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## Remnants

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## **Remnants**

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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## **Artist Statement**

My mixed media collages address issues concerning the outcast, the overlooked, and the underprivileged. My inspirations come from what I experience and perceive around me. My purpose in life is to use my art to address social issues that involve children. For example, I focus my attention on issues ranging from homelessness to mental illness. I am passionate about how vital these concerns are to our success as human beings.

To express my ideas, I layer a variety of materials and textiles. The materials include fragments of photographs, drawings, and objects. The textiles include articles of clothing and fabrics. Recurring symbols and imagery link the individual pieces together. The theme of each work determines the materials and media. While doing research for a piece, new social issues often surface and lead to the next piece.

# Remnants

## Introduction

Art was my earliest form of communication and I was involved in creativity throughout grade school. In high school, I took commercial art, and in college, I earned a fine arts degree in Fashion Art and Advertising. I decided to become an art teacher when I had an epiphany that it was time in my life for me to give back to society and work a job that was more rewarding.

My decision to pursue a master's degree came to me after seven years of teaching in an elementary school. My experiences as a teacher were rewarding, but I always seemed to want to improve and reinvent myself to be relevant as a teacher and as an artist. I believe ongoing education is important for professional and personal growth. So, I enrolled in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). It seemed to be a perfect choice for me because I was a full-time mother, wife, and teacher. In this program, I was able to take classes after work. These classes unleashed my creativity that was subdued by day to day life. The program also gave me a chance to work with other art teachers, refine my craft and skills, and focus on exploring my own vision.

My inspiration comes from what I experience and perceive around me. In my work, I speak for the voiceless to address children's social issues. I use acrylic paints, watercolor, graphite pencil, and oil pastels. I also use remnants of found objects and clothing. I explore my ideas through the concentrations of craft studies and sculpture.

## **Aesthetics**

In my teaching, I often need to address problems that affect children. Many of my students have obstacles, such as behavioral or health issues, that influence their school performance. It is important to me to bring attention to these issues in the hopes of improving their situations.

When presenting the problems associated with at-risk children, I use a wide range of materials. In some pieces, I use layered images and collagraphs to express my concerns. In others, I use objects such as sticks, threads, and wires as symbols and structural supports. Finally, I use actual clothing and fabric remnants in my statements. These materials represent children and point to particular problematic situations. Clothing and objects are part of my visual language.

From an early age, I saw my mother, grandmother, godmother, and aunts sewed. They instilled in me an appreciation for fabrics and their uses, from blankets to wedding gowns. I have always looked at clothing as a way of peering into someone's soul or identifying their characteristics. In my pieces, I present the articles of clothing by incasing them in multiple layers of media, such as abaca pulp and glazes, to represent the thick skin children often develop to hide their problematic circumstances. In another layer, I often add handwritten text and text from newspaper articles. The words and brief phrases point to complex issues. By inserting carefully selected text, the viewer is asked to make associations with the clothing and other elements. Materials, when used strategically and symbolically, can evolve to have much deeper meaning than just a remnant. For example, in a piece dealing with homelessness I painted and attached an image of a small tattered house.

## **Influences**

There are a lot of artists who serve as an inspiration to me. However, Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) and Norman Rockwell (1894-1978) are the two I look to the most. They both gave a voice to everyday common folks. Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) was an American artist who trained as an Impressionist. During this period, most artists were painting landscapes and city views. She created pastels and paintings that portrayed the domestic and social lives of women, with an emphasis on the mother and child bond. Cassatt's choice of imagery was considered very unconventional. Her male classmates discouraged and patronized her because they did not expect or want a woman to participate in the art world. Yet, she created a significant body of work and focused on women's issues even though she never married or had children.

I'm most intrigued by Cassatt's refusal to be confined or defined by traditional women's roles of her time. Ironically, she allowed these contradictory social expectations to inspire her work. She rejected society's view that spinsterhood was a weakness and considered her unmarried status to be a strength. She was also known as an activist for the arts because she encouraged her wealthy friends to support creativity by purchasing works of art. Her choice to confront and overcome such obstacles and become a well-known advocate has been an inspiration to me.

As I researched the life and work of Cassatt, I realized I had a lot in common with her. In my high school commercial art classes, many of my male classmates patronized me. Like Cassatt's contemporaries, they didn't think women were fit for a career in the arts. One of them even told me that there are only two places for women - the kitchen and the bedroom. Like Cassatt, their discouragement did not prevent me from pursuing

an art career. I have continued to produce work, and like Cassatt, I am an activist for the visual arts.

