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Capturing Memory

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

In my work, I present the moments of true emotional clarity and impactful memories from my life. I strive to provide insight into my experiences and my understanding of others' motivations. The creative process helps safely guide me through memories of the past and understanding of others.

In my abstracted mixed media paintings and crafts, I use bold jewel tones to express strong feelings and passionate emotions. I also incorporate found objects and paints to communicate the layers and varied depth of memories. With the use of these varied materials, I have developed a personal symbolic language that allows me to relay aspects of my life and perceptions. My goal is to explore my past and invite the viewer into my experiences.

Capturing Memory

Introduction

I am an artist and I create work that is highly meaningful to me. Exploring my own life experiences has become the focus of my creativity. I capture and present memories that are deeply personal. I am inspired by my positive and negative perceptions of others, and the moments in life that changed me and that continue to shape me.

As a young child, I was always drawing cartoon princesses, building small playdough animal sculptures, and constructing toys out of odds and ends. When I reached middle school, art had become an integral part of my identity and was something my peers recognized about me. At that age, I became interested in focusing my work on personal subjects and private stories. In high school, in Louisa County, Virginia, I was a member of the National Art Honor Society. At that time, I experimented with an edgy street art aesthetic, trying to find my artistic niche. When it came time for college, I applied to and was accepted in the School of the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). It was during this time that I began to lose confidence in my artwork and my abilities. I was surrounded by a multitude of approaches and philosophies in making art. It was overwhelming for a shy teenager fresh from a small town in a rural community.

I continued to make art during my undergraduate education but began to separate my school projects from my personal artwork. I hoarded and hid my personal work in closets, under beds, and in family member's basements. For class, I would submit my assignments but shield my personal expressions from public view.

I earned my undergraduate degree in art education and am now a teacher in the early stages of my career. I teach elementary art in rural Orange County, Virginia. It was here that I

decided to continue my own education and attempt to regain my creative confidence.

Confidence was something I encouraged in my own students and I started to take my own advice. As I advanced in my coursework, I became more comfortable with my work. I started to openly share my work with other people and accept their judgments. My hidden artwork slowly started to come out of the closets and back into the public arena.

I enrolled in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program to grow as a teacher and artist. My areas of concentration were painting and craft studies. Through these focus areas, I succeeded in gaining teaching experience and my own artistic confidence. I now present and share my personally motivated work with others.

My Aesthetics

My work is about my memories. I visually explore my responses to other people's *internal motivations* and *inner identities*. I define internal motivations as the goals or conscious desires I have seen others try to attain, such as finding long term love, being perceived as a leader, or maintaining constant attention from others. Our inner identities are the deep seated qualities of personality bred from nature and nurtured by life experiences, such as a mild temperament, an optimistic outlook, or dominant role in interpersonal relationships. Once I understand people's motivations and actions, by analyzing what drives them, I am better able to interact with empathy and develop meaningful relationships. I gain my understanding by deconstructing specific memories. I communicate the raw emotions I have felt through gestural marks, layering of media, abstraction of imagery, and symbolism.

The act of creativity helps me analyze events from different perspectives, and assign new meaning and healthy significance to my memories. For example, by analyzing my parents'

internal motivations and inner identities, I determined the reasons why relationships were difficult for them to maintain. Their multiple marriages and divorces happened, but not because they didn't have the goal of success and their motivation for secure married life was present. However, their feelings of anger, contempt, and neglect could not be reconciled. For example, my biological father was motivated to be a married father, but his inner identity required all of his spouse's attention and acclaim. In contrast, my mother spread her focus to all members of the family. This resulted in his inner needs being unmet and a dissolution of a marriage. As a small child, I always knew that they weren't meant to be paired but had little understanding of why. Now as an adult, who has used art as a means of processing memories, I am better able to understand behaviors and the decisions that were made.

My creative approach is expressionistic and personally cathartic. I break imagery down into general shapes and contours to present a distorted reality. The distortion of an image allows me to focus on and enhance emotions. For example, by using jagged shapes and sharp lines to create and segment an animal skull, symbolizing an antagonistic person, I create a visual expression of aggression. Fractured shapes and ill-fitting contours reflect breaks in a person's mental state, the sharp jutting lines cutting through the space symbolize slicing words spoken in rage.

I continuously add gestural marks and layer media as I develop a work. Like memories, my initial marks are sometimes buried beneath subsequent layers of media. This process allows me to emotionally work through my memories and intuitively develop pieces with found objects, like metal machine pieces and wire. The use of objects allows me to express raw emotion by having an extended palette of symbols.

