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May 12 2006

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COOKING WITH PAINT

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Acknowledgement

Many people have supported and encouraged my growth and experimentation. I would like to extend thanks and gratitude to my family: Sandy Schwab, Chuck Schwab, and my brother, Eric Schwab, for endless support, time, encouragement and advice. Thank you to my friend Kristen Becker for diversifying my life.

I would like to extend gratitude to Reni Gower, who pushed and encouraged, along with the rest of my committee, Ruth Bolduan and Peter Baldes.

Thank you to my teachers Richard Roth, Gregory Volk, Holly Morrison, the late Morris Yarowsky, and Joe Siepel.

Thank you to my fellow graduating class: Rachel Hayes, Eric Sall, Saul Becker, Jorge Benitez, Calvin Burton, and Joseph McSpadden.

With endless awe and gratitude, thank you Andrew Symula. You displayed a level of faith, love, and encouragement that I never knew was possible.

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INTRODUCTION

I recently went to see a Frank Stella show at the Sackler Museum on the Harvard campus. The premise of the exhibition, *Frank Stella 1958*, was to present a body of work Stella produced the year after he graduated from Princeton University. The show was monumental for me because I could easily identify many of Stella's interests and inspirations. The artists Morris Louis, Jackson Pollock, Jasper Johns, and Robert Motherwell were all very alive in the work. It was refreshing to see the struggle and exploration of an art icon before his breakthrough famed "black paintings." It was validating to see this type of experimentation and searching exposed in the history of one of our greats.

Graduate school has been a time of travel through experimentation. The journey has almost always been a search for materials and sources that match my need for working with the self-referential narrative within the framework of a process. Repeatedly, I would venture out and turn back, only to venture out again, packed with new materials and image sources, in search of a complete process.

In retrospect, there have been no dead ends, only quenched curiosities that sometimes cleanly, often clumsily, lead one to the other. What is left is a series of explorations from

which I can pluck similarities, clues to my core interests and methods. In the end, I believe I have found a place of clarity, where interests and process converge.

STEP 1: THE CRAVING

Working within boundaries can nurture creativity. A vast majority of my graduate work has centered on the creation of a structure, within which art making becomes possible. My upbringing has led me toward my dual needs for structure and creativity. Raised by two parents who are educators in two very different fields has directed me to create a hybrid approach to art making.

My Dad is an accomplished scientist and postsecondary educator. He is someone I perceive as very regimented and methodical, searching for answers and order through science. He instilled in me a need for organization and structure, which provides the underlying skeleton to my work.

My Mom, an elementary school teacher, worked towards her masters in elementary psychology, a cutting edge degree for her time. Her answers to questions come from a more emotional, humanistic observation. It is through her I become in tune to my relationship to the people and the world around me, my personal history, and how it has shaped my present day life. This sensitivity to humanistic relationships provides the external flesh to my explorations.

Explaining my career path before returning to school as an art major clearly illustrates my natural working methods and need for structure. Directly out of high school, I attended Johnson & Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island, majoring in Culinary Arts. Although I had an interest in the fine arts, I was unclear about what it meant to make art professionally. Being an art major felt too open and limitless while the cooking world offered the creativity I required within a clear set of guidelines. There was comfort working within the boundaries of a recipe or time constraints that are inherent in a kitchen scenario.

After graduating from Johnson & Wales, I worked in the kitchen of a classically European Café in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. It was at Café Brioche that I learned the skills of pastry. I soon began to realize that all ingredients had certain personalities, which once understood, could be manipulated to achieve certain results. A certain raw material, such as chocolate, or meringue made from egg whites, had certain limits that, if pushed too far, would create a failed product. But, if I could recognize and learn those limits, I could work within that framework not only to bake a successful torte, but also I could invent a whole new torte with equal success. The ingredients in a pastry shop kitchen are fairly minimal compared to a savory kitchen, but it is the arranging of ingredients that yields different results. I thrived in the pastry kitchen learning and experimenting with flour, sugar, chocolate, nuts, eggs and fruits, and was given free reign to create new recipes and products.

In addition to the very clear framework intrinsic in every pastry kitchen, I thrived on the creativity juxtaposed against the monotony and physicality. Baking and cutting 500 petit fours can be extremely monotonous. Pouring fondant, a temperamental liquid sugar icing, over the tiny cakes is a very fast, physical step, while decorating each tiny bite-sized pastry was the reward for it all. What to place on the top of each petit four was always fun, and I could finish each pastry as I saw fit with colored buttercreams and decorations.

