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Virginia Commonwealth University

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Cultural Identity

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

by

Laura J. Faulcon
Bachelor of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia, 1998

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
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Artist Statement

Living and thriving in a diverse culture has allowed me to appreciate all that people have to offer, regardless of where they come from. It is my intention to portray an individual cultural sensitivity, while celebrating the qualities that unite all people. The four elements that are common in my work are scenes of livelihood, religion, entertainment, and family. Though some people may strongly identify with one particular culture, I have had the privilege of being assimilated and accepted in to many. I intend to show my affection and appreciation for them all, through detailed drawings, bold use of color, and expressive photography.

Cultural Identity

Introduction

I am a Caucasian Christian from an English-speaking household on the east coast of the United States. I have always been interested in traditions and lifestyles of my culture, as well as others. My real-life experiences with people from other countries or cultures had been minimal until I spent some time in Guatemala where my eyes began to open to all that the world had to offer. Since then, I have found great satisfaction in learning about people from all walks of life, and I have learned more about myself in the process.

I developed this interest during my undergraduate studies while earning a degree and certification as an art teacher. My degree has afforded me many opportunities to teach kids from different backgrounds. I've chosen to work in lower socioeconomic areas, where most of my student population are non-native English speakers. I incorporate my students' individual cultural heritage when designing lessons, and this in turn has influenced my own artwork.

In the last five years, while earning my Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) degree, I have completed a body of work that includes my own family roots. Each major event in my life has been a landmark for a drawing, painting, or photograph. From getting married to an African American man, to teaching non-English speaking students, to having a family of mixed ethnicities, my interest is in depicting cultural ideals that have universal appeal. Because of these

influences, my works portray street life in Central America, Indian dancers, scenes from African American life, and my own background.

Process and Media

In addition to painting and drawing, I use mixed media transfer processes for my images. This process is relatively new, starting with the Polaroid transfer process in the 1960s. A photographic image is manipulated and transferred on to a receptor surface (any material that the image can be transferred on), and then can be potentially altered again. Originally, the Polaroid was transferred directly from the negative, resulting in a small positive image on the receptor surface. But with the advance of the computer and digital photography, any number of combinations of this technology can be used. I prefer using my manual camera with black and white film to capture an image, which I then develop and print in the darkroom. I use either the heat transfer method or acrylic gel medium to get my image on to the receptor. Then, I use acrylic paints, oil pastels, and colored pencils to enhance the transfer. The result is something with many layers and textures.

Harlem Renaissance Aesthetics

Few periods throughout history have captured the essence of a specific culture more than the art, music, and literature from New York in the early part of the twentieth century. From World War I to the great Stock Market Crash in 1929,

the Harlem Renaissance was truly a rebirth of the African American culture that had been undeniably repressed up until that point. Though the art was specific to happenings in New York City, the imagery was relevant to African Americans across the country. Even today, people of all nationalities can identify with such universal cultural symbols as livelihood, religion, entertainment and family, which were dominant in the arts of the time. These elements help to shape a cultural perspective, with which all people can identify.

One of the most famous African American photographers of the Harlem Renaissance was James Van Der Zee (1886-1983). He portrayed a part of African American culture in the 1930s that included portraits of dancers, children in dancing school, soldiers on parade, authors, and artists. This group of people had never been glamorized in fine art by African Americans. It was his intention to show that wealthy African Americans had the same interests as the rich white people of the time. However, he captured a sense of pride never before seen. It was so important to Van Der Zee to portray his subjects at their finest that he was famous for retouching blemishes and drawing in hair!

Van Der Zee, and others, often required subjects to dress in their best clothing and he placed them in elaborate studios with dramatic lighting and props, normally associated with the white elite. Or, subjects would be photographed with expensive cars and in front of successful businesses and large homes. The purpose was to show "the new Negro" (Powell, 9) as being educated and financially sound.

I am inspired by similar ideals as the Masters of the Harlem Renaissance. Showing pride in heritage and celebration of individual tradition, I attempt to appeal to the cultural masses. Though my work represents African American people in specific situations, I have also chosen other ethnic groups to portray in similar settings. Diversifying my subjects enables me to embody characteristics that every racial and ethnic group can respond to.

