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From the Edge

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

by

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Artist's Statement

Paintings and drawings are the physical representations of my dialogue with the world around me. Art is how I connect to what is too large, or too vague, or too personally meaningful to express in any other way.

Space and its transformation by light and color have always been central to this dialogue. I am particularly intrigued by spatial ambiguity. Space exists for us only in how it relates to us and so, space changes. One viewpoint or state of mind might make space seem freeing, while another makes the same space feel confining. Barriers are sometimes delineated, sometimes obscured. At other times, they are broken. This has a political implication which appears in my work as fissures, fences, compression, and collapse.

The space of my inner self, the space outside, and the space between the two are relationships that drive what I paint and draw. My art is the place where I acknowledge the cracks in the ice and where I try to keep from falling through when the ground opens up. Shifting planes are where I try to keep my balance while peeking through the cracks and over the edge.

From the Edge

Lingering Images

The content of my artwork represents lifelong concerns. It draws upon images that have always evoked a strong personal response.

In my first memory, I am an infant in a crib waking to the morning. I see the hard edges of brown, wooden slats and the folds of a pale yellow blanket. I am barely aware of myself. I am mostly aware of the light dancing across the room and through the slats to me.

I am five when, in the green grass of summer, I find a rubber ball. It is painted milky white with swirling lines of vivid colors. I pick away at the exterior hoping to find a cache of multi-colored rubber bands inside. Instead, there is rich, porous, burnt sienna rubber. The beauty of the contrast takes my breath away.

At fifteen, I am walking home from school. Telephone workers have draped their efforts overhead in heavy tarps for the night. Cables poke through the edges. I stop to stare at the lovely forms.

Decades later, these images of light, color, contrast, and edges cling like icons to my memory. The layers of connection and separation and the hidden secrets they represent are at the core of the artwork that has followed.

Arriving at a Personal Aesthetic

It was as an undergraduate that this preoccupation with spatial tension first surfaced and took an abstract turn. An incorrigible scavenger, I had found a doorknob and lock set that, to me, possessed beauty in both form and meaning. At my professor's prompting, I began a series of twenty-five works based upon that object. A pencil rendering gave way to colored drawings in which I explored the movement, recesses, and reflection of the doorknob. By the sixth piece, a painting, the object was no longer recognizable. It had become a series of stacked planes of unrelated colors. My exploration of shifting space, color, and light, of separation and connection and the ways in which these things represent us had begun.

Paying Homage to Influential Artists

During that time, three artists in particular captured my attention and became a continual inspiration to me: Edouard Manet, Paul Cezanne, and Richard Diebenkorn.

Painting at the University of Michigan, I stepped back from my easel to find the School of Art's Chancellor watching over my shoulder. He complimented my work and mentioned that it reminded him of Richard Diebenkorn. Since his was a new name to me, I began to research Diebenkorn's work. In him, I found an artist confronting issues of spatial relationships similar to my own. The layered, painterly history of Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park* canvasses held great appeal for me, as did the multicolored edges that resulted. His inclusion of painted lines gave Diebenkorn's paintings the look of plans to which one is exposed in stages. In his "Notes to Myself on Beginning a Painting," a list

of numbered statements includes: 1. Attempt what is not certain. Certainty may or may not come later. It may then, be a valuable delusion. 2. The pretty, initial position which falls short of completeness is not to be valued – except as a stimulus for further moves. 3. Do search. But in order to find other than what is searched for. 4. Use and respond to the initial fresh qualities but consider them absolutely expendable.¹ The process reflected in these statements was influential in my own approach, and the notion of history and gradual revelation found its way into my work. In my painting, *Counterweight* (Appendix 1, No.1), of 2001, Diebenkorn's influence is clearly evident.

In Edouard Manet, I found a masterful and sensuous handling of paint that lent an immediacy and power to the medium. Manet's ability to describe the edge of a fold or the freshness of a flower with one stroke is something to which I aspire. One can feel his hand push the brush so that the paint becomes his voice. This, coupled with Manet's strenuous compression of space and alteration of context, taught me much about painting and its ability to communicate in a deeply primal and profound way. *White Light* (Appendix 1, No.2), a piece I later painted in the MIS program in 2002, is an example of my effort to capture the fresh brushwork and compressed space of a Manet.

