences, each layer builds on the previous layer. My imagery consists of singular moments and quiet views, such as a grouping of trees with a single bird, a layer of leaves decaying on the woods floor, or my koi swarming in circular formation. I

observe these moments and want to present them as images of quiet harmony.

I am particularly drawn to trees and to the life they support. The majestic tree takes many years to mature, and if it is able to survive it shows power and strength. It also reveals its own struggles of devastation with scars caused by weather, animals, and humans. It heals itself and grows stronger. In my own life, like a tree, struggles have made me stronger.

I often reflect on three traumatic life events that have altered my approach to life and my subsequent expression in art. The first occurred in my sophomore year of college when I was involved in a horrific car accident. I was thrown through a car windshield which tore the upper half of my face. The surgeon who put me back together in the emergency room was worried that I would lose the ability to open and close my left eye. The scarring was a tough one to deal with, and I felt that I looked like Frankenstein's monster. After years of re-constructive surgeries and changing my hair style, I was able to feel human and my eye lid only had a minor droop. After this experience, I found that my previous introverted personality became more outgoing. I wanted people to see the beauty inside of me and not my physical appearance. In my work, I use pure, warm colors to help express my hard won confidence.

The second event was the death of my first husband. In the innocence of youth, I thought that I would grow old with this person. After three and a half years of marriage my husband committed suicide. Chemical imbalances over took his way of thinking. Searching for four days, the police found his body hanging from a tree along the river. The shock and devastation was unspeakable. At the graveside service, the only thing I can remember is a flock of crows in nearby grouping of trees. Their squawking and flying around was alarming to some but for me it brought comfort. I felt that they were distracting me and I was able to get through the service. When I see crows, I feel his presence. These birds often appear in my works as reminders of this

time.

Later, I remarried and started having a family. Then, my mother was stricken with Alzheimer's disease. Watching a person that I love being stripped of life and vigor by a slow tormented killing of the mind has affected me and my appreciation of life. Each day is a gift and I realize that each moment lived, is not to be taken for granted. My mother taught me to respect the natural world, and nature became the main theme of my work.

I work with fiber, glass, and paint. With each media, I use multiple processes and materials. In fiber, I print and paint on fabric. In glass, I paint with glass powders and incorporate metal inclusions. In my painting, I often collage different types of paper with acrylic paint. Every work is created through multiple steps and layers of media.

I intuitively use bright, pure hues of red, yellow, and orange. These colors have a cultural and psychological effect on the viewer. They are associated with energy and are considered warm colors. Warm colors visually advance in a work of art, while the cool colors, such as blue, green, and violet, tend to recede. In my training as a designer, I used the power and weight of color in my projects. In using these pure, vibrant colors I want the viewer to sense my confidence. I also use bright color as a way to attract attention and heighten the awareness of the beauty and harmony that I find in nature.

Influences

My creative outcomes are derived from my natural environment, such as walking through the woods in my backyard or driving to school. I want to capture small moments that I experience during my normal routines. In addressing nature as my inspiration, I looked to artists who also used their natural surroundings as an influence. Two artists that have influenced my

work are Emil Nolde (1867-1956) and Wolf Kahn (b.1927).

Emil Nolde was a German Expressionist painter and printmaker. He is known for his vigorous brushwork and expressive use of colors. This is especially present in his later works entitled *Unpainted Pictures* (1938-1945). These paintings were a series consisting of over 1300 sheets of paper. At that time, during World War II, the Nazis' campaign against modern art led to the confiscation of Nolde's work from German museums. Nolde was ordered by the Nazi regime not to paint. However, he painted in secrecy, and when he could not paint he would write. Nolde was inspired by nature and believed every artist sees nature in their own way and they translate it in their own personal way. Nolde considered these particular paintings to be his legacy. To him, they were created during a time of artistic and mental oppression.

I was immediately attracted to Nolde and his *Unpainted Pictures* series. Nolde approached color with no inhibitions and expressed his responses to nature in a non-naturalistic palette. He was not concerned with perspective or academic realism. He used a loose, gestural painting style and allowed pigment to flow and drip. I felt connected to Nolde and his paintings. I was not kept from creating but I did have obstacles to overcome. He used color as a dynamic visual statement in his paintings. Like him, I used color to express my own responses and feelings. He was also inspired by nature and I also related to this subject matter.

Another artist that has influenced my work is Wolf Kahn. He is a German-born American painter. Kahn's pastels and oil paintings include portraits, interiors, still lifes, and especially, landscapes. What intrigues me about Kahn's work is his inventive use of color. Kahn brings the openness and vividness of Color Field Painting, of the 1970s, to his landscapes. Color Field works presented large areas of unmodulated color. In Kahn's pieces, fields and skies are defined by strong bands of bright colors. Often, his color choices do not correspond to actual

landscape colors. They do reflect his expressive interpretation of nature. Like Kahn, I also use vivid and non-naturalistic color.

Both Nolde and Kahn have influenced my approach to color. Their expressive and non-naturalistic palettes have given me permission to use color in my response to nature. Like them, I want to attract the viewer's attention and have them view my interpretations.

