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Organic Space

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

by

Lisa Gardner

Bachelor of Fine Arts, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, 1998

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
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Artist Statement

My works evolve from a concrete vision but tend to lack recognizable imagery. Color and texture are central to my process. By isolating the element of color, I strive for purely formal qualities in my color field paintings. Working on textured surfaces, such as burlap, allows me to capture textural elements, which further adds to the aesthetic components of my art. The lack of realistic imagery provides an opportunity for the viewer to personally interpret the visual elements. It is my objective that during the aesthetic experience, the viewer becomes captivated by the unique ways that colors play within tiny sections of the composition.

Organic Space

Introduction

Being in a classroom of elementary students everyday caused me to long for adult interaction and socialization with working artists who were experimenting with new techniques. The Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) Off-Campus Program offered through Virginia Commonwealth University was the perfect fit. Being a teacher is a huge job in itself but this program made taking graduate classes doable while still working.

It seemed natural to begin my MIS journey soon after earning my undergraduate degree. By not skipping a beat, I never felt like I was playing catch-up or was clueless to new approaches, or not thinking about art making. Being active in graduate classes proved rewarding in my personal life, as well as my teaching workplace. Pushing myself to evolve and produce art challenged me. This in turn benefited my students through my own inspiration and excitement.

In 2000, I took my first graduate painting class. The hardest decision with any studio class always seemed to be finding an initial starting point. Thinking back to my prior painting experiences, I decided I needed a change. Throughout school, I had been trained in the techniques of realism, which worked well for me at the time. The only problem was it wasn't fun or fulfilling. I knew there had to be a way to create art and enjoy it at the same time. Thus, the search for a more

spontaneous, painterly approach to art making began. The answer would come not as an immediate change but developed through a gradual process.

Personal Aesthetics

Looking back at the many pieces of art I have made and purchased over the years, I find one common element - an attention to color. Colors attract me. My work focuses on their boldness, their softness, their juxtaposition, the way they dance together. Noted artist Wolf Kahn (b. 1927) eloquently described one of his paintings as “a celebration of color.”¹ His statement echoes my ultimate goal for my work.

Nature has also been an inspiration for my paintings, photography, and prints. I often take images from nature as a way to begin thinking about a specific place. This initial inspiration informs my composition by way of color choices, areas of light, and movement throughout my piece. My final goal isn't to represent this place realistically but to use the elements of art to instead represent my perceptions.

My works have slowly progressed from representing natural elements in exaggerated colors to abstract fields of color. Originally, I felt I had to have an object or recognizable image in order for my art to be valid. Through guidance from professors and my own evolutionary processes, I started to move from the

¹ Wolf Kahn. *Wolf Kahn's America: an artist's travels* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 2003), p.80.

image to organic color *spaces*. At this point, I felt free to concentrate on what ultimately is my passion, color.

In *Growth* (Appendix, 1), I painstakingly worked on getting all of my brushstrokes smooth and flowing in the same direction while also concentrating on seamlessly mixing colors together. Each controlled brushstroke was barely visible to the viewer. I applied the oil paint in even, relatively thin layers. At this point, I was painting on smooth canvases while also trying to retain a flat surface, but this soon changed. I introduced another element to my paintings: texture.

A significant stage in my development began when I altered my supports and started to paint on burlap. Once I started painting on burlap, such as in *Horizon* (Appendix, 2), I used thicker layers of paint because it wasn't possible to have a flat, even surface. This change in surface altered the direction of my art making and challenged my usual delicate color interplay.

My actual painting style changed in effect. The recesses in the burlap added wonderful shadows, which in turn made the colors seem richer. I no longer painted gingerly while trying to glide each color gracefully into the next. I was forced to be aggressive so the paint would fill the crevices in the burlap. My brushes as well as my brushstrokes became larger and more demanding. Without having to be concerned with smooth application and mixing, I was now able to focus more on the juxtapositions of colors and their relationship to each other as viewed from a distance.

By applying burlap over my canvases, my art making wasn't just centered on color anymore, texture and light became added elements that would ultimately enhance my focus. I changed from wanting my works to be viewed closely to wanting them to be viewed from a further distance.