However, the strongest influence for me is that of Paul Cezanne. His ability to define space with color and to show varied views and sensations simultaneously give his work a presence that is always with me. I can sense the earnestness of his struggle for a purely visual truth. There is a continual reorientation of space in his paintings in

¹Jane Livingston, *The Art of Richard Diebenkorn* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1997), p.115

which the object and ground become interchangeable. The objects are never quite still, and the viewpoint is never quite fixed. This idea of shifting the equilibrium so that the viewer's experience of the piece changes with one's physical and emotional positioning intrigues me and acts as a catalyst for much of my most recent work. Taking the VCU landscape painting class in 2003, I was excited to work as Cezanne had. Spending the entire day, every day, painting the surrounding scene, was energizing and transporting. My diptych, *River Rocks* (Appendix 1, No.3) is a plein air tribute to Cezanne.

Returning to a Former Vocabulary in a Changed Context

My first VCU painting class took place in September of 2001, when the World Trade Center was transformed into Ground Zero. Stacks of steel plate rugs pulled from beneath my feet made my world unrecognizable. Art became the lifeline I needed to digest a new reality.

It had been twenty-five years since I earned my BFA. Rather than the artist's life I had envisioned, the intervening years had brought a steady withdrawal from painting. The passion that had driven me as a young adult, the very essence of life, was usurped by the demands of family and career. It was frightening how easily I could put my art aside. In this regard, 9/11 became my own ground zero as an artist.

How does one reach back through the years to the core where it began? A good teacher helps you find the way. As a way to come up with content, instructor Kurt Godwin suggested an Image Sorting assignment. Through this process, I tore fifty images from magazines that appealed to me on a gut level. These were sorted and edited down

to two pictures. One photograph was of a rowboat interior, an arrangement of sunlit planes in space. The other was a close-up of heavily textured frayed and woven fibers. The colors in both were vivid, the contrast strong. Together, they represented ghosts of artwork that lingered from my past.

With these images as a starting point, the scent of turpentine and oils was like an elixir for my spirit. The blank canvas that had been so intimidating now seemed an invitation, or possibly a dare. As I began to mix colors, and paint, art's intoxicating power held sway once again.

My first canvas completed in the program, *Boat Adrift* (Appendix 1, No.4), is loosely based upon the magazine image of the rowboat. It is executed with energetic brushstrokes of dissonant, complementary colors. In the center is a chasm that seems to glow from within. It is encircled by precariously arranged planes intended to give a sense of mystery and danger.

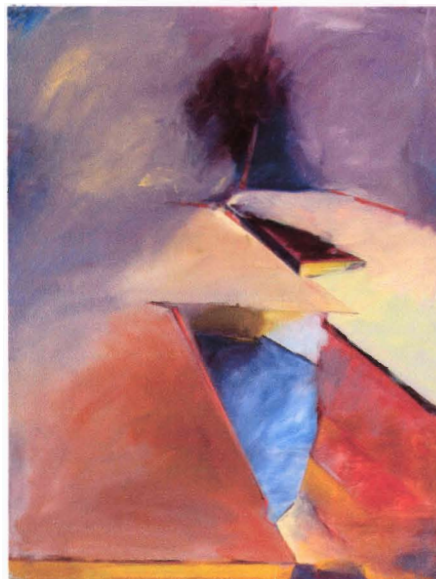


Figure 4, *Boat Adrift*

Because this painting virtually poured from me, I was surprised to find that the issues of light, color, and space that had so occupied me as a young artist continued to rivet my attention. It was an enormous relief to experience art's power again, and I felt euphoric in returning to its grip. I couldn't wait to begin another canvas.

Numerous, more controlled pieces followed. In these, I was less spontaneous with the spatial composition. In *Draft* (Appendix 1, No.5), for example, edges of planes are clearly defined and the relationship of one plane to another, while unstable, is easily understood. This painting also sees the emergence of folded forms along with a continued use of backlit entries.