Working in a professional pastry kitchen was rewarding for me in so many ways, but it lacked the freedom of self-expression. Pastry work was methodical labor, and the guidelines were too strict. After working in pastry shops for nearly 10 years, the pull towards fine arts continued, so I abandoned the kitchen and went back to school as a fine arts major. I liked the structure of the kitchen, but craved a more personal type of creativity in a more intellectually demanding atmosphere. I was hoping that within the fine arts I could create a structure that I could work within. I wanted to use art making as a way to identify and make sense of the world and people around me.

STEP 2: THE METHOD

All works of art are, in some ways, formally *arranged*. In most cases, the artist makes conscious decisions about the *placement* of things such as color, shape, and line. My paintings are “arranged” with precise compositions.

Arranging is a very specific activity I employ to inform the composition, and therefore, the content of the work. Arranging involves the physical movement of dry shapes on the canvas or panel. The shapes act as data, or ingredients, that directly inform the composition, and often content, of the final work. The shapes could be cut pieces of paper or cloth for example, moved about on a tabletop or floor.

Arranging dry mobile forms and colors as a preliminary step to inform a painting, has been a common thread in a large majority of my explorations, both as an undergrad and as a graduate student. Working with a data set is very much rooted in my culinary training, as I would arrange ingredients to achieve a premeditated result. I treat the dry, mobile forms as ingredients, which, if arranged appropriately, and for the right reasons, can yield an effective painting.

STEP 3: THE INGREDIENTS

Being an art student in the 21st century can be a daunting proposal. It can, at times, be overwhelming to know that just about anything can be done, at any time, within the program. Realizing that I didn't need to be painting, per se, I took the opportunity to experiment with materials and sources while still staying within the loose parameters of painting.

The search for physically “what” to arrange has been the source for much of my experimentations. While working on my MFA, I have experimented with both materials and sources for shapes with which to arrange.

Prior to attending VCU, and during my first semester, I was working with a viscous, clear gloss polymer medium that I poured in layers on rigid panels. I felt that this material was somehow important to me. It had properties that were interesting, so I set to push it and discover its possibilities.

I mixed the medium with acrylic paint and applied the liquid on large sheets of stretched plastic in single separate strokes. For variation of mark, I would apply the medium in

several ways. I would pour it out of a small container, brush it in large, sweeping arcs, and let it drip from the brush or my fingers. The activity was very gestural and physical. It was reminiscent of the movement required to pour liquid fondant over hundreds of petit fours, and also referenced abstract expressionism and Jackson Pollock's drip paintings. When left to dry, the paint would peel cleanly off the plastic, resulting in a single, tactile dry brushstroke or drip.

Depending on the pigment to medium ratio, I could create a wide range of opacities and transparencies. The colors of the strokes were limitless as I added and mixed conventional acrylic paints in the medium. Needing a system of organization led to separating the brushstrokes in bins specific to color. The process was very mechanical. I would simply produce more strokes of a specific color when a bin of color ran low. There was no specific formula to the color because the motivation was to have a significant stock of each color from which to pull from.

To create a work, I would lay a collection of premade strokes and drips on a rigid panel, and arrange them endlessly without having to commit to their permanence. Working on a rigid panel laid flat on a table, I would very spontaneously add and remove strokes and drips as I saw fit. I could also move around the panel and observe the composition from all four sides. This deconstruction of the classical painting process of addition and subtraction directly on the painting surface without leaving any mark afforded me extensive contemplation before I had to commit to any one composition.

This led to a very important shift in my position as the maker of the work, and marks the first step in removing myself from the center of the work and the inspiration for content. A finished piece was no longer a record of process; it was a display of a final composition. I would permanently adhere the brushstrokes only when I arrived at a composition, informed by the arrangement of the strokes that created a certain reaction in me. The reaction could have been a memory spurred by two colors being placed next to each other, or a composition that was evocative of a scene from a window in my childhood home.

I worked in this manner for several months until I felt the need to discover more possibilities for the strokes. Identifying the fact that the strokes, in their dry state, did not require a rigid surface to back them, I began draping and hanging them over rods, the tabletop, and ceiling pipes. This was the second step in pushing my materials and letting them dictate the direction of the work: I became an active observer attempting to put my materials in a setting they required.

Soon, the brushstrokes were abandoned. They began to feel gimmicky and focused too much on the material itself. There was nothing personal about the strokes. They could have been made by anyone without significant aesthetic change. I ventured off again, in search of a source that could provide me with the ingredients to arrange.

During my third semester, I experimented with several more sources. I recorded shapes and textures with my digital camera. I took hundreds of photographs of leaves, rocks, houses, gravestones and statues. Working with images printed on the Epson printer, I cut the images into shapes as a very direct form of collage. I took photos of all of the food I ate for several consecutive days, hoping for inspiration through color and texture. Nothing captivated me until I came upon the work of Ingrid Callame.