On Fabric

One of my chosen media to work with is fabric and quilting. As I embarked on this work, I reviewed the history of quilt making. Quilting was once an important and a large part of a woman's life. Quilts were necessary items in the home and were used as bed coverings and blankets. Traditionally, in quilting there are three layers: a top layer, the batting (or filler), and the back layer. All three layers were cut the same width and length. Quilts were typically hand sewn to hold the three layers of fabrics together. The amount of time and effort that went into the creation of a traditional quilt made them not only expensive but often produced a priceless family heirloom that was passed down from generation to generation.

When I made my first quilt, I learned in the traditional method. As I made more quilts, I began to explore creative and innovative options. I began to break or extend the rules of quilt making and began to make art quilts. This type of quilt is not a utilitarian object and can be presented as fine art in a wide variety of ways. My process began by dyeing my own fabrics with the *shibori* process. *Shibori* is a Japanese term for tie-dye, where the cloth is rolled or folded and bound with string or rubber bands before it is placed in a dye bath. The term refers to both the process and product. I also printed and painted on the fabrics and rubbed oil pastels into the surfaces. I left edges unraveled, exposed usually hidden basting stitches, and cut fabric

layers in uneven sizes. I also introduced other fabrics, such as felt and acetate. Another process that I often include in my art quilts is needle felting. Needle felting is performed by taking dyed roving (wool) from a sheep or alpaca and layering it on top of a piece of fabric. To attach the roving to the fabric, a barbed needle is used to poke the roving through the fabric. By doing this, the fibers are locked into place and serve as an embellishment to the fabric surface.

Bottom Layer (Appendix, 1) is an art quilt that includes the *shibori* process. It is a three piece wall-hanging that depicts layers of deteriorating fig leaves. To begin the work, I chose three cotton *shibori* fabrics that were from the same color dyeing process. As a result of the dyeing process, panel one and panel three are intended to visually reference organic matter. On the central panel, using free-motion sewing, I stitched on leaves that were cut from felt and acetate. Free motion sewing allowed me to use the sewing machine as a drawing tool. Varied sized fig leaves from my garden were used as patterns. Layers of blue, brown, and green organic-shaped acetate pieces were quilted onto each leaf. Then, I used a heat gun and melted the acetate around the stitched areas. This part of the process added texture to the surface.

Each of the three panels was finished off with a traditional edge and the backing is a light forest green in coloration, as seen in the detail (Appendix, 1a). I designed the three panels to be hung from the ceiling and in stepped layers from a wall. The shortest piece (on the left-hand side) was closest to the wall. The central panel is suspended about 3" in front of the first, and the third panel is hung 3" in front of the second. When viewed frontally, the three quilt panels appear to be one three-sectioned quilt. However, from a side view they are seen as three separate pieces. The back is accessible for viewing as well. The light forest green back was machined in black thread on all three panels. As a counterpoint, the center back panel was machine quilted with free motion quilting in the negative spaces around the fig leaves,

(Appendix, 1a). In this piece, I wanted to show a part of nature at the end of a cycle yet present the decayed leaves as a beautiful anticipation of winter.

Equilibrium (Appendix, 2) is finished off as a framed art quilt. It is a remembrance of the day that my former husband was buried. To begin the quilt, I painted the white muslin ground in blues and purples to represent the calm in the middle of summer. I placed five trees in a row on a horizon, three were grouped on the left and two on the right. In the center, between the two groupings of trees, I painted a brilliant yellow rectangular shape. Highlighted in this area of yellow, symbolic of my faith, is the silhouetted image of a single crow. Next, I needle felted roving in the trees to represent foliage. To represent the intensity of the time, I used vibrant yellow and orange. The repetition of stitched line throughout represents moments of everyday life. I named this piece *Equilibrium* because I now feel at peace and in balance.

In the next quilt, *Rhapsody of Color* (Appendix, 3), I took a more formal and geometric approach to the imagery. I experimented with the weight of color and shape. The original size of the work consisted of four 10"x10" fabric squares. I decided to cut them down and used fifteen 5"x5" squares for a series of mini quilts. I found these smaller pieces allowed me room for more variation with similar shapes and colors. Once all the small geometric pieces were arranged, I quilted them to a cotton batting. I used a bright and contrasting thread as an additional linear element. Lastly, I framed each quilt square in a black frame to contrast with strong color of the fabric and thread. The frames also unified these pieces into a group.

After working with color in fabrics, I took my palette and ideas to my glass work. Continuing with layering as a motivation to create, I interpreted processes I knew into my glass making.

In Glass

Working with glass was very challenging. Yet, I was able to incorporate other processes and media into my pieces. For example, I layered glass, painted with glass powders, used stencils, and added glass and metal inclusions. I also learned how to cast glass in sand, and make flexible silicone and ceramic molds for glass.

In my first glass piece, *Koi Play* (Appendix, 4), I experimented with a turquoise reactive glass. Chemical additives in this type of glass often results in unexpected colors and effects after firing. The color of the turquoise glass reminded me of water and my koi pond. I decided to use the fan shape as my format because it relates to the koi and its Japanese origins. Using a template of a fan shape, I cut the turquoise glass into five rectangular pieces. I also cut five additional clear glass pieces in the same size. I fused the one turquoise with one clear piece of glass for each of the five panels. At firing, the reactive turquoise glass turned gray on one side. On the top, fused with clear glass, it remained turquoise. I also had dispersed chunks of clear, coarse frits throughout the glass pieces before firing. After fusing the glass, these pieces appeared to be air bubbles coming from the fish. I placed the five glass pieces side-by-side, gray surface up. Next, I worked on the imagery of the koi.