I often use animal skulls as a symbolic reference to animalistic and inner identities of

humans. I feel that there is inherent symbolism in the bone structure of an organism as a direct reference to the formation of their character or personality. Our inner identities shape our actions, just as the bone structure shapes the skin and flesh in physical life. The historical use of skulls in art typically points to the finite and fragile aspect of life. I use the skull as a personal symbol of raw power as I reflect on my own experiences. For instance, to relay complicated and powerful characteristics and personalities, I present frontal views of skulls with jagged edges and distorted shapes.

In layering media, I have developed symbolic associations with objects. I collect old cell phones, metal chains, and multicolored copper wiring, all of which have utilitarian functions. They tell a literal story of the inner workings of machinery or tools of everyday life. I use found metal objects to represent both mind and body. For example, I use wire to symbolize the connections between thoughts and biology. I want to contrast emotional responses of a person with the physical body. I create environments for objects to provide a setting for an emotion or idea. For example, to show a feeling of isolation, I might paint a small skull surrounded by a swirling mass of neutral colors. The swirling brushwork creates a soft and hazy environment that shows the subject surrounded by nothing concrete and emphasizes its remoteness.

In addition to objects, I use cultural and personal symbolism to connect colors to emotions. For example, in our Western society the color black is typically seen to represent power, death, and formality. In my work, I use harsh and aggressive black lines to contrast and divide skull sections and create barriers between objects. Another color, red, is traditionally associated with blood, anger, and sometimes, warfare. I incorporate these symbolic meanings of red as well as my own. I use deep and lush reds to indicate surging joy.

By using gestural marks, layering media, abstracting imagery, and developing

symbolism, I am able to intuitively explore my memories and perceptions. By using similar processes in different media, I make work with purpose and visual consistency.

Influences

My approach to creativity has been most influenced by academic literature concerning art therapy. Cathy Malchiodi is a contemporary licensed art therapist and author of *Art Therapy Sourcebook* (2006). Malchiodi believes art is health-enhancing and can positively impact the artist's life through development of emotional functioning, interpersonal skills, and self-realization. This is a philosophy that I agree with and put into practice in my own creative process. Her book and ideas are my conceptual guide in creating cathartic artworks based on memory. Malchiodi has said, "When words are not enough, we turn to images and symbols to tell our stories. And in telling our stories through art, we find pathways to wellness, recovery and transformation." (Malchiodi, Cathy A. Malchiodi, PHD) Her book's message of how art transcends words through the use of symbolism has specifically influenced my approach to art making.

Another writer whose work has influenced me is Simon Schama, a contemporary historian and art historian who studies the connections between naturalism, humanity, and art. His theory of internal, instinctual connections between the human mind and natural imagery resonates with me. He stresses that connections between a human being's mental understanding and passionate desire for a place within the natural world is innate. His book, *Landscape and Memory* (1996), has influenced my work by adding credence and validation to the concept of these connections. My work incorporates imagery of nature and is a study of human emotion through the deconstruction of memory.

When looking at artists and art history, I am most inspired by the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century movements of Abstract Expressionism and Symbolism. Their influence can be seen in my use of gestural brushwork, abstraction, and symbolism.

Abstract Expressionism developed around the concept of distortion and exaggeration of forms and objects for emotional effect based on the artist's personal experience. The use of bright and pure color, textured surfaces, and gestural marks were prominent. Some paintings were meant to represent the true and emotional nature of an object or person. The artists were seeking to show a profound emotion or universal theme. Willem de Kooning (1904-1997) described this emotion based art when he said, "I'm not interested in 'abstracting' or taking things out or reducing painting to design, form, line, and color. I paint this way because I can keep putting more things in it - drama, anger, pain, love, a figure, a horse, my ideas about space. Through your eyes it again becomes an emotion or idea." (Art Story Foundation).

In de Kooning's *Seated Woman* (1940) he redefined how a woman's form could be presented. De Kooning used gestural brushstrokes and bold colors to create his abstracted figures of women, which became a recurring theme. His use of physical and gestural brushstrokes created a new, more aggressive interpretation of the female form. I have also incorporated de Kooning's approach to fluid brushstrokes and abstracted forms in my artwork. Highly activated surfaces that emphasize emotional turmoil is something I strive to create in my layered paintings. In addition, his approach to figurative abstraction has encouraged my presentation of human and animal bodies.