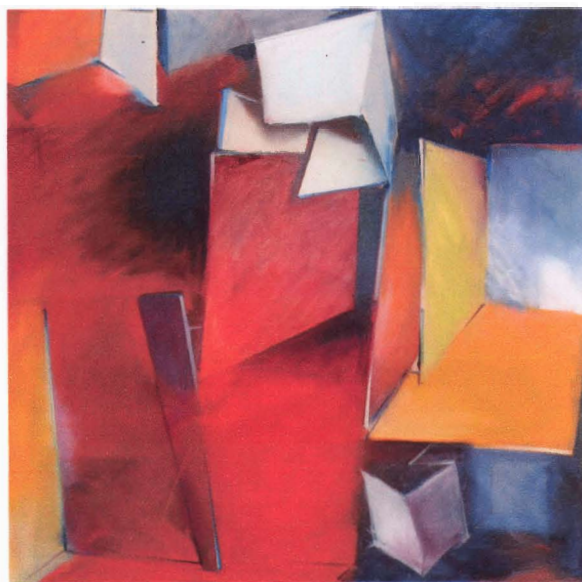


Figure 5, *Draft*

The intention behind these effects is to destabilize the picture plane and allude to something within or beyond the composition. To this day, my paintings often include these visual devices.

As a longtime abstract painter, certain images have been a consistent part of my work. Shifting geometric planes, sometimes laid amidst stretched and knotted forms have emerged again and again. In 2001, these images returned in an altered, more explosive state. Planes lean against one another, to enfold, separate, and hide the surrounding space. “Sunken Pool” (Appendix 1, No.6) shows this idea emerging.



Figure 6, *Sunken Pool*

In subsequent works, planes become increasingly tenuous, sometimes toppling and crashing into one another. Writhing, twisted organic forms like those in Puncture (Appendix 1, No.7) mix with the suggestion of broken, abandoned mechanical parts.

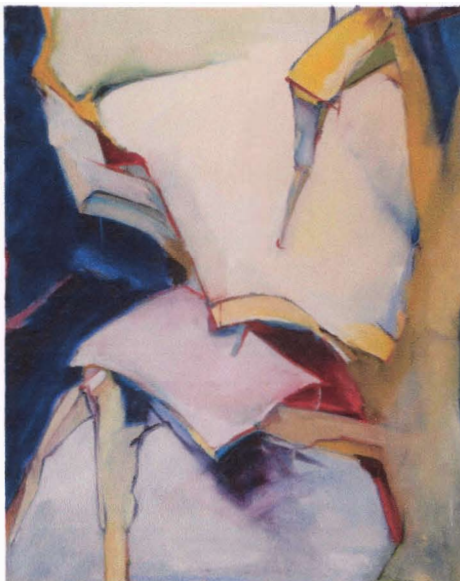


Figure 7, *Puncture*

At first, though unintentional, the association with 9/11 seemed obvious. The depiction of a chasm, both literal and figurative, evolved on my canvasses. The full story, for both that tragic event and my art turned out, of course, to be more complex.

Uniting Subject, Process, and Media

I believe that grappling with color, space, texture, shape, line, and value is reason enough for making art. The representation of objects seems to detract from this elemental language. As recognizable images encourage viewers to bring their own personal associations to a piece, abstraction is, for me, the only way to reach a deeper and more universal place.

Ironically, it was the MIS still life and landscape classes that helped clarify this idea. I felt that I was “given permission” to bring a new, organic iconography to my

work. Among the objects I gathered for my still life, *Space Contained* (Appendix 1, No.8), was an ordinary stick. It is laid amidst a clutter of unrelated, brightly colored objects. This stick, unlike the rest, was to reappear in various forms in numerous later works. In each case, it was important to convey that it is a stick rather than a living branch. The stick became the organic version of my doorknob, a symbol of connection and separation.