I painted one fish white and the other yellow, and the lily pads were painted in shades of green and blue. I used a fine glass powder mixed with a liquid medium so that it could be applied with a brush. When dry, I used a single-edged razor blade and scraped scales and other details into the fish. Then, I fired the five pieces. When I pulled them from the kiln, the colored frits held their colors and resulted in a textured surface.

The last part of the process was to frame the five pieces in black, ink-stained wood. The frame was designed to represent the sections of a Japanese fan. In Japanese art, everyday life

and the beauties of nature are represented. My koi pond is a focal point of my daily life. I see it as a place to rejuvenate after a long day. It is my safe place.

In *Pachypteris in Ice* (Appendix, 5), I encased a metal leaf in glass. I grow large elephant ear plants, or pachypteris, in my garden. For this piece, I took a leaf and pressed it into clay. Next, I took the clay impression and made a mold to cast a glass leaf. The clay was fired and used as the mold for casting. Using the mold as a template, I cut out a metal leaf slightly smaller than the mold. I chose a sheet of 36-gauge aluminum metal with a copper finish. I incised into the metal creating a pachypteris leaf, emphasizing the veining or life lines of the foliage.

At this point, I used 1½” of clear crushed glass in the bottom of the mold. Then, this was placed in the kiln and fused. Next, I laid the leaf cutout on top of the glass and placed another ½” of crushed glass on top, and fused it again. Finally, the leaf was removed from the mold and cleaned. I wanted to present the leaf as covered in ice. I wanted to capture the feeling of an isolated presence of nature; a moment of time encapsulated.

In Painting

In my painting, I use gestural marks and vibrant colors. I often apply pigment with sponges and rags, and include tissue papers to add texture. In this media, like my fabric and glass works, my inspiration comes from nature. I want to interpret nature through color and the layering of brush marks.

Autumn Glow (Appendix, 6) is an intimate (10”x10”) acrylic painting on luan board. I painted this with a sponge instead of having the control of a brush. Using a sponge gave me a method of presenting an atmospheric, poetic image of a fall morning. I began to paint with blues and greens. I added yellow to the sky and water for a more colorful and dramatic effect. As

another dramatic effect, I chose the purple for the trees as the complement of yellow. By using a sponge and high-keyed complementary colors, I expressed my response to the intense glow of the morning light.

A view of the woods from my family room windows to some could be overlooked. I often see the same view as if looking at it for the first time. I can see its subtly changing beauty through the days. My painting, *Through the Woods* (Appendix, 7), is one reflection of how I see this view.

I started with a large canvas (36"x48"x2") because I wanted the image to engulf the viewer as it does in my own view of it. I painted the canvas dark gray and collaged white tissue paper over the entire surface to create an old, used look. Next, I drew a thick forest of the trees that I see out of my window. The random lines and raised surfaces of the paper complemented the complexities of the branches and limbs of the trees. In painting this piece, I blended shades of green for the trees and bright yellow and oranges for fall foliage. There is a square patch of white in the central part of the painting, behind the trees. This represents a house on a neighboring property. This structure is not emphasized in order to show the seclusion of my view.

After exploring my ideas through painting, I decided to use multiple media again in a piece. *Crow Hop* (Appendix, 8) is a mixed media work on a wooden support. I designed the structure as a child-like house, typically drawn as a basic square with a triangle on top. I wanted to reference my childhood art making and my career as an interior designer. It also represents the safety I feel with my family and the natural environment in which we live.

First, I painted a grouping of trees on the panel. Then, within the format of the house, I incorporated natural elements and symbols from my other works. I revisited the subject of crows

and painted a silhouette of one on the left-hand side of the composition. I painted other crows amongst the tree limbs. Then, I added a cut out copper tree encased in glass onto the right side of the format. Lastly, I used an iridescent finish over the painting, to allow the glass and painted ground to merge as one unit.

Through this body of work I have explored many processes and media. I have learned many new techniques and at times have felt a little out of my comfort zone. This presented to me new challenges and fed my curiosities. The natural world is my inspiration and I tell my story through color and process. It is a reflection of my past and my present. It is visual and symbolic. It is personal and poetic.

Conclusion

In pursuing my degree, I am very thankful for the MIS-IAR Program. Not only has it helped me develop my talents but I have established many positive relationships with my professors and colleagues. I have embarked on a journey of creativity and plan to continue with this journey. I am more confident as a teacher in my lesson planning, engaging my students, and I am able to expand on my lessons through process and media.

Currently, I meet with a group of fellow teachers and artists. We work each week on our own art, sharing and collaborating. This would not have happened if I had not pursued this degree. Through this program, I became more confident in my teaching as well as making and exhibiting my own work.