Livelihood

In the oil painting *Aunt Maude* (Appendix, 1), I wanted to capture the essence of Van Der Zee's photograph, *Couple, Harlem* (1932). *Aunt Maude* is an amalgam of imagery from my family photos and from stories about my husband's great-aunt. With her graying hair, she wears a fur coat and hat, and carries a leather clutch. She is leaning against a luxurious car projecting an obvious level of stature. The urban background is an empty street with brick row houses at the rear, reminiscent of the country's growing cities.

Like Van Der Zee, I have also attempted to show a sense of pride in my subjects. In the drawing, *West Virginia People* (Appendix, 2), I have captured the simple pose of three weathered, working adults, cramped together for one brief moment. This piece was inspired by an early twentieth-century photograph of my great-grandparents and my great-uncle. The original photo showed them to be tired and beaten, but still standing tall and proud. I wanted to create a sense of

timelessness reminiscent of the old photo itself, so I used the soft, subtleties of ink and water to create tonal shades of grey.

My series of mixed media drawings came from an interest in learning more about my own family heritage. In the early 1930s and 40s, my family lived a simple life working in the steel industry of western Pennsylvania. The family home was a beacon of hope and a symbol of success for the blue collar existence of that generation. Special events were marked with fanciful photos taken in the home's backyard.

Universal Heritage: Status (Appendix, 3) is one of the mixed media drawings in this series. It is inspired by a photo of my maternal grandfather, standing proudly in front of his 1940 Buick. First, I created a lithograph print in high contrast black and white. After printing, I used acrylic medium to transfer the image on to canvas, resulting in a hazy, faint impression with more tones of grey. I then accentuated it with charcoal to add to the overall texture. The car is parked in front of the family home and my grandfather's stance indicates how proud he was. He had made a life for himself and his family. Even though this piece was inspired by my own family history, the image could be found in the memories of many other American families.

People in every culture have to support themselves by earning money. Just as I have illustrated farming life, and the importance of status, livelihood in other countries might include the same ideals, although the work itself may be different. For example, *Central American Street Scene* (Appendix, 4) is an oil

triptych which depicts an ordinary market in Latin America. There is a man leaning out of a window, taking a fish from a young person. There are also large bushels of produce ready for sale or trade. The colors are bold with bright oranges, purples, and blues. I created these three panels on a large scale (48" x 72") so the viewers could feel a part of the scene themselves.

I wanted to connect the viewer to another cultural experience, one where children work in the same manner as adults. In the oil painting, *Guatemalan Girl* (Appendix, 5), a preteen girl is seated against a plain wall. She has a basket of gourds next to her and her clothing is a traditional textile made by women in her village. Her feet are bare but this is not uncommon for *la indigena* (native, non-Spanish speaking people of Guatemala). This image was inspired by a photo I took while studying abroad, where I learned that every member of the family must contribute to helping the family survive. This scene is common among families all over the world.

Religion

Religion is an integral part of many cultures, including the African American community. I've learned through attending several black churches on a regular basis that the church is nearly as important as home for some people. In the oil painting, *Country Church* (Appendix, 6), I have shown a rustic building in an isolated field with three men standing outside. They are dressed in suits and hats, with one of the gentlemen's hands in his pockets. I have used dramatic

colors of a summer sunset, with vibrant purples and oranges. These colors are reminiscent of a hot summer evening, as well as indicating good weather for the crops surrounding them. The church itself is sparse, with simple windows and white clapboard siding. The men outside can be found in any rural African American church where people wear their best clothes and devote entire Sundays to celebrating the spirit.

I have also portrayed another aspect of religion in *Baptism* (Appendix, 7). This emulsion transfer shows my brother-in-law, his son, and his father-in-law, who is a Catholic Deacon. It is a beautiful ceremony, where the child is blessed with holy water amid family and friends, as he is welcomed in to the Catholic Church. This Catholic baptism is especially unique to our family because the baby boy will also be raised to experience traditions at the all black Baptist church, where his father was raised. This image shows the meshing of a diverse family, through religion and race.

Entertainment

Entertainment is something every culture can identify with, whether it's music, dancing, eating, or as a part of religious experiences. During Black History Month, I had the privilege of watching a dance troupe from urban New Jersey perform. They danced to a multicultural mix of spirituals, modern gospel hits, and traditional Caribbean and African beats. *Dancers, Color* (Appendix, 8) is an example of one of the images I printed in a series of photos detailing this

performance. I intentionally blurred the imagery using Photoshop, to capture the essence of movement. I then printed it on to cold-peel transfer paper. Next, I used an iron to transfer the image on to hot press watercolor paper. Some of the images have been altered with water-soluble oil pastels before printing, while others have been manipulated afterward. There were many steps to this process, because I prefer adding additional media to make each image more unique than a reproducible photograph.