Paintings that followed became a mixture of planes representing man-made constructions and forms more suggestive of nature. *Collapse* (Appendix 1, No.9) and *Squeeze* (Appendix 1, No. 10) are examples of this new combination aesthetic. Geometric planar forms of previous works have been replaced with those of a less distinct or stable nature.

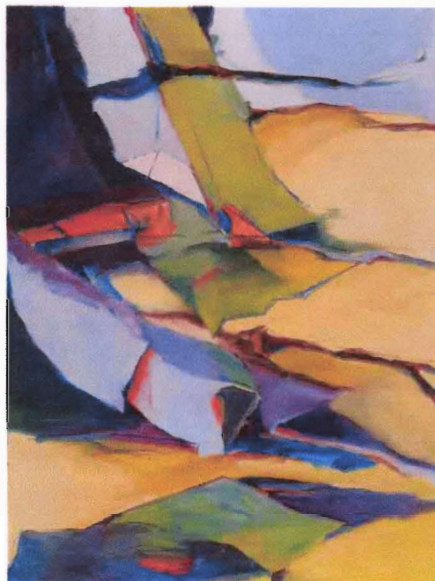


Figure 9, *Collapse*

These works represent a desire to convey a feeling of compression and unease via the suggestion of increased movement through an unsettled environment.

In my paintings, color becomes a means of “bending” the picture plane into an ambiguous, tenuous space. Projecting and receding planes that lean, layer, and stack together further destabilize the composition. The edges and corners of these planes brush against or puncture one another while overlapping cable-like lines connect them to the areas they occupy.

Lately, as in the 2005 painting, *What Remains* (Appendix 1, No.11), forms resembling bones and other remnants of organic matter are laid amidst the geometrically divided spaces. They denote bits of life, sheltered and separated. This represents a desire to preserve a pre-9/11 vitality from what I see as a post-9/11 repression. Forms have become more amorphous and the color more atmospheric. There is, in these newer pieces, a mood of disquiet, and a sense of both floating and falling.



Figure 11, *What Remains*

Over the past two years, I have constructed collages and reliefs in which sticks are bound by wires and are partially hidden by attached folds of cloth or tattered papers (see *Rush*, Appendix 1, No.12). Charcoal, with its earthly association, is a preferred drawing medium. Similarly, I use a velvety black underglaze to give a charred look to handmade ceramic bones and sticks that are assembled into reliefs and sculptures. This dimensional approach that evolved through classes in drawing and ceramics allows me to explode images beyond the confines of the picture plane. In this way, they force their way into the viewer's space just enough to present, once again, concerns of connection and separation, ambiguity and ambivalence.

The Journey Continues

At the time that I started the MIS program, I was an art teacher who had avoided my own art for years. My life was so busy without it that I was afraid to allow its inclusion. Art is not, however, something you choose to do or not do. For some, art grabs hold of one's being, alters one's vision, and throttles one's soul. Art, I think, took possession of me that day in my crib. Thankfully, it has never let go.

One of my high school students recently asked if I consider myself a teacher who makes art, or an artist who teaches. Without hesitation, I said I am most decidedly the latter. That is the gift given to me by VCU through its MIS program and, to me, there could be none greater.

Bibliography

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- Venturi, Lionello. *Cezanne*. New York, NY: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1978.