My artwork has also been influenced by the Symbolist art and literary movement. The philosophy was based on the concept that art should embody an emotion or idea. Symbolists also believed that the artist can present a portion of an idea and allow the viewer to draw their

own conclusions. In the Symbolist poet, Stéphane Mallarmé's (1842-1892) words, "To name an object is to suppress three-quarters of the enjoyment to be found in the poem... suggestion, that is the dream." (Myers, 1) For example, in my subject matter the person represented in the animal skull is known to me in a highly personal way. However, I keep the person's actual identity unknown because it allows me the freedom of depicting them in an honest way with both positives and negatives. It also allows the viewer to personally interpret the image.

An artist who used symbolist approaches in his paintings was Gustav Klimt (1862-1918). He often used symbols of nature to express universal themes like death and eroticism in his work. In his painting, *The Three Ages of Woman* (1905), three females are depicted at different stages of life, from childhood to old age. The young woman, depicted holding a child on the right, has blooming spring flowers in her hair. The picked blooming flower provides a connection between the bloom of youth with the undertone of death. When a flower is picked it immediately begins to wither and die, just as when humans are born we begin the process of dying. The slouched crone represents the passage of time, old age experienced at the end of the human life cycle. In the child we see the beginning of life and all its great possibilities. Klimt's painting is a narrative of the transition from life to death that we all experience. Like Klimt, and the symbolist philosophy, I also address universal themes. I use nature in my work to represent memories.

The range of influences on my work and approach led to my process of expression. Art therapy provides me with a sense of direction and the reason for making artwork that holds pieces of myself in the paint. Schema gives me a sense of validation and purpose that what I am making holds value. De Kooning's work and the aesthetics of Abstract Expressionism create a sense of emotional relief that my process of layering, altering, and gestural marks can create an

expression. Finally, the meaningful beauty of Klimt's Symbolist work inspires me to visually express all the things I can't say out loud. Each influence pushes and enables me to reach a greater potential.

On Painting

My painting is based on creating visual interpretations of emotional clarity and impactful memories from my life. By looking at a completed work, I gain a greater understanding of my experiences and others' motivations. The creative process I have developed, through research into art therapy, helps safely guide me through memories of the past and understanding of others.

My process starts with quick, light pencil sketches, followed by thicker lines that delineate spaces and patterns. On the first painting layer, I add opaque and transparent washes of acrylic paint, allowing some of the linear marks to show through. At this point, I often add found metal pieces. Next, I develop the imagery and its environment. I use bold paint colors and expressive gestural marks with various sizes of brushes and paint scrapers to create textures and color mixtures. The final layer is a thin sheen of poured clear acrylic sealant. I use this slightly glossy coating to create a sense of unity. With this process, I want to show the complicated depth of memory through the layering of paint and found materials.

In my painting *Deer* (Appendix, 1), I present an interpretation of my mother. My mother strives for inner calm because of her constant emotional turmoil, the consistent cycle of guilt that is based on a past she cannot change. I symbolized her as a female deer. As a native Virginian I have lived nearby white tail deer all my life. I find them beautiful, have noticed they are quick to flee, and are often found on the outskirts. My mother is a beautiful introvert and flight over fight is her natural first response to confrontation.

To present this idea of delicacy, beauty, and chosen seclusion, I created a cold gray background with swirling tones of bright colors to invoke the feeling of overwhelming interaction that I know she experiences in social interactions. The raised areas within the bright colors of the backgrounds are created by collaging freeform sketches from my sketchbook. I created these pencil drawings of shapes and lines while on the phone with my mother, in her voice I could hear anxiety and I translated it into my artwork.

Stag (Appendix, 2) represents a man whose relationship I cherish. I didn't know the security of connection and friendship until I met him. He is complex, warm, and compassionate. The strength of emotion and the interlocking of lives was new to me, and sometimes frightening. To present his identity, I chose an animal skull of a warm blooded creature that can also be dangerous. A stag is a herd bound animal living off a vegetarian diet, but will charge and use its fierce horns when under threat. My color choices of fiery reds and oranges reflect the vibrant passion of a new love. The overlapping magenta and green circles represent the merging of two identities in the same space. When finished, I realized that the painting wasn't completely representative of the man but of my response to or view of relationships.