Strong Black Man (Appendix, 9) is the first in a series of photo emulsion transfers depicting the same subject matter of dancing. It shows unity and power because of how the dancers are all grouped together, with the leader's hands raised high reminiscent of the Black Power sign from the 1960s. But, like the fashion trends of today, the boys were wearing white oxford shirts, baggy blue jeans, and white sneakers. Because the faces are intentionally blurred in Photoshop, and the overall feeling is unity, this image relates to people of any racial or cultural group, in any region of America. Though the song these young men danced to was called *Strong Black Man*, this image is relevant to any strong group of men.

Along the lines of music and entertainment, parades have always been a time to celebrate. I was in attendance at a Richmond Christmas parade, where I witnessed the talents of local high school student bands, step teams, majorettes, and drum corps. The photo emulsion transfer *Parade, Trombone* (Appendix, 10), shows the pride felt by a talented young musician. He is marching, head held

high, to the beat of the drummers at the rear. The grasp on his horn, with his pristine white gloves, shows an affinity for his instrument and the band he is a part of. My intention with this image and this particular series of mixed media photographs is to show strength and pride for the uniforms the kids are wearing and the community they represent.

At a Punjabi Festival I attended, Indian people of all ages wore traditional garb and danced in ceremonial fashion. While music blared, people enjoyed traditional dishes and fellowship. *Indian Girl in Blue* (Appendix, 11) best represents this cultural identity. She was one of six dancers to entertain the crowd. Her family cheered her on enthusiastically, as I took photos. To create this image, I started with a pencil drawing, then scanned it in to Photoshop. Before transferring it to paper using a hot press, I used colored pencil and watercolor to emphasize the bold colors of her dress, thereby bringing attention to the elaborate nature of the costume.

Whether it is dancing or marching in a parade, celebrating a birthday, or modeling traditional clothing, I want to capture a sense of excitement as I portray different cultures in varying forms of entertainment. These events transcend history, geographic location, and language. All people celebrate certain things in their lives and it is my intention to show some commonalities between cultural groups.

Family

In *Mother and Child* (Appendix, 12), I have attempted to capture the intimate bond between a mother and her child. The little boy has his head pressed against his mother's chest, seemingly hiding his face. She may have just scolded him, and this is his way of showing remorse. Or it could be that he is tired and finds comfort in his mother's arms. The people here are African American but this could be an example of a mother and child from any culture in the world. The black and white background is blurred, so I could direct the focus on the figures in the foreground. I used shades of brown to accentuate the mother and her son.

Father and Son (Appendix, 13) has a similar feeling of expressing the simple, pure love between a child and his parent. In this mixed media emulsion transfer and drawing, the father is lying down, looking off in to the distance. His son is behind him, with his hands grasping his father's face. He is leaning down kissing his forehead. Both people are Hispanic but this sort of family connection is something we can all strive to have, regardless of heritage. Family is the foundation of every culture.

Conclusion

At the beginning, I intended to complete my master's degree in two or three years, while teaching full-time. The MIS program, established at Virginia Commonwealth University, encourages teachers like myself to pursue advanced

degrees. For the first two years, I took classes every semester and could see my personal style evolve. I was truly ecstatic about my accomplishments. I would have continued at the same feverish pace, but several major events took place, and it forced me to take some time away from the program. As soon as I could return to taking classes, I attributed all of my new passion for art to my husband, and our two small children. They have made all of this possible for me.

As far as teaching, I have had the great privilege of working with some of the most intriguing, innocent, open-minded children and young adults that I could imagine. All of my students are different from each other, whether it is by race, religion, language, or socioeconomic background. My students, after all, are where I find renewed hope for our future, where social prejudices and biases become a thing of the past. I have learned that though all my students are so different, they engage in the same four elements in their respective cultures: livelihood, religion, entertainment, and family.

I will always continue to make and experience art. I'm so thankful that my profession allows me to be creative on a daily basis. I also find time to work alongside my students. They seem to appreciate the fact that I practice what I preach.