Appendix 1

Works referred to in the text

1. *Counterweight*
oil on canvas
16" x 20"
2001



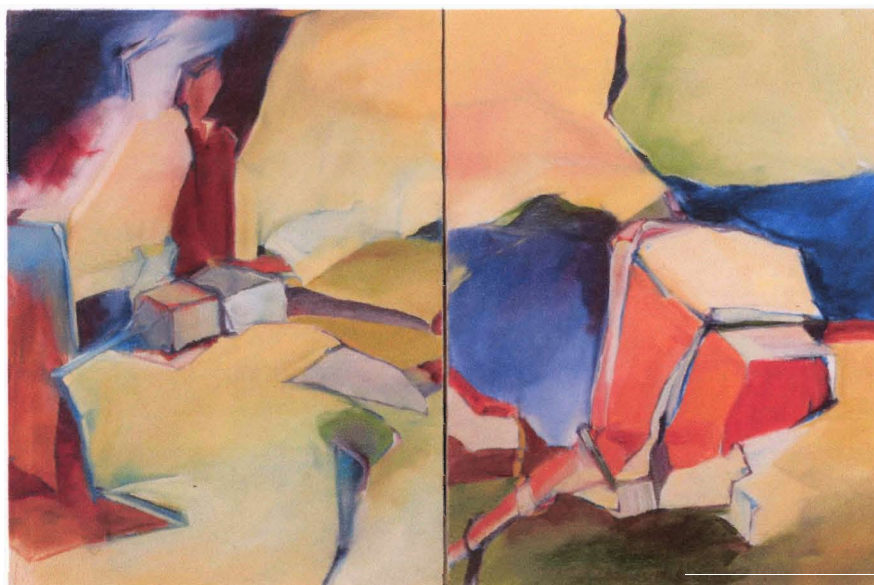
2. *White Light*
oil on canvas
20" x 24"
2002



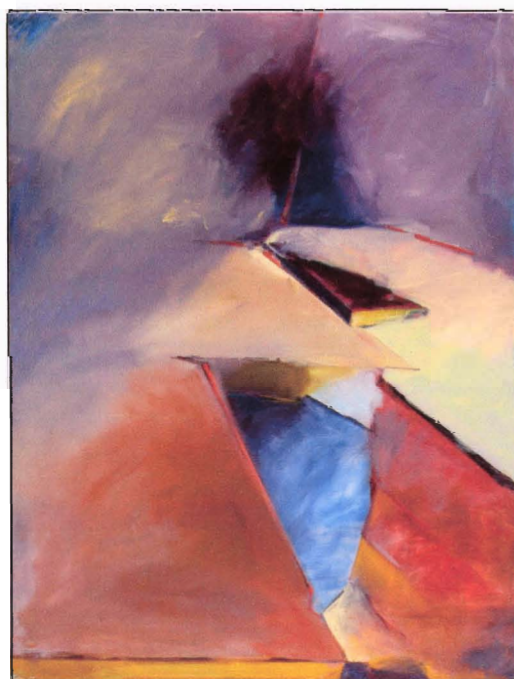
Appendix 1

Works referred to in the text

3. *River Rocks*
oil on canvas
36" x 48"
2003



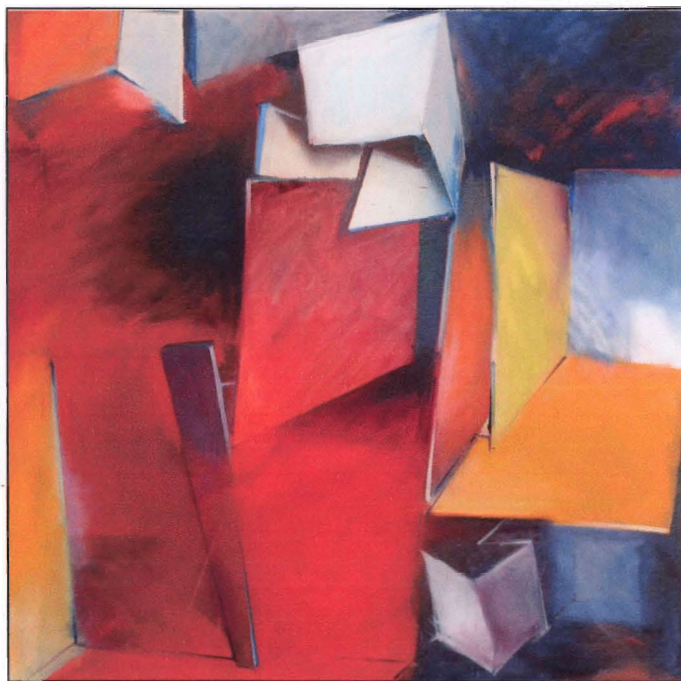
4. *Boat Adrift*
oil on canvas
30" x 40"
2001