Artists of Influence

Although Kahn's works possess a greater "sense of place and moment"², my overall color juxtapositions are inspired by his works. Kahn isn't afraid to use bold, straight out of the tube, pure color. My great admiration of his palette is evident to me when I revisit some of the color choices I made in *Horizon*. The vibrant warm colors of orange, red, and yellow are reminiscent of Kahn's choices of strong colors.

Although his goal was to visually take viewers to the places he had visited in his travels, he also wanted his colors to have a voice of their own. As I view Kahn's works, I do feel as if I am standing in a very specific place but I also get excited at the colors he has chosen. He doesn't use typical hues and tones; he uses vibrant, playful color combinations that move me for reasons unrelated to his **places**.

As biographer John Updike said of Kahn's works, "the art, of course, must finally lift free of the person, enjoying the enigma of its own being, without the

² Wolf Kahn. *Wolf Kahn's America: an artist's travels* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 2003), p.9.

artist as commentator.”³ Of his own work Kahn said, “The idea isn’t, after all, to be a copycat, but to use nature, its chaos and its geometry, as a jumping-off point for the imagination.”⁴ I have also used nature as a jumping off point in my art. For example, *Habitat* (Appendix, 3) was inspired from my memories.

Through my windows and sliding glass doors, I see sunsets, sunrises, and awesome atmospheric images each day. Living on the Elizabeth River my entire life has ingrained these organic images of landscapes and skies in my brain. It is second nature for me to use these references of nature from memory. In doing so, my concentration is in the color combinations I am making at the time because the hints at nature come intuitively.

I was intrigued to read that Kahn, like me, would sometimes give himself a specific task, such as “do a picture that celebrates the color gray.”⁵ Although he had a point of departure, the rest was open to his imagination. In *Water Light* (Appendix, 4), the only objective I gave myself was to celebrate the color blue. I have received multiple comments from viewers who tell me this painting reminds them of Claude Monet’s (1840-1926) *Water-Lilies* (1914). There is a corner section in this painting that seems to be filled with light. The light appears to either be shining through the blue surface or reflecting off of the surface. I believe that using various shades of blue and having sharp contrasts within

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p.40.

⁵ Ibid., p.46.

the field of blue creates a watery feel. My brushwork in this painting--quick, short strokes--also mimics the Impressionism of Monet.

Mark Rothko (1903-1970) is another artist who inspires me with his celebration of color. I was first attracted to his paintings because of his confident use of color. However, author Jacob Baal-Teshuva states that "in fear of being described too one-dimensionally, Rothko deliberately denied that the medium of color interested him."⁶ Without knowing Rothko's true intentions, to merely view one of his works, you might think he was strictly concerned with color.

I am drawn to his pieces that have highly-contrasted juxtapositions of colors, such as *Saffron* (1957). The separation and space created by these colors makes the paintings seem full of movement. Rothko knew how to use cool colors and warm colors to create pictorial space within his works. He also had an uncanny way of using unusual color combinations to create a successful composition, as seen in *No. 3 (Magenta, Black, Green and Orange)* (1949).

Painting

My painting style has changed significantly over the years. As stated previously, the subject of my paintings was most representational in my earliest endeavors. *Distant* (Appendix, 5) is an example of a waterscape image that contains relatively natural hues painted in a realistic manner. This watercolor is a loose representation of the view across the river as seen from my backyard. It is

⁶ Jacob Baal-Teshuva. *Mark Rothko: Pictures As Drama* (Germany: Taschen, 2003), p. 57.

true to form and contains some expression and exaggeration while remaining completely recognizable. I painted this composition before I began my evolution into focusing on color. It serves its purpose, to represent a waterscape, but I feel it lacks energy and excitement. Around this time is when I felt I needed a change.

Through advice, I accepted the fact that color in itself, without a recognizable image, was acceptable as the subject of my paintings. As my focus turned more towards formalism, my images became less evident and more abstracted. My oil painting *Red Sky* (Appendix, 6) is an example of mixing colors to create an abstract field of color, while using a sunset as inspiration. Since the sunset was my starting point, I basically knew my palette would consist of warm, rich colors like oranges, yellows, and deep reds.