What I've learned while in this graduate program has been immeasurable. I've learned a wealth of new artistic skills, while applying useful knowledge to the classroom. But more importantly, I've learned and grown through the production of my own ideas. A few professors along the way have greatly encouraged my

work, and my path, which has led me to this point. I see that I have accomplished a great deal and am satisfied but I know that my own educational journey will not stop here.

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Figure 1. *Aunt Maude*, oil on canvas, 36" x 36", 2001.



Figure 2. *West Virginia People*, India Ink on paper, 48" x 36", 2001.

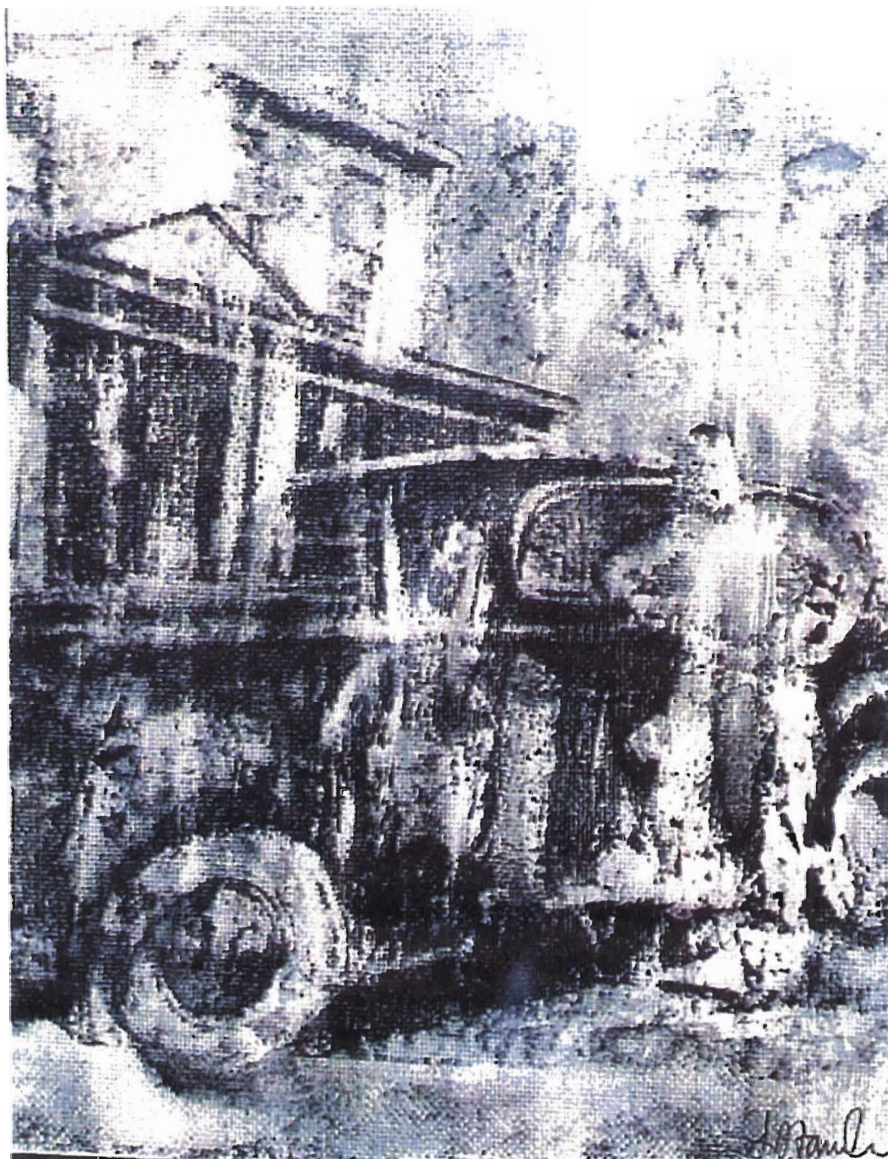


Figure 3. *Universal Heritage: Status*, emulsion transfer of lithograph print on canvas, charcoal, 18" x 14", 2006.



Figure 4. *Central American Street Scene*, oil on board, 48" x 72", 2000.



Figure 5. *Guatemalan Girl*, oil on board, 24" x 24", 2000.



Figure 6. *Country Church*, oil on canvas, 24" x 36", 2002.