Appendix 1

Works referred to in the text

5. *Draft*
oil on canvas
36" x 36"
2002



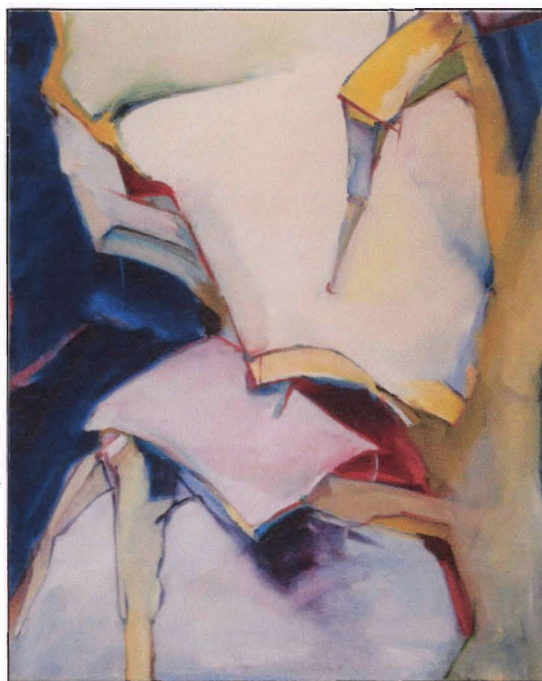
6. *Sunken Pool*
oil on canvas
22" x 29"
2002



Appendix 1

Works referred to in the text

7. *Puncture*
oil on canvas
24" x 30"
2003



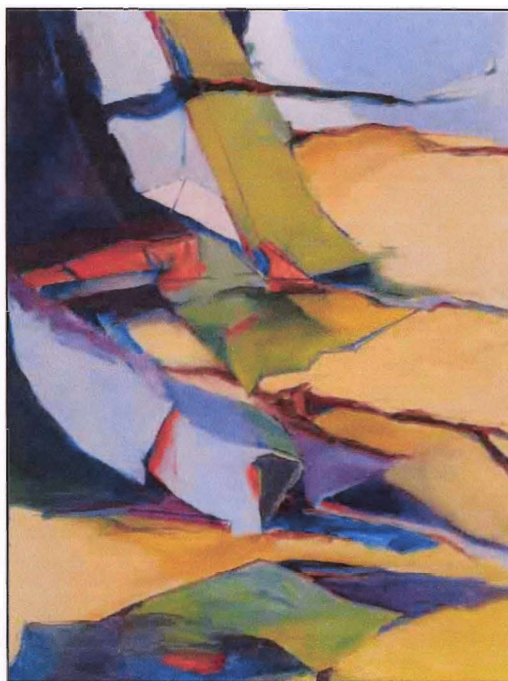
8. *Space Contained*
oil on canvas
20" x 24"
2002



