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A Seamless Journey

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A Seamless Journey

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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A Seamless Journey

My quilts serve as a visual journal of some of my travels and experiences. Through my quilts, I remember the rich colors and memories of my European adventures. The methodical process of stitching quilts line by line is an important process for my recollection of the many steps taken during my trip abroad. Stitching fabric is the method that communicates the opportunities and experiences of my travel that I want to share with others.

A Seamless Journey

Before the First Stitch

I graduated from the University of South Carolina in 1995 with a degree in art education and taught art for three years. I then got married and moved to Virginia, where I have been an art teacher for seven years. During this time, although I have been teaching art, I have not been feeding my own artistic hunger.

In 2001, I became a faculty member at Henrico High School. My colleagues had long, detailed conversations at lunch about their artwork and future shows. Many of the art teachers I had worked with in the past simply considered themselves teachers of design and aesthetics for school children. I had forgotten what led me to my profession in the first place my personal passion to make art.

A colleague encouraged me to enroll in a painting class that he was taking. This painting class had a loosely structured curriculum, as do many of the classes in Virginia Commonwealth University's Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) Off-campus Program. This combination of freedom and guided instruction increased my

creative energy and sparked a rebirth of myself as an artist. I entered the degree program with a concentration in crafts and mixed media.

Machines Sense Fear

My obsession with sewing began in 2003 with the arrival of Emma, my Viking Husqvarna sewing machine. I had always wanted to sew, mostly because of the fabrics. Colors, patterns, and textures of fibers drove me to shop at fabric stores. However, my nonexistent sewing skills kept me from making anything substantial. The fibers were inspiring, but the creations in my head were not realized.

I had just started the MIS program when I entered a class named *Quilting: Art, Narrative, Image*. I called the professor and told her that I could not sew a stitch, much less thread a bobbin. She said that I was going to have to work twice as hard as the other students, a statement I found to be true. My instructor said that Emma could sense fear, so I would just need to practice. I have never worked so hard before to achieve success in making art.

My frustration lost out to my determined spirit. All of my energy was channeled into a stitch, which led to creating a line and finally assembling a composition.

These fibers became art quilts. I soon grew familiar with a whole new vocabulary: appliqué, machine quilting, piecing, and foundation quilting. With a new vocabulary and the fabric store as my palette, the adventure began.

Artistic Influences: Painting to Fibers

I began my first quilts by cutting stencils and making stamps. The stencils and stamps added originality and an element of consistency to my quilts. I realized that there are many integral parts of quilting that go unnoticed by the average viewer. I began to respect the amount of work and talent displayed in just one quilt. The composition, fabric, and technical assemblage of the parts must all work together to form a work of art. While they did not make quilts, some artists who exhibit the technical skills required to form artistic masterpieces are Jasper Johns, Henri Matisse, and Robert Rauschenberg.

Jasper Johns' (1930-) early works "contain things seen but not looked at."¹ Johns makes his viewers look at common objects in a new light. His encaustic pieces are

¹ Fred S Kleiner and others, *Gardener's Art Through the Ages*. 11th Ed. (Singapore, Asia: Thomson and Wadsworth Publishers, 2001), p. 1092.

paintings that employ layers of wax and newspaper articles, enabling viewers to see the embedded text as a compositional element, not as textual information. I have hand stenciled words and sewn metro cards into the fabric of my quilts. The stenciled words are often seen as decoration in addition to the information they offer.

Venus de Milo Again (Appendix, 1) and *Vermeer Revisited* (Appendix, 2) are two of my quilts that refer to my trip to the Louvre Museum in Paris, France. The repetitive letters and numbers in these quilts, although first seemingly decorative, convey the location of the artwork found in the Louvre.

Just as Johns uses wax to adhere newspapers to his compositions, I use thread to attach metro tickets to the fabric, as in my quilt *Ligne Un* (Appendix, 3). These tickets, sewn in a circular pattern, are tangible memories sewn into the fabric.

Henri Matisse (1869-1954) came from a family of weavers, and his artwork shows his affinity for textiles. However, we have contrasting views in our attention to fabric. Matisse captured the designs and textures of the fibers with paint, while I use actual fabrics in my work. Yet his love of fiber is evident in his analysis of his

predecessors at the Louvre when he expressed that, "you can say of a particular artist that his texture is like velvet, or satin, or taffeta."² Matisse painted the beauty of fabric, which is something I have long admired.

I incorporated fabric in my quilt *Vermeer Revisited* (Appendix, 2). For this quilt, I placed ribbon on top of a base fabric and used a zigzag stitch to catch or bind the ribbon to the cloth in a process called couching. The couched ribbon forms a design inspired by a piece of fabric.

An artist who also uses fabric is Robert Rauschenberg (1925-). Rauschenberg's work entitled *Bed* (1955) contains a log cabin patterned blanket with a large area of randomly splattered paint. "Rauschenberg set out to create works that would be open and indeterminate and he began by making 'combines,' which intersperse painted passages with sculptural elements."³ I was influenced by his sculptural mixed media approach to art, and I decided that I would paint my sewn fabric and display objects along with my

² Kathleen Brunner and others, *Matisse, His Art and His Textiles: The Fabric of Dreams*. (London: Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2004), p. 14.

³ Fred S Kleiner and others, *Gardener's Art through the Ages*. 11th Ed. (Singapore, Asia: Thomson and Wadsworth Publishers, 2001), p. 1093.

quilts. Rauschenberg gave me the artistic license to display quilts in this nontraditional way, which inspired me to introduce *sculptural suitcases*, my own version of a *combine*. These suitcases are filled with scraps of fabric to enhance the story of my *Seamless Journey*.