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Appendix

List of Figures

- Figure 1. *Bottom Layer*, fabric wall hanging, cotton and acrylic fabric, *shibori* discharged, hand and machine quilted, applied heat distress, 41"x33"x6", 2013.
- Figure 1a. *Bottom Layer* (back view), fabric wall hanging, cotton and acrylic fabric, *shibori*, discharged, hand and machine quilted, applied heat distress 41"x33"x6", 2013.
- Figure 2. *Equilibrium*, art quilt mounted on luan, cotton, painted, rubbing, fiber fused, needle felted, hand and machine quilted, 36"x24", 2013.
- Figure 3. *Rhapsody of Color*, art quilt mounted on luan, cotton, dyed, fiber fused, machine stitched, 5"x5" (each), 2014.
- Figure 4. *Koi Play*, reactive glass, frits, powders, fused, 18"x30"x1", 2012.
- Figure 5. *Pachypteris in Ice*, fused glass with metal inclusion, 12"x20"x3", 2014.
- Figure 6. *Autumn Glow*, acrylic on wood, 10"x10", 2013.
- Figure 7. *Through the Woods*, mixed media, acrylic on canvas, 36"x48"x2", 2014.
- Figure 8. *Crow Hop*, mixed media, acrylic on wood, 13"x9"x2", 2013.



Figure 1. *Bottom Layer*, fabric wall hanging, cotton and acrylic fabric, *shibori* discharged, hand and machine quilted, applied heat distress, 41"x33"x6", 2013.

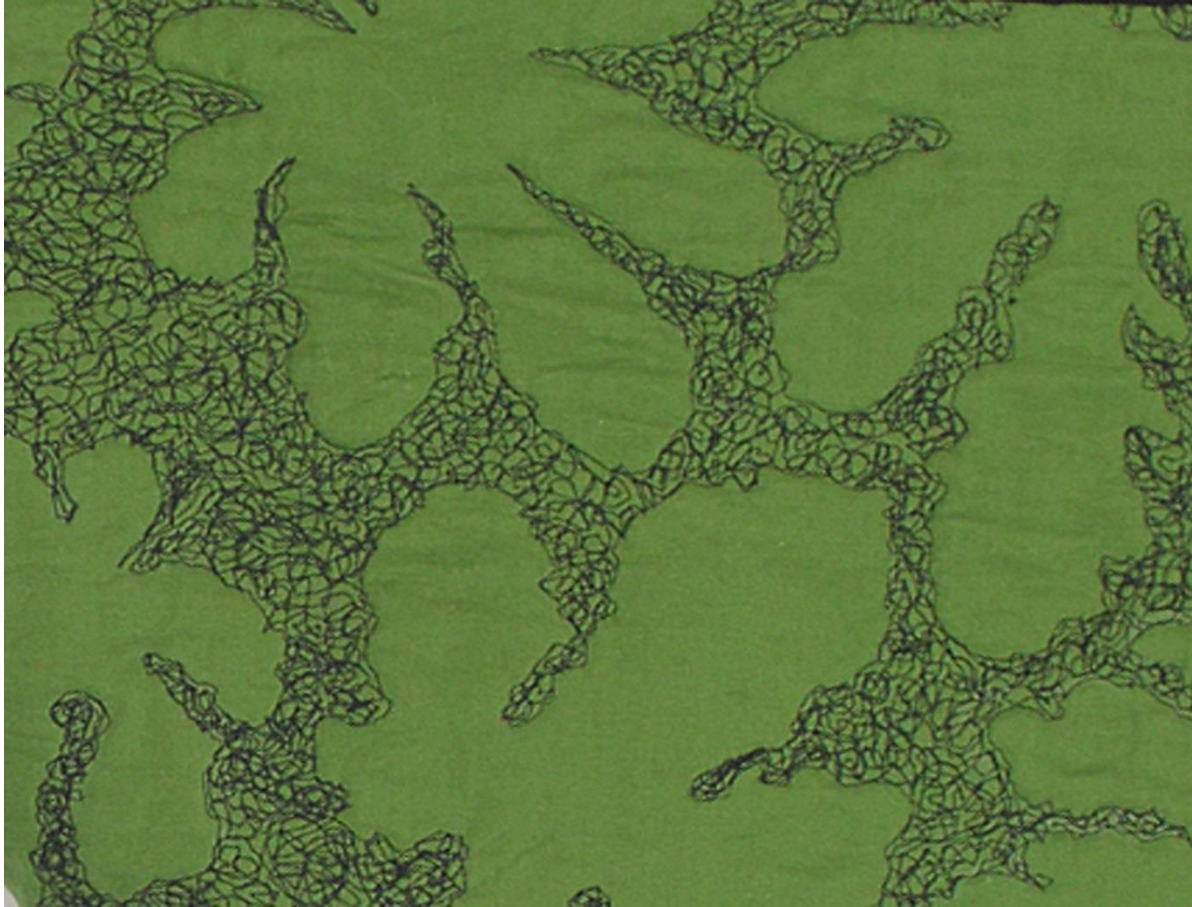


Figure 1a. *Bottom Layer* (back view), fabric wall hanging, cotton and acrylic fabric, *shibori* discharged, hand and machine quilted, applied heat distress, 41"x33"x6", 2013.