Basically, my attention was focused on color mixing, juxtaposition, and color interplay. I concentrated on keeping specific areas light while overlapping colors to create shadows with rich color. At times, intuition guided my choices as to which colors would overlap. Overall, this painting has proven to be one that viewers seem drawn to most often. I believe that strong, warm colors evoke a feeling of warmth, which is comforting to many.

As my views on aesthetics changed, my paintings changed. The experiences gained in each painting class gave me the confidence to try new approaches. The further I strayed from my safe zone, the better I felt about my art making. Keeping my imagery realistic and representational came naturally

and was easy for me. On the other hand, trying to paint a successful work while focusing only on color was a challenge. Without being pushed to try something new by my peers, my painting style would not have evolved.

Photography

Photography has always interested me. I enjoyed taking classes that taught me how to manually manipulate my images using my traditional SLR camera. However, up until this time I had never taken a digital photography class. I had only manually developed my own negatives and prints. Ultimately, I found the changes I was able to make with the computer were immediate and more forgiving than the previous ways of altering my images.

When I took my first digital photography class, I realized this medium had possibilities for me. Digital photography allowed me to keep my focus on nature, while still being able to manipulate color and vary the degree of abstraction. For example, I began by taking pictures of a large shell from various angles. I selected one digital image, *Shell 1* (Appendix, 7), and edited it using Adobe PhotoShop. This program was very much like painting to me. I was able to change the color, the contrast levels, and the overall appearance of the image. I wanted to give this image an abstract painterly feel. I did this by blurring edges, smudging and stretching areas, and blending colors using the program's tools.

In the second image in the series, *Shell 2* (Appendix, 8), I cropped the shell. This allowed me to create an abstract, organic composition that seemed

shell-like but could be enjoyed for its purely formal qualities. I found that digital photography is a medium that I could delve deeper into while still staying true to my love for abstraction. It is a process which allows me to take photographs but present them as a painterly interpretation of nature while celebrating color. I had found a way to blend my painting and photography into one body of work.

Printmaking

Some of the more developed ideas found in my paintings, such as color combinations and organic space, can find their roots in my printmaking. Classes taught by Warren Corrado proved to be a time of great artistic growth for me. In these classes, I was able to combine my painting, drawing, and printmaking skills. The variety of prints created during this time ranged from abstracted landscapes, *Rich Earth* (Appendix, 9), to organic fields of color, *Sanguine* (Appendix, 10) and *Fever* (Appendix, 11).

Rich Earth was created by applying oil-based inks onto Plexiglas. My intent of creating a landscape was echoed by the severe horizontal format, as well as the vibrant color choices. By using strong blues, greens, and browns, I made it hard for the viewer to see anything other than a landscape. The application of texture to the layers of sky, foliage, and earth with various tools was meant to create movement and interest. This monotype was one that was easy for the viewer to grasp and identify with.

On the other hand, *Sanguine* and *Fever* were pure studies of color, space, and movement. These monotypes were created by taping off a 3"x3" square of transparency paper and applying very watery gouache paint inside of the area. Using a small paintbrush, I was able to swirl colors and move them around mostly as intended. At times, some mixing and bleeding happened without my assistance. After allowing a short time for some of the major puddles to start to dry, I printed these squares onto damp paper. These miniature studies were some of my favorite works created in my printmaking classes.

Of all of my works, these drift the farthest from nature. The only hint at nature can be found in their names. *Sanguine* consists of cool hues of blue and violet with sharp areas of a deep magenta and red. Areas of light can be found where the colors were diluted more with water. The contrast of translucency and rich color adds interest and movement in the small format. *Fever* also exhibited these qualities while using warm hues of red, orange, and yellow.

With monotypes, I felt like I was making miniature paintings. Since the scale was small, I found I could print many works during a single class, which lent time for experimentation and a maturing of ideas and techniques. The differences between the very representational landscape compared to the abstract color studies exemplify the playful attitude I had while printmaking.