My first exposure to Norman Rockwell (1894-1978) was when I viewed a piece in an art magazine. Then, I went to see his artwork at the Chrysler Museum in Norfolk, VA. Rockwell's work was realistic and illustrative. I was immediately interested in his selection of common folks as his subject matter. He was most noted for his ability to capture American culture of his time, and his work was seen by millions on many covers of *The Saturday Evening Post* magazine. Rockwell had an ability to narrate traditional American values on canvas. He portrayed people involved in events and circumstances that were heroic or humorous. These works were presented to a public that quickly recognized the meaning. Although his works reached the public in the form of a color press reproduction and magazine mass production he is still highly regarded in the realm of fine art. Norman Rockwell's subject matter influenced me to use every day people's lives as the subject of my own work. However, instead of an illustrative approach, I used painterly mixed media techniques to convey my ideas about contemporary social issues.

Both Mary Cassatt's and Norman Rockwell's work and ideas influenced my work. Each artist contributed to my appreciation of using everyday people and children and their lives as a subject matter. Both artists showed me ways to address contemporary issues. Like these artists, I want to add my voice to the art world.



## Crafts Studies

The two panel drawing and mixed media piece, *Gutten Morgen Sister* (Appendix, 1), is about my sister and me. We lived in Germany for a few years and this references our time there as children. When we came back to the States we would talk in code using German words nobody else knew. We had a strong bond and I wanted to point out the benefits of this kind of close relationship. Many children from broken homes, or who are homeless, are denied this kind of positive experience. I wanted to present a positive statement about family ties.

In constructing this two part piece, I drew my sister and myself on old antique abaca paper and patterned tissue paper. This support paper was beige because I wanted the ground color to be subtle, calm, and neutral to reflect the calm and positive aspects of our childhood. Then, I attached images of children's lacy dresses and old family photos. These color photos are so aged and faded that they have a yellow-orange tint to them. Finally, I attached transparencies of words, such as *grace*, *giving*, and *simplicity*. These words also reflect the positive aspects of family life.

In *Leaf Monkey* (Appendix, 2), I confronted the prejudices some students face at school. This drawing and monoprint refers to how problematic backgrounds or behavioral problems are sometimes negatively regarded within the educational system. This system is supposed to help children but often contains biases and prejudices. Once, I heard a teacher say *I don't understand why they act like little monkeys with no home training*. This statement and attitude shocked me and made me want to explore this issue.

*Leaf Monkey* was developed by superimposing transparent layers of imagery.

First, I made transparencies from collagraphs of leaves. I layered these leaves between two transparencies of different shades of yellow. Then, I created a new transparency from this layered stack; I combined this with a transparency of a monkey and a transparency of children's doodles. Lastly, I layered transparencies of leaves on top to partially obscure the monkey. The monkey and doodles symbolize children behind a screen of leaves. They can see and hear what is going on around them. Children face many prejudices in school and society. By layering these various images, I intended to convey how children are caught in a jungle of prejudices yet are aware of their status. Teachers need to be role models for social justice in schools. I wanted to impress on my viewer that, as educators, what we do or do not do will greatly impact society.

## **Sculpture**

Next, I decided to experiment with mixed media techniques because it allowed me to expand my visual language. For instance, in *Spirit Sweater* (Appendix, 3) I wanted to address childhood homelessness and used clothing, abaca pulp, thread, and tree branches as my palette of materials.

First, I chose a tree branch that mimicked a human torso with arms and a neck. I used the branch to reference the relationship between humans and our homes within nature. The tree has been used throughout history as a place of refuge and a source of food. Wood is used to make shelter for homes and boats for transportation; and the fruit is used as sustenance. The tree also exists as a home for many animals and insects.

On the tree branch, I fitted a damaged sweater. The torn, dirty garment implies

clothing that is not cared for properly. It is a child's sweater and represents homeless children because they often wear very used and soiled clothing. The use of the garment allowed me to point to the over one million homeless children enrolled in public schools in the United States.

Lastly, I made birds and a nest out of abaca pulp which is from recycled wood. The pulp was used to represent the amount of things in society we waste while some people are in need. Pulp is a combination of paper waste and recycled paper. The nest represents the home, and the birds symbolize children that need lodging.

*Society's Pollutants and Influence 1A, 1B, and 1C* (Appendix, 4, 5, and 6) comprise a three-part series that illustrates how society contributes to the pollution of young minds, bodies, and souls. I created each piece on canvas with a similar process. However, each one deals with a unique problem. *Society's Pollutants and Influence 1A* (Appendix, 4) deals with sexual abuse, *Society's Pollutants and Influence 1B* (Appendix, 5) addresses mental health, and *Society's Pollutants and Influence 1C* (Appendix, 6) deals with poverty.

In each piece, I began by layering antique McCall's clothing patterns onto a canvas. Then, I sewed or glued articles of children's clothing to the canvas. Next, I glued informational newspaper articles to the canvas. The articles documented actual cases involving children in the press. The next step involved encasing the clothing in layers of abaca pulp, tissue papers, transparencies, glazes, gels, starches, and plaster. Again, this encasement referenced the thick skin that at-risk children develop. Lastly, I stenciled on images and symbols of houses, paper dolls, leaves, and trees. The houses represent residency and habitation, the paper dolls represent children, the

leaves represent the changing of seasons and the passage of time, and the tree represents survival and refuge.