Figure 2. *Equilibrium*, art quilt mounted on luan, cotton, painted, rubbing, fiber fused, needle felted, hand and machine quilted, 12"x24", 2013.

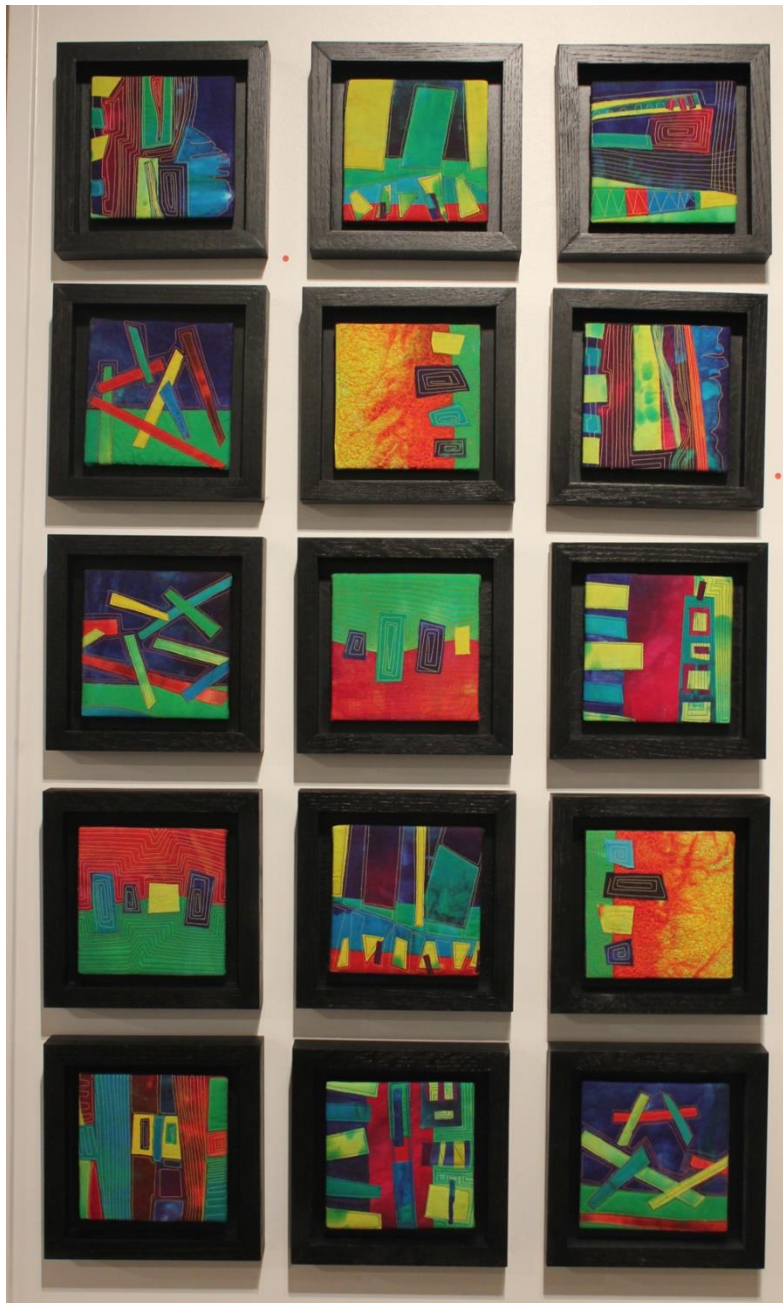


Figure 3. *Rhapsody of Color*, art quilt mounted on luan, cotton, dyed, fiber fused, machine stitched, 5"x5"(each), 2014.