Conclusion

The long process of completing my MIS degree has proven to be completely worth all the hard work. I am already thinking about what classes I want to take next. I know that oil painting will be in my future, as well as printmaking. I'm excited about what I will produce knowing that I am free from time limits and pressure to produce. With this new collection of works, my future plans are to continue showing and selling my art.

In closing, the MIS program has given me renewed inspiration and invaluable ideas in my life as an artist and teacher. The classes challenged me to approach art making in new and different directions. Without being around active artists who also teach, I don't think I would have gained all of the priceless exchanges of information and ideas. I know that this revival in my creative spirit will greatly benefit my students.

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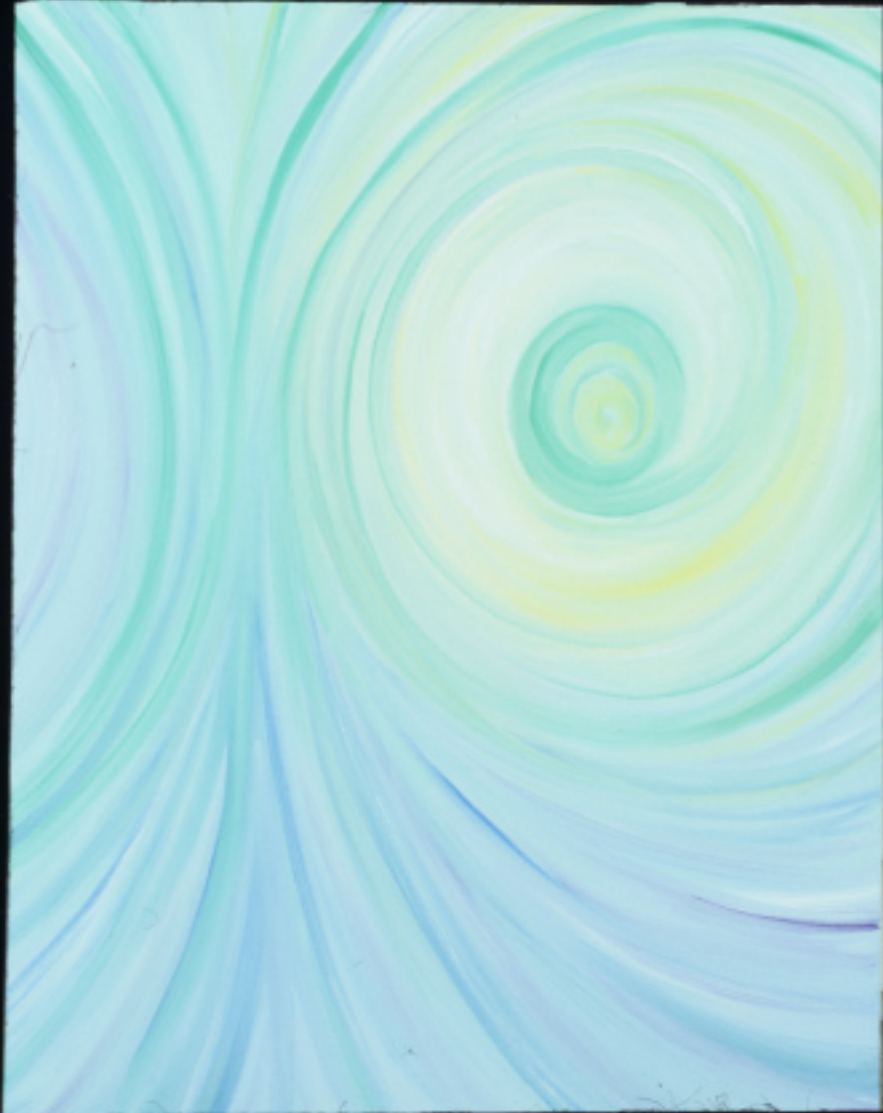
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Appendix