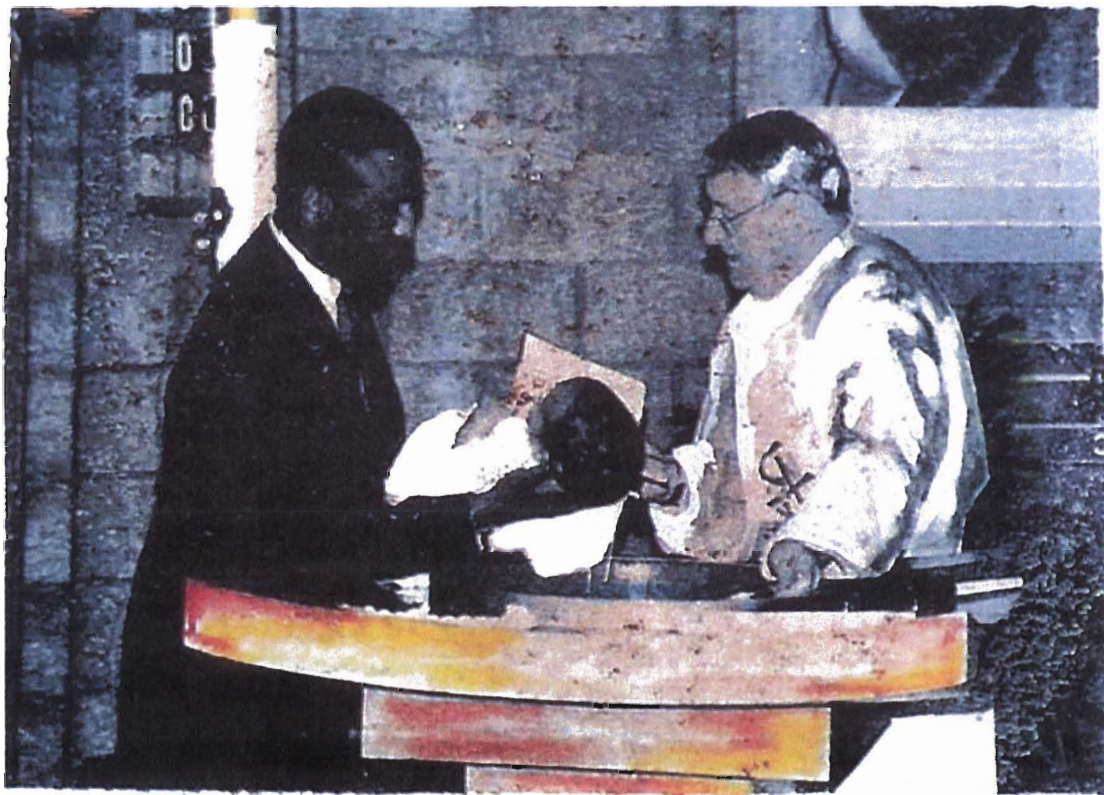


Figure 7. *Baptism*, emulsion transfer of C-print, acrylic paint, 11" x 14", 2006.



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Figure 12. *Mother and Child*, acrylic gel transfer of black and white print, acrylic paint, 16" x 20", 2006.



Figure 13. *Father and Son*, acrylic gel transfer of black and white print, colored pencil, 11" x 14", 2006.

Laura J. Faulcon

EDUCATION

- | | |
|------|--|
| 2006 | Master of Interdisciplinary Studies
Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, VA
Concentration: Painting and Photography |
| 1998 | Bachelor of Fine Arts
Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, VA
Concentration: Art Education |

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| 2005 – Present | Art / Photography Teacher
Meadowbrook High School
Chesterfield County Public Schools
Richmond, VA |
| 2002 – 2005 | Art Teacher
Mt. Vernon High School
Fairfax County Public Schools
Alexandria, VA |
| 1999 – 2002 | Art Teacher
Woodley Hills Elementary School
Fairfax County Public Schools
Alexandria, VA |

RELATED EXPERIENCE

- | | |
|------|---|
| 2002 | Art Director
DayJamz summer music camp
Alexandria, VA |
|------|---|

RELATED EXPERIENCE, *continued*

1999 – 2000 Curriculum Writer
Fairfax County Public Schools
Alexandria, VA

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

National Art Education Association
Virginia Art Education Association
Virginia Professional Educators

EXHIBITIONS

2006 *Cultural Identity*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis
Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University. St. Paul's,
Richmond, VA

2006 *Artist as Educator Show*, St. Paul's
Richmond, VA