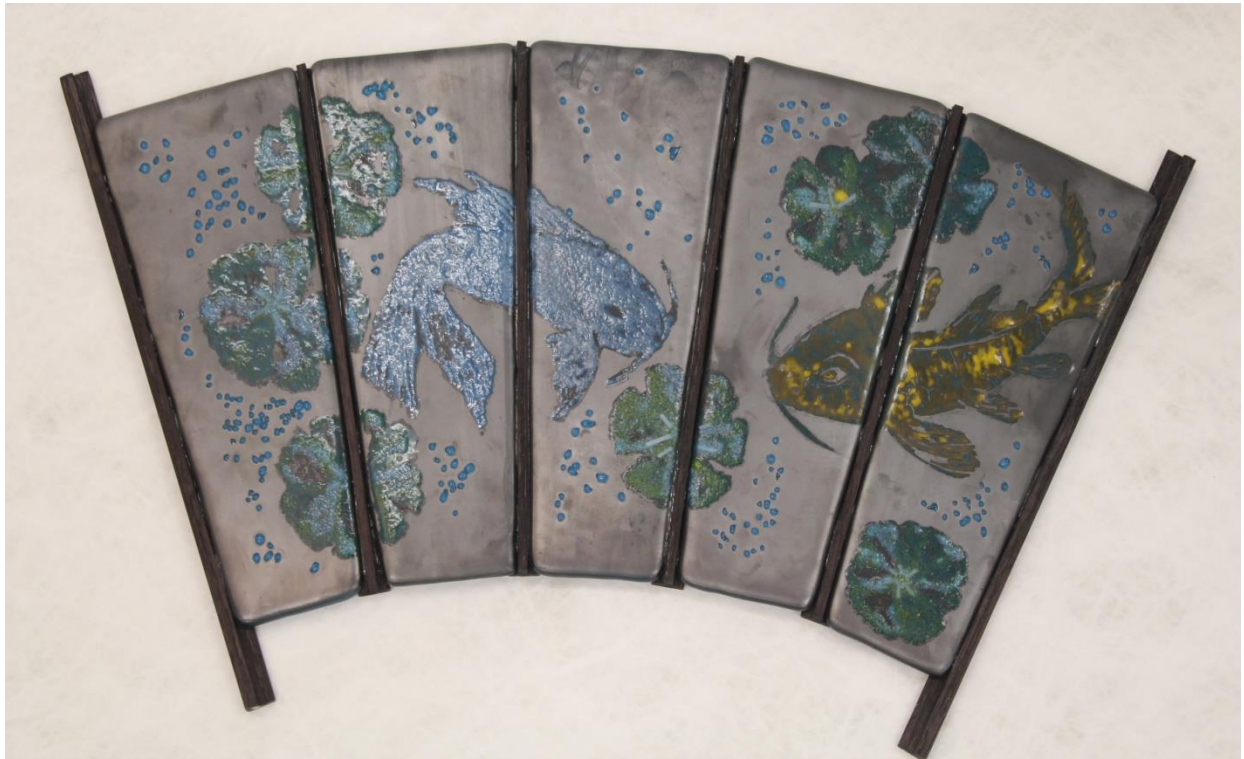


Figure 4. *Koi Play*, reactive glass, frits, powders, fused, 18"x30"x1", 2012.



Figure 5. *Pachypteris in Ice*, fused glass with metal inclusion, 12"x20"x3", 2014.

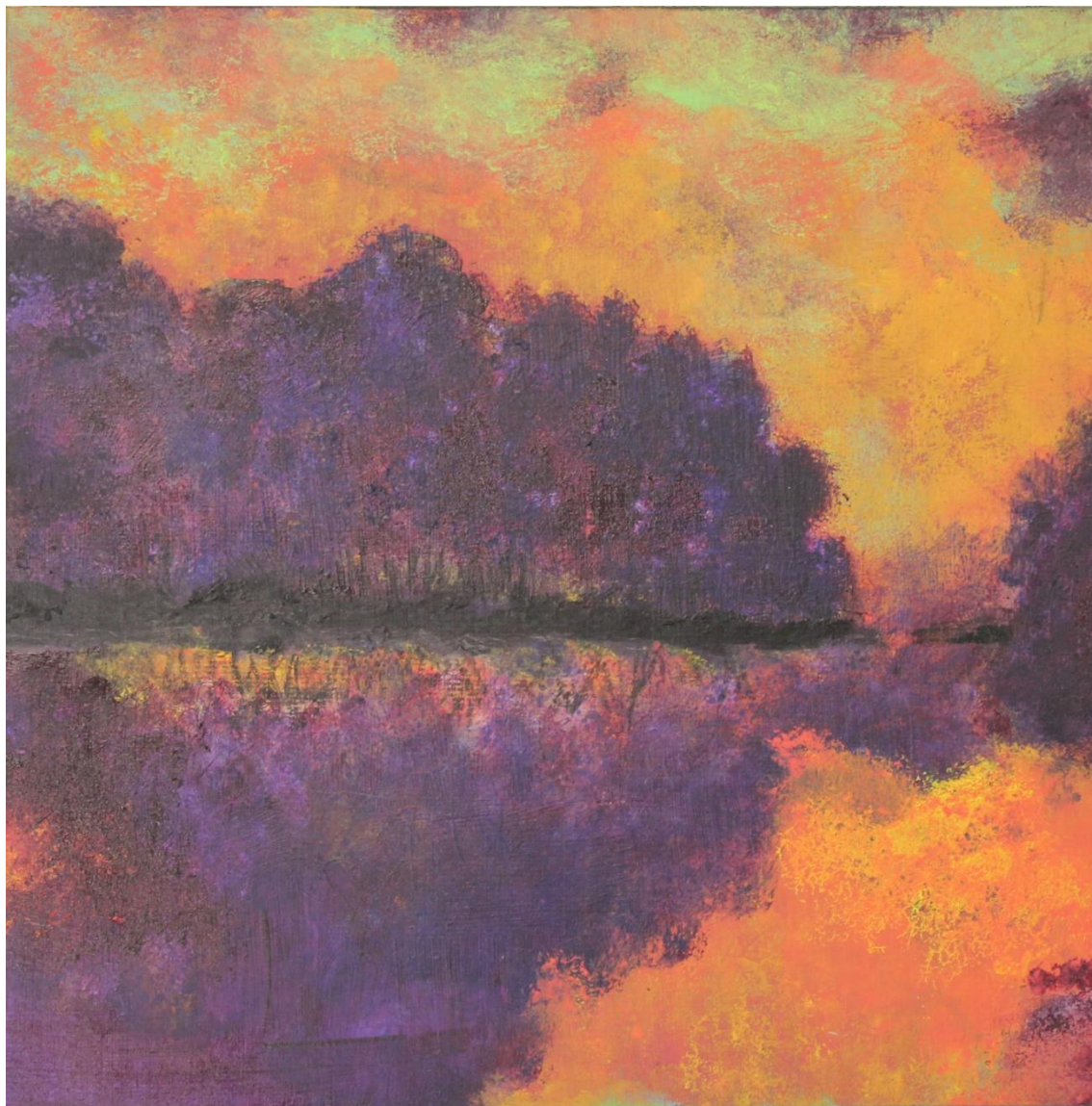


Figure 6. *Autumn Glow*, acrylic on wood, 10"x10", 2013.