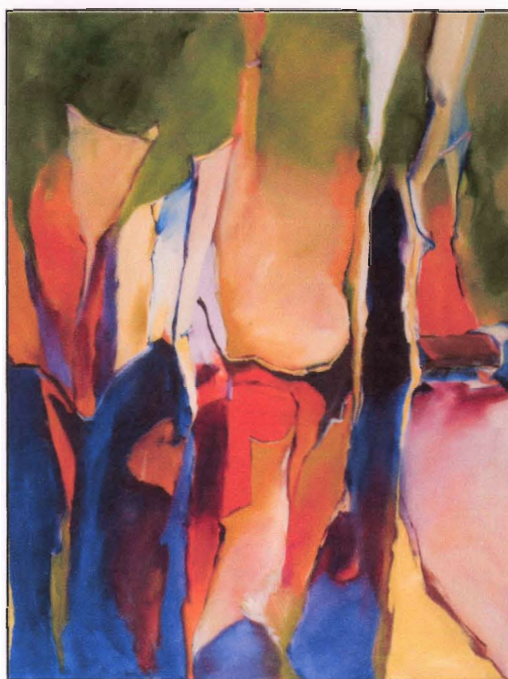
Appendix 1

Works referred to in the text

9. *Collapse*
oil on canvas
30" x 40"
2004



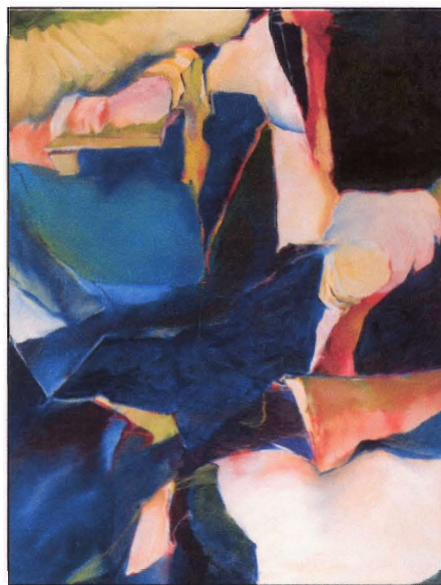
10. *Squeeze*
oil on canvas
36" x 48"
2004



Appendix 1

Works referred to in the text

11. *What Remains*
oil on canvas
36" x 48"
2005



12. *Rush*
mixed media
24" x 48"
2005



Appendix 2

Thesis Exhibit List of Slides

1. *Boat Adrift*, oil on canvas, 30" x 40", 2001.
2. *Counterweight*, oil on canvas, 16" x 20", 2001.
3. *Interior Quartet*, oil on canvas, 36" x 40", 2001
4. *Tunnel*, oil on canvas, 30" x 36", 2002.
5. *Draft*, oil on canvas, 36" x 36", 2002.
6. *Sunken Pool*, oil on canvas, 22" x 29", 2002.
7. *White Light*, oil on canvas, 20" x 24", 2002.
8. *Space Contained*, oil on canvas, 20" x 24", 2002.
9. *River Rocks*, oil on canvas, 36" x 48", 2003.
10. *Thrust*, oil on canvas, 24" x 30", 2003.
11. *Puncture*, oil on canvas, 24" x 30", 2003.
12. *Dusk*, oil on canvas, 18" x 24", 2003.
13. *Torn*, oil on canvas, 30" x 40", 2003.
14. *Canal*, oil on canvas, 30" x 40", 2004.
15. *Blue Pool, Ruptured Light*, oil on canvas, 24" x 30", 2004.
16. *Collapse*, oil on canvas, 30" x 40", 2004.
17. *Squeeze*, oil on canvas, 36" x 48", 2004.
18. *Breaking Wave*, oil on canvas, 24" x 30", 2004.

Appendix 2

Thesis Exhibit List of Slides

19. *Mechanical Breakdown*, mixed media, 18" x 128", 2004.
20. *Twisted Tremor*, charcoal and oil pastel, 18" x 24", 2005.
21. *Crucifix*, Charcoal, chalk pastel, and oil pastel, 18" x 24", 2005.
22. *Squandered Fragments*, oil on canvas, 24" x 30", 2005.
23. *Walled Light*, oil on canvas, 24" x 30", 2005.
24. *Compression*, charcoal, chalk pastel, and gesso, 11" x 27", 2005.
25. *Stacks*, charcoal and gesso, 11" x 27", 2005.
26. *Rib Cage*, charcoal and gesso, 11" x 27", 2005.
27. *Wired*, mixed media, 16" x 49", 2005.
28. *Rush*, mixed media, 24" x 48", 2005.
29. *What Remains*, oil on canvas, 36" x 48", 2005.

Leslie G. Rousseau**EDUCATION:**

2006	Candidate, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Virginia Commonwealth University Richmond, Virginia
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RELATED EXPERIENCE:

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2004 to present	Sponsor T.C. Williams High School Art Club Alexandria, Virginia
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2003 to present	Del Ray Artisans Alexandria, Virginia

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2006	<i>From the Edge</i> Master Thesis Exhibition Del Ray Artisans Alexandria, Virginia
2004	<i>All Member Show</i> Del Ray Artisans Alexandria, Virginia