Although most of my ideas stem from painters such as Johns, Matisse, and Rauschenberg, I have started to become familiar with quilting artists. As I looked through various *Quilt National*⁴ books, I realized that the quilts I am drawn to have hand-dyed fabrics. This is when I decided to use my own hand-dyed fabric to tell the story of my personal journey to Paris and the Louvre.

I had always naively assumed that my Louvre quilts were one of a kind. Who else would think to make quilts of famous artworks? I was deflated when I saw a book of Faith Ringgold's (1930-) quilts entitled *Dancing at the Louvre* (1998). This book contains quilts with similar subject matter to my artwork from the Louvre.

Initially disappointed to learn that another artist had made a quilt inspired by the Louvre, I was relieved

⁴ *Quilt National* is a biennial international juried exhibition of contemporary quilts in book form. It was started by two quilting artists whose work did not fit into the parameters of a traditional quilt.

when I saw that her quilt was quite different from my own. My quilts are more abstract, contain a completely different color palette, and are narratives of my experiences. Faith Ringgold's quilts contain bold colors; my coloration is muted and transparent. Ringgold uses pigments to paint on her quilts so the colors are more opaque. The immersion dyeing technique that I use creates a transparent appearance similar to watercolor.

Dancing at the Louvre (1991) is a narrative quilt by Ringgold about her struggle with the importance of being a mother and an artist. In her quilt, Ringgold creates a character named Willia Maria to deal with these issues. In contrast, my series of narrative quilts is devoted to locating and remembering masterpieces at the Louvre. Each quilt in my *Seamless Journey series* contains reworked masterpieces and their addresses in the Louvre.

Piecing and the Process

Just before leaving for Paris and the Louvre, I read a book titled *Girl with the Pearl Earring* (2001) by Tracy Chevalier. A fictional story about a Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675) painting, this book inspired me to view his paintings in the Louvre. When I finally reached the Vermeer

section, Room 38, the door was closed and the sign read "Closed on Mondays". This inspired *The Quiltmaker Closed on Mondays* (Appendix, 4). In this quilt I modified Vermeer's Caucasian girl, who is wearing a yellow dress in the *Lacemaker* (1669-71), into a green and yellow girl with a red dress. Her appearance and task have been altered into a semi-self portrait. Instead of making lace, she is quilting. This quilting figure is appliquéd to the upper left-hand corner of the composition. Below the appliquéd girl, I inserted a crazy quilt. The crazy quilt piecing technique, seen in all of my quilts, symbolizes the overwhelming amount of art housed in the Louvre. The right side of the work contains three areas. In the top section, a hand-dyed Louvre ticket is sewn, or machine quilted, into the fabric. The middle area consists of hand-dyed fabric and the backstitched word RICH. RICH refers to Richelieu, the wing of the Louvre where the Vermeer paintings are found. The bottom section contains red passageways, or floor plans, displaying the room number and wing of the Vermeer painting. These passageways are present in all of the quilts in the series.

Denon 13 (Appendix, 5) is another quilt in this series. Denon 13 is a room on the first floor of the

Louvre that houses Leonardo Da Vinci's (1452-1519) *Mona Lisa* (c.1503-1505). In a tribute to *Mona Lisa*, I constructed a symmetrical quilt with three horizontally stacked sections. I placed her eyes in the center of the composition, making them the focal point of the work. In the top section of the composition is a pictogram found on ladies' restroom doors, a foundation quilted hallway, and a stitched and appliquéd plan of Denon's first floor. The lower section of the quilt contains a piece of hand-dyed fabric with the word Denon accentuated by backstitching.

The next quilt in my series, *The Winged Victory of Samothrace* (Appendix, 6), is an asymmetrical composition. An image of the statue, *The Winged Victory of Samothrace* (190 BC), is appliquéd to the quilt. The hand-dyed words *Winged Victory of Samothrace* are placed behind the satin stitched wing. On the right side of the composition are hallways, a floor plan, and the word Sully, which indicates the wing of the museum.

Many times I was unable to visit particular artworks due to unforeseen closings. The quilts that I subsequently made often contain room numbers, maps, and passageways to locate the works, even though I was unable to view the works firsthand.

A memory of my experience in the museum is recorded.

Conclusion

The MIS program itself has been a journey for me. Without this program, I would not have been exposed to many art resources and professional artists. I would not have found quilting. My potential to make artwork was locked away in everyday life. This program has allowed me to make time for my passion of making art.

I feel that the MIS program has reintroduced me to art, and I am able to carry this newly found love into my classroom. I have been able to mentor fiber art students and teach hand-dyeing techniques. I also have goals for myself. I would like to enter *Quilt National* and attend a *Quilt National* show. I will also continue to meet and form new relationships with artists in the community.

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Appendix

Slide List

1. *Venus de Milo Again*, art quilt, 109" X 59", 2006.
2. *Vermeer Revisited*, art quilt, 63"X 31", 2005.
3. *Ligne Un*, art quilt, 50" X 39", 2006.
4. *The Quiltmaker Closed on Mondays*, art quilt, 38" X 30", 2004.
5. *Denon 13*, art quilt, 24" X 34", 2004.
6. *The Winged Victory of Samothrace*, art quilt, 34" X 31", 2004.

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2001 ***Old Santee Art Exhibition Juried
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2000 ***Virginia Art Education Association
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1997 ***South Carolina Art Education
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