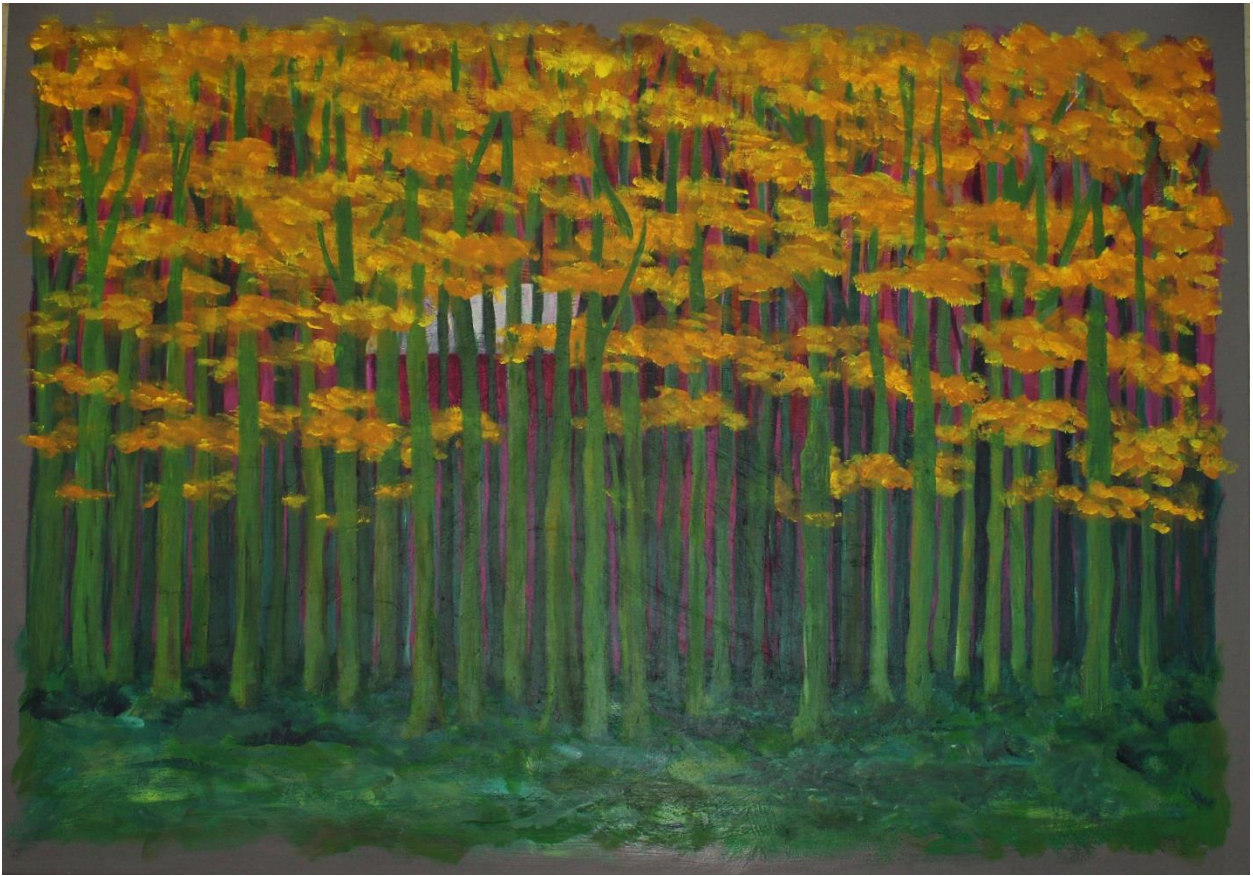


Figure 7. *Through the Woods*, mixed media, acrylic on canvas, 36"x48"x2", 2013.