Slide List

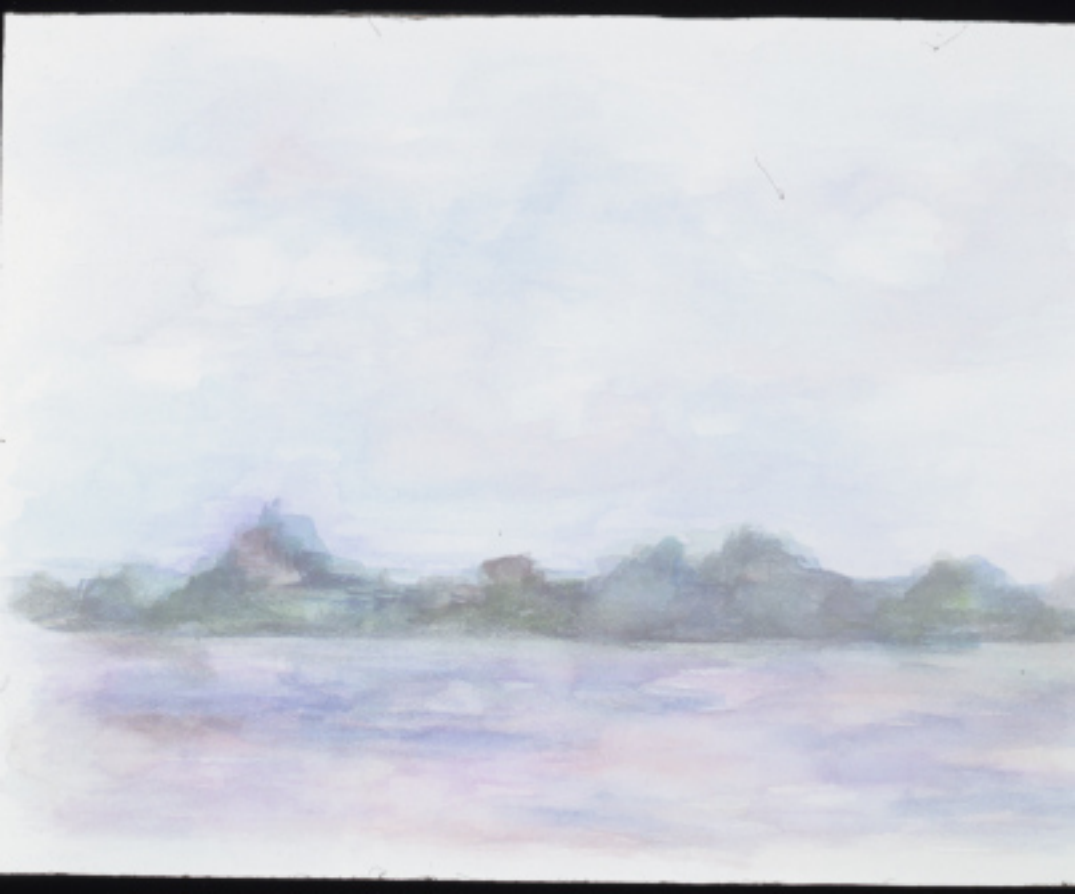
1. *Growth*, oil on canvas, 30" x 24", 2002.
2. *Horizon*, oil on burlap, 24" x 30", 2006.
3. *Habitat*, oil on burlap, 24" x 30", 2004.
4. *Water Light*, oil on burlap, 16" x 20", 2006.
5. *Distant*, watercolor, 10.75" x 14.6", 2003.
6. *Red Sky*, oil on burlap, 16" x 20", 2004.
7. *Shell 1*, digital image, 7" x 5.25", 2004.
8. *Shell 2*, digital image, 5.25" x 7", 2004.
9. *Rich Earth*, monotype, 4.5" x 8.25", 2003.
10. *Sanguine*, monotype, 3" X 3", 2003.
11. *Fever*, monotype, 3" x 3", 2003.