Each piece contained similar elements but was unique in its message. For instance, in *Society's Pollutants and Influence 1A* (Appendix, 4) a jumpsuit is the focal point. The text in this piece includes *bad guys out* and is from a newspaper article about the prison release of online child predators. Other text in this piece is the word *AIDS* in different languages. Many times AIDS is spread to children through abuse. Also, molested children often suffer from eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorders, anxiety disorders, and may be depressed or suicidal. In this piece, I used a jumpsuit because they can be aggravating to wear and to take on and off. Molested children often wear extra layers of clothing and outfits that are difficult to get on and off in order to protect themselves.

In *Society's Pollutants and Influence 1B* (Appendix, 5) I chose a pink dress as the focal point. I added the text *mental health, psychology, and bad politics*. These terms came from an article about politicians cutting mental health funding due to lack of public interest. Many mental health issues begin in adolescence. The majority of epidemiological studies show behavioral problems in kids often turn into adult mental health problems. If diagnosed early and treated properly, the lives of children and their families can be improved. I wanted the viewer of this piece to see this connection.

In *Society's Pollutants and Influence 1C* (Appendix, 6) I chose a premature-sized infant t-shirt as the focal point to address poverty. I added text that includes *uninsured, damaged, fear of losing, and economic downturn*. Statistics have shown that many parents delay taking their kids to the doctor or the dentist due to lack of funds. For the

same reason, parents have even refrained from purchasing prescribed medications for their children. Throughout history, the results of economic recession on a child's quality of life can be drastic and impactful for years to come.

In each work, I start with a plan or a theme but I allow for spontaneous decision-making. The flexibility of layering mixed media was well suited to my process. Through experimentally combining different media, I discovered my own creative style and a method to address social issues.

## **Conclusion**

The MIS-IAR Program was an excellent opportunity for me to explore my creativity in depth. It opened up a lot of options for me. It helped me increase student learning results, and gave me the potential for a higher salary. Obtaining this degree has helped me position myself for career advancement. It has been one of the most valuable investments I have made in my career. By earning a master's degree, I am letting my school district know how serious I am about improving the quality of my students' education.

Many of the techniques I have learned have helped me teach my students how to make good judgments, and to make art that reflects their life experiences. Most of all, the Program allowed me to convey new ideas and techniques to my students. It also helped me address and bring attention to their social and behavioral issues. Lastly, it helped me create art that is socially relevant; art that has a purpose and message. I now feel like I help speak for the voiceless.

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## Appendix

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Figure 1. *Gutten Morgen Sister*, drawing and mixed media on two panels, 10.5"x8.5" (each), 2014.





Figure 2. *Leaf Monkey*, drawing and monoprint, 12"x8.5", 2014.



Figure 3. *Spirit Sweater*, mixed media installation, 41"x33"x12", 2014.



Figure 4. *Society's Pollutants and Influence 1A*, mixed media on canvas, 20"x16", 2013.



Figure 5. Society's *Pollutants and Influence 1B*, mixed media on canvas, 20"x16", 2013.



Figure 6. *Society's Pollutants and Influence 1C*, mixed media on canvas, 20"x16", 2013.

## Angel Jones

### Education:

- 2015 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia. Focus Areas: Craft Studies and Sculpture
- 1995 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia

### Awards:

- 2014 All Star Teaching Committee, Norfolk Public Schools, Norfolk, Virginia
- 2013-2014 Teacher of the Year at Jacox Elementary, Norfolk, Virginia
- 2013 Award of Distinction, Norfolk Public Schools, Norfolk, Virginia
- 2010 Award of Accomplishment and Commendation, Norfolk Public Schools, Norfolk, Virginia

### Teaching and Related Experiences:

- 2005-Present Elementary Art Teacher, Jacox Elementary School, Norfolk Public Schools, Norfolk, Virginia
- 2005 Part-time Recreation Aide, Parks and Recreation, Portsmouth, Virginia
- 2004-2005 Visual Designer, Grand Furniture, Chesapeake, Virginia  
Substitute Long Term Art Teacher, Norfolk Public Schools, Norfolk, Virginia

### Professional Organizations or Memberships:

- 2005-Present National Art Education Association, Norfolk, Virginia
- 2005-Present National Education Association, Washington D.C.
- 2005-Present National Federation of Teachers, Norfolk, Virginia

### Exhibitions:

- 2015 *Remnants*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia at Downing Gross Cultural Arts Center, Newport News, Virginia

**Exhibitions (continued):**

2013 *Tidewater Virginia Art Education Association: Downing Gross*  
Cultural Arts Center, Newport News, Virginia (**Third Place**)

2004 *Essence, Marketplace Show, New Orleans Convention Center,*  
New Orleans, Louisiana