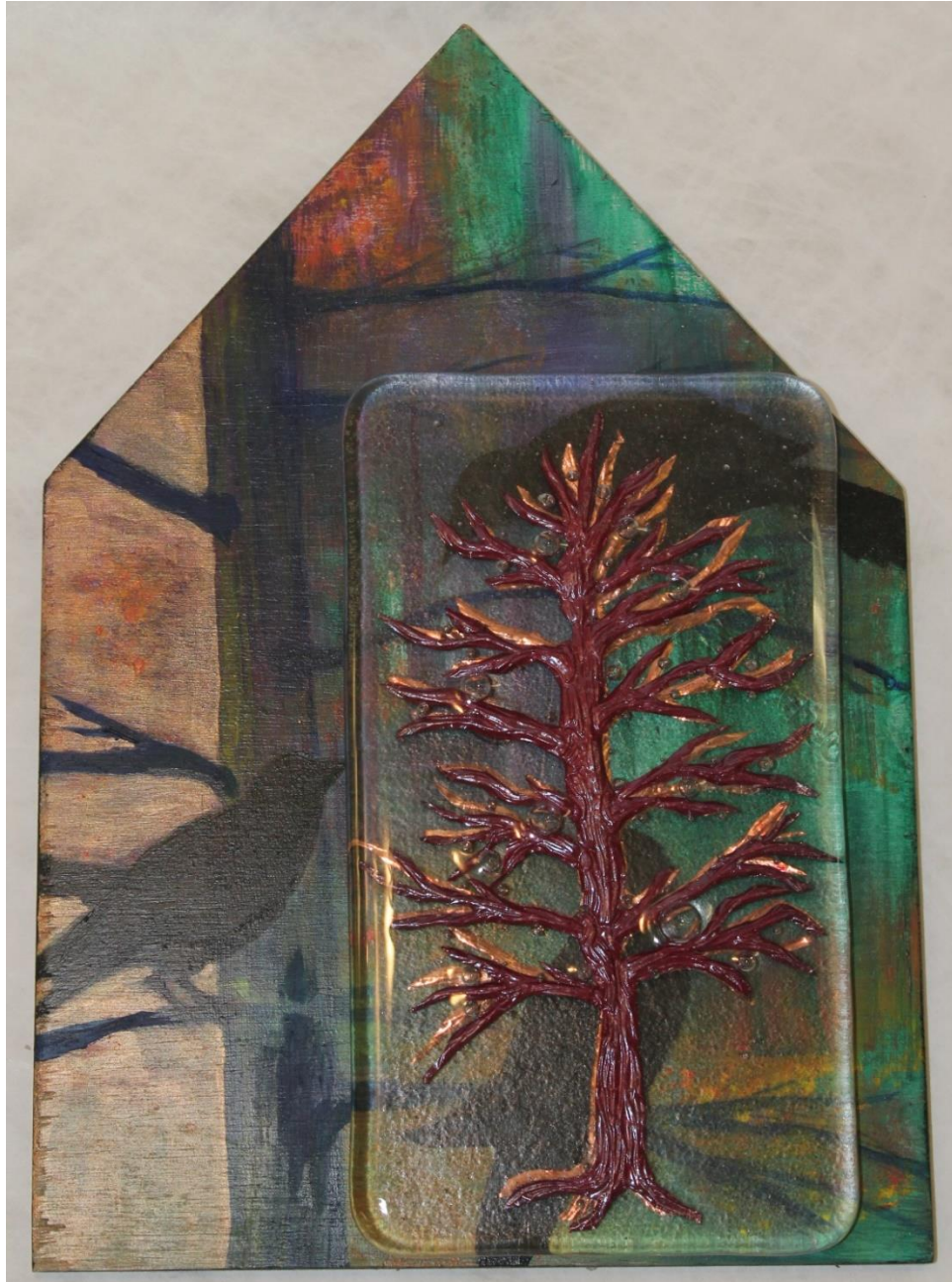


Figure 8. *Crow Hop*, mixed media, acrylic on wood, 13"x9"x2", 2013.

Mary O. Dickerson

EDUCATION

- 2015 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
(Crafts and Painting)
- 2000 Bachelor of Fine Arts
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
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- 1979 Bachelor of Fine Arts
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
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CERTIFICATION

- 2000-Present Art Education, pre-K-12

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- 2006-Present Art Teacher, Kersey Creek Elementary, Mechanicsville, VA
- 2000-2006 Art Teacher, Pole Green Elementary, Mechanicsville, VA

RELATED EXPERIENCE

- 2002-2007 Oak Knoll Middle School, CASTLE Productions, Art Director,
Mechanicsville, VA
- 1985-1990 Baskervill and Son, Architects and Engineers, Interior Designer,
Richmond, VA
- 1980-1985 Thalhimer Brothers Retail, Visual Merchandiser, Richmond, VA
- 1975-1982 Coleman Brothers Flowers, Floral Designer, Henrico, VA

AWARDS AND GRANTS

- 2009-2010 Partners in the Arts Grant, Books for Ghana, Richmond, VA
- 2008 Hanover Master Gardeners Grant, Hanover, VA

AWARDS AND GRANTS (continued)

2001 Beginning Teacher of the Year, Pole Green Elementary, Mechanicsville,
VA

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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EXHIBITIONS

2014 *3rd Annual Miniature Show*, Gallery Flux, Ashland, VA

2014 *Reflective Curiosities*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in
Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University,
Richmond, VA at Gallery Flux, Ashland, VA.

2014 *Artists Who Teach Show*, Hanover County School Board, Ashland VA

2013 *Artists Who Teach Show*, Hanover County School Board, Ashland, VA

2012 *Artists Who Teach Show*, Hanover County School Board, Ashland, VA

2011 *Artists Who Teach Show*, Hanover County School Board, Ashland, VA

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Meadow Farm Museum, Glen Allen, VA