Steer (Appendix, 3) is representative of a masculine, authoritative energy based on my previous experiences with father figures. This piece is inspired by multiple men who have played or tried to play father-like roles in my life. In this painting, I reconciled my experience with father figures with the knowledge that my perspective is biased. In the process of creating *Steer*, I used small metal rods and attached them to the canvas in a disjointed line. The rods are located at the top and bottom left side of the painting, I used paper and gel medium to build the found objects into the canvas's surface. This symbolizes a broken machine, the parts are no longer able to perform their function. I surrounded the masculine steer skull with softer more

traditionally feminine yellow and pink tints to show the contrast of the two genders.

Goat (Appendix, 4) symbolizes a woman who has profound impact on my life. Her influential decisions greatly affect me. I do not think she is aware of the control she has over her family. I chose a goat for its symbolic stubborn nature, the stubby horns for passive aggression. Goats are intelligent survivors who plough through life constantly scavenging. Like a goat, my friend seems to be rooting around in her life. This realization made me able to gain patience and want to grow a relationship with her at her own pace.

During the process of creating *Goat*, I placed broken pieces of old cellphones and thin curling wires to reference the lack of communication I have experienced with this woman. As I was creating this piece, the concept of communication gained greater importance and became a goal for me during interactions with her. The color choices in this piece are significant to me. I used burnt reds to show the pent up aggression, blurring orange-browns for the muddy anxiety I imagine she feels, and barely visible through the over layer's surface are calming blues and greens for the person I think she could be.

In these paintings I explored my past. I have difficulty connecting to people on extended emotional levels, and I am consistently pulling back and away to avoid relationships. I have found that painting is a way to share myself with others in a safe space. From this experience, I began to explore the possibilities of other media. I think that art is a contribution and greatly enhances quality of life, and sharing in art with other people is what I find joyful. The joyful, safe space that art creates is what drew me into the creative process, the self-labeling of artist, and the art education profession.

On Crafts

As I explored book arts, I began to develop my own understanding of what a book could be and adapted my approach to painting to making books. Like painting, bookmaking holds great opportunity for communicating ideas. My focus of representing inner identities and internal motivations translated to the secrets hidden within the pages of a book or enclosed within a protective cover. My painting approach of layering paints, including found materials and adding symbolic color, evolved with the creation of books.

I created a wooden box series, called *3 Phases* (Appendix, 5), to represent the stages of life transition I had researched in Symbolist paintings. The three phases of human life are a universal theme: childhood, adulthood, and old age. The smallest of the wooden boxes (lower right) is a combination of pastel colors and contains a small *piano hinge* book with child-like drawings. The piano hinge is a bookbinding technique which uses a thin cylindrical object woven through symmetrical cuts along the page edges to form a flexible spine. On the pages, I created drawings using my non-dominant hand to show the shaky lines and disjointed figures made by child artists. The middle-sized box (top center) is painted with a garish mix of colors on an uneven surface, representing the chaotic busy dash through life that is adulthood. Inside, I made another fitted piano hinge box filled with lists from my own life. Sometimes, it feels that being an adult is just a harried attempt at finishing one to-do list before beginning another. I created the last box (center) with bright colors peeking out from behind chipped and faded washes of grey and white paint. This symbolized the flashes of youth and experience wrapped in the neutrality of old age, the apathy felt after the major life events have occurred. The piano hinge book within this piece is bursting out from the box. The pages of the suspended piano hinge book are blank which symbolizes that old age doesn't mean that the story is over yet.

My piece *Heart Story* (Appendix, 6) was an experiment in playing with the concept of

what makes a book a book. I was encouraged to discover my own understanding of what gives a book value both aesthetically and conceptually. I have always been a voracious reader and have great esteem for the written word. This piece is representative to me in aesthetic terms of what a book is, a physical definition instead of a written one. In *Heart Story*, I used string and needles to stitch together many pages from various reference sources, such as maps, dictionaries, and encyclopedias. The pages represent the amount of knowledge found in books. I then used string, wire, and brute force to crush the pages together and permanently bind them with tight coils. The compression of the pages into a vaguely heart-shaped form symbolizes the compression of information or a story into the pages of a book, entire worlds constrained inside a small space.

In my standing books, *Coyote* (Appendix, 7 and 7a) and *Chimp* (Appendix, 8), I merged my two focus disciplines. The books were created by attaching paintings of skulls as covers. I used heavy industrial metal hinges. The hinges are rigid and keep the book closed. I used metal pipes and fittings to create a heavy stands that support both books, the stands are identical in material and model.