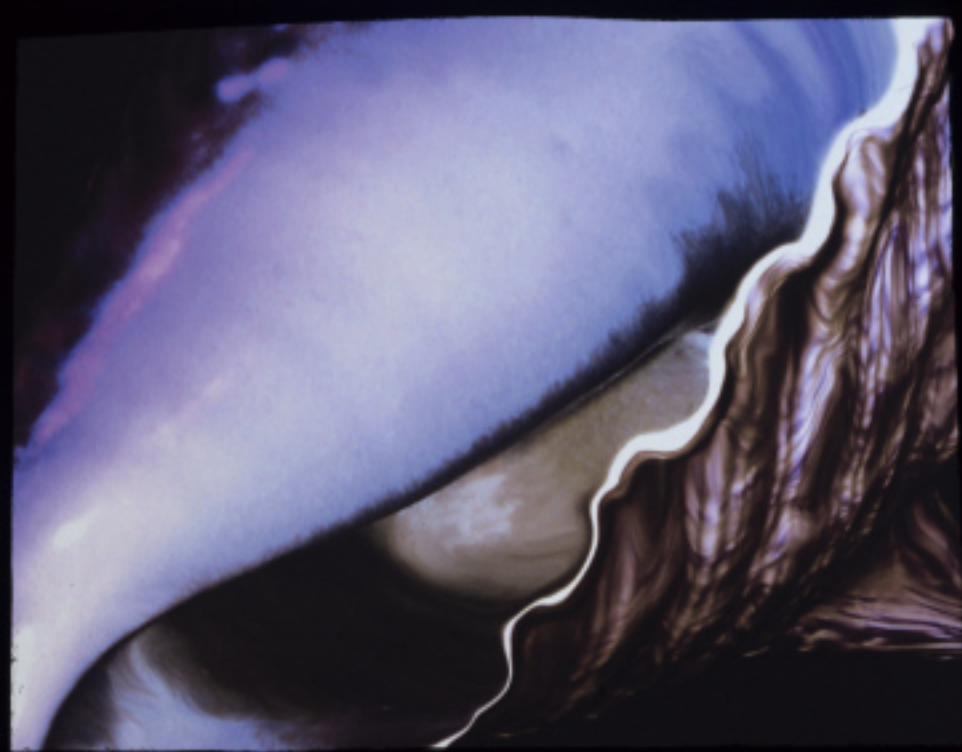


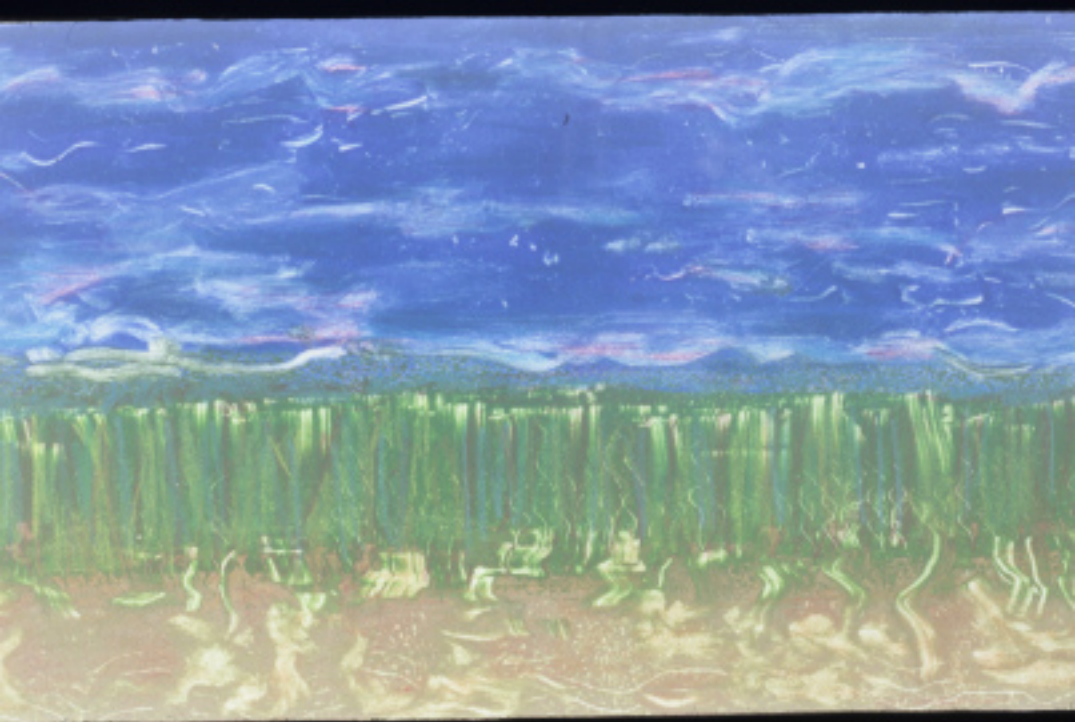


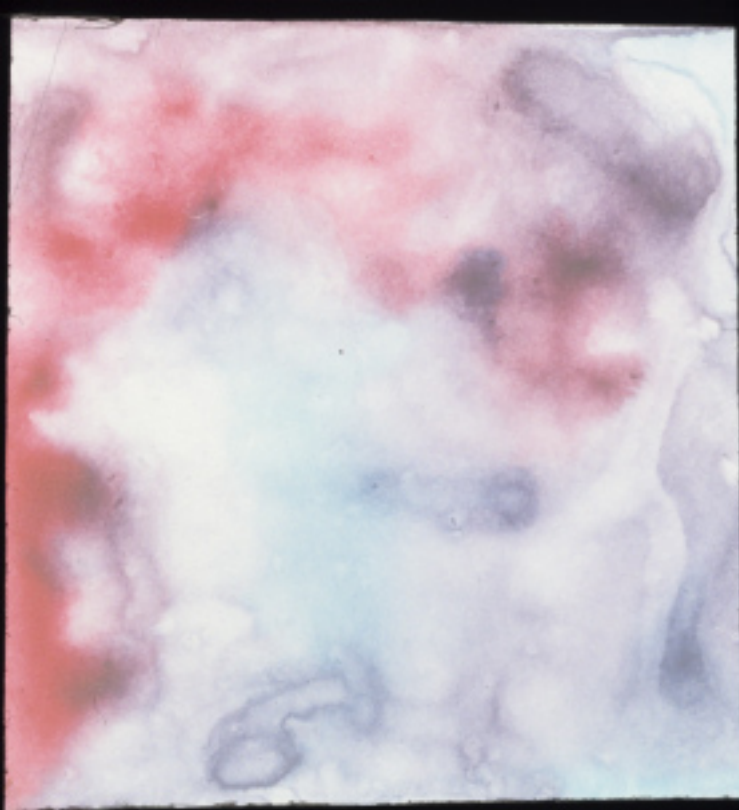


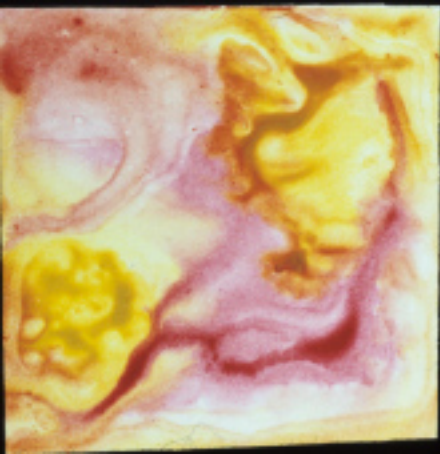












LISA GARDNER

EDUCATION:

- | | |
|------|--|
| 2007 | Master of Interdisciplinary Studies, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA. Concentrations in Painting and Photography. |
| 1998 | Bachelor of Fine Arts, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA. Concentration in Painting. |

CERTIFICATION: Art Education PreK-12, Collegiate Professional License.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE:

- | | |
|--------------|--|
| 2005-present | Art Teacher, Churchland Middle School, Portsmouth City Public Schools, Portsmouth, VA. |
| 1998-2005 | Art Teacher, Churchland Elementary School, Portsmouth City Public Schools, Portsmouth, VA. |

RELATED EXPERIENCE:

- | | |
|--------------|--|
| 2005-present | After School Art Enrichment Teacher, Churchland Middle School, Portsmouth, VA. |
| 2006 | Participant, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Fall Institute for Educators, Richmond, VA. |
| 2006 | Art Curriculum Writer, Portsmouth City Public Schools, Portsmouth, VA. |
| 2005 | Participant, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Summer Institute for Educators, Richmond, VA. |