Coyote and *Chimp* is a series based on two friends. *Coyote* is representative of a young man who is unable to communicate effectively and seems to float through life resigned to whatever happens next. I chose a coyote skull lacking a jawbone to reference the lack of communication in his relationships with family and friends. After reflecting on this finished piece it occurred to me that this individual wasn't trying to be secretive, he didn't have the ability to speak his thoughts. *Chimp* symbolizes a person who consistently tests people's boundaries for fun. This person will try to manipulate those around him and act as impishly as a chimp often does.

My experience in book arts has given me an opportunity to engage a new discipline. I have benefited from my experience and plan on continuing to create books. While painting will always be my main creative outlet and the focus of my development as an artist, the combination of approaches has led to a more exploratory art making process.

Conclusion

As an artist, I feel that this experience has given me insight into my inner identity and internal motivations. By creating artwork as a way of decoding people and memories I have been forced to use that same insight on myself. My inner identity is of a creature being naively happy, with the intense desire to be free. My internal motivations seem to be driven by the impulse to hide from confrontation and a fear of never being good enough. These reflections have not always been pleasant and have given me goals for change.

I enrolled in the MIS-IAR Program in order to grow as a professional artist, participate in critiques, and have a solo show of work. The Program has helped me to develop as an artist. My body of artwork will continue to grow and evolve as I do. I will continue developing my aesthetics and my personal visual language of symbolism. Continued education and exploration in my chosen field has given me a stronger foundation in fundamental knowledge and greater personal confidence.

The program has also affected my teaching through exploration of varied materials and new disciplines that I can implement in my curriculum development. Working within crafts, specifically book arts, has changed my approach to three-dimensional projects with elementary and secondary students. The multitude of methods, techniques, and disciplines has shown me what is possible in the art classroom. The program also gave me access to different attitudes,

perspectives on teaching, and the opportunity to see art as a constantly evolving journey.

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Appendix

List of Images

- Figure 1. *Deer*, mixed media, 24"x 24", 2015.
- Figure 2. *Stag*, mixed media, 30"x 30", 2016.
- Figure 3. *Steer*, mixed media, 30"x 30", 2016.
- Figure 4. *Goat*, mixed media, 30"x 30", 2016.
- Figure 5. *3 Phases*, mixed media, 14"x 12" x 10", 2016.
- Figure 6. *Heart Story*, mixed media, 12" x 10" x 4", 2015.
- Figure 7. *Coyote*, mixed media, 24"x 12" x 4", 2016.
- Figure 7a. *Coyote* (detail), mixed media, 12"x 12" x 4", 2016.
- Figure 8. *Chimp* (detail), mixed media, 12"x 12" X 4", 2016.



Figure 1. *Deer*, mixed media, 24"x 24", 2015.



Figure 2. *Stag*, mixed media, 30"x 30", 2016.



Figure 3. *Steer*, mixed media, 30"x 30", 2016.



Figure 4. *Goat*, mixed media, 30"x 30", 2016.



Figure 5. *3 Phases*, mixed media, 14"x 12" x 10", 2016.



Figure 6. *Heart Story*, mixed media, 12"x 10" x 4", 2015.



Figure 7. *Coyote*, mixed media, 24"x 12" x 4", 2016.



Figure 7a. *Coyote* (detail), mixed media, 12"x 12" x 4", 2016.



Figure 8. *Chimp* (detail), mixed media, 12"x 12" X 4", 2016.

Morgan Molenda

EDUCATION

- 2017 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
(Painting and Craft Materials)
- 2012 Bachelor of Fine Arts in Art Education
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
(Art Education major and Anthropology minor)

CERTIFICATION

- 2012-2017 Virginia State Collegiate Professional License, Visual Arts, PreK-12

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- 2015-Present Elementary School Art Educator
Gordon-Barbour Elementary School, Orange County Public Schools, VA
- 2013-2015 Middle School Art Educator and IB MYP (International Baccalaureate
Middle Years Program) School Coordinator
Poe Middle School, Fairfax County Public Schools, VA

RELATED EXPERIENCE

- 2014 Teacher, Art 21st Century Grant Summer Program
Poe Middle School, Fairfax, VA
- 2009 Arts and Drama Child Development Specialist
Triple C Camp, Charlottesville, VA

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

- 2012-Present National Art Education Association

EXHIBITIONS

- 2017 *Capturing Memory*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary
Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University,
The Lightwell, Orange, VA
- 2008 *LCHS* (Louisa County High School) *Student Work*
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