There is a certain stain in the hallway I notice every time I pass it. There is something beautiful about its form: a splash of a liquid falling on the floor. Callames' method of tracing drips and stains on buildings and streets for use as her source material resonated with me, and I felt that it suited my process. As an avid hiker and cyclist, I enjoy spending as much time as I can outdoors being physical. I've always noticed shadows and I am attracted by the way they are skewed representations. I was curious if they could be representational if taken out of context, and placed on my studio walls.

I began tracing shadows outdoors on old window shades from the building. The shades were very large, up to 9 feet long and five feet wide, and allowed me to work outdoors on a very large scale. After collecting drawings of trees, park benches and parking meters, I cut the shapes from the material, and stapled them onto the wall in a variety of arrangements. While working, it became difficult to ignore the references to Callame, and the work of Sally Smart, who became very important to me at the time after seeing her work at the Anderson Gallery on campus.

What was missing from these endeavors was a personal connection. Each attempt at finding a source for materials to arrange felt unfulfilling, because I saw them as simple formal endeavors void of any self-referential narrative. One of the things that separated art making from pastry making was the opportunity for me to use the art making process as a tool with which I can help make sense of and contemplate my place amongst my surroundings. I felt that previous endeavors were rooted in a process I did not feel a connection to.

ELLSWORTH KELLY

Realizing that I didn't need to be painting, per se, I took the opportunity to experiment with various media, source materials, and presentation strategies. The words "painting is dead" rang in my ears from my undergraduate education, and I didn't have the evidence to prove that statement otherwise. I felt lost and frustrated. I didn't yet know how to formulate my own guidelines or recipe; I only knew how to follow them.

I had pulled a giant stack of books from the library to bring into a beginning drawing class I was teaching. One of the books was *Ellsworth Kelly's Tablet 1948-1973*. The book was important because it illustrated how Kelly used the mundane as source material for shapes. Void of any supplemental text, the book displayed a dense collection of images, culled from popular culture, that were marked by Kelly's hand. The shape of a torso in a newspaper clipping, a map of Vermont, a crushed sno-cone paper all became signature Kelly's with the mark of his pen. It was solidifying to see so clearly a way of working from source material.

What drew me to Kelly's work was the simplicity of his shapes, particularly his etchings. I found it remarkable that he could achieve a dynamic composition with an economy of

color and form. This stripping away felt appropriate for my natural working style and interest in arranging shapes on a flat surface.

STEP 4: THE RECIPE

After working with a variety of materials and material sources, the work highlighted in the thesis show represents a style that has resulted from two years of experimentation.

Working with paint on canvas, a method for art making I had previously thought lost to the contemporary art world, is now a process that I feel the most content with.

Between my third and fourth semesters, I built wooden stretcher bars and stretched canvas.

I had an idea to return to the classical approach to painting: paint on canvas. I had the work of Kelly in the back of my mind, and I set a simple goal to work through a narrative using flat color and simplified shape. Collections of shapes, cut from paper and contact paper, acted as the data I began to use to make sense of, and communicate, my surroundings and personal history. Pulled from a roll, the stock shapes varied from very small up to three feet in height or width. Initially, the shapes were made by randomly cutting the paper into a variety of shapes. This resulted in a small pile comprised of the shapes themselves, and the negative space of paper, which was kept as well.

A painting typically began after feeling a connection with one of the found shapes. When sifting through the stock shapes, a connection was often contingent on my mood or state of mind, and I may have picked up a particular shape several times before I felt a connection

and decided to use it in a painting. After sifting through the pile, a specific form may spur an internal dialog or evoke a memory. The painting then proceeds around the personal connection with that shape and additional shapes are added as required to help play out the narrative. *Double Hammer Poke and Bend* and *Double Point, Balance Bend*, represent this working strategy, and are the first two paint on canvas works.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Initially, the process of arrangement remained a critical step, as it was for previous endeavors and experiments. Once two or three shapes were found to play out a narrative, they were independently taped on the canvas and moved around as I observed the relationships between them, and on the confines of the two dimensional surface. My approach to translating the shapes from paper form to paint on canvas was not rigid and direct, but remained pliable as the painting itself evolved. If an element of an arrangement was not working in relation to other elements, or within the boundaries of the canvas, it was changed or omitted as needed.

During the initial paint on canvas investigations, my focus was on the arrangement of the paper shapes. The choice of colors was not intentional, but was instead a very loose, intuitive decision making process. This approach to color was a continuation of the way I dealt with the paintskins, when my interest was in the arrangement of the color or shapes themselves, not in their relation to content.

The use of color and shape became personalized when I began to approach a painting with a specific idea in mind. When this happened, I would create specific shapes, and choose specific colors to convey that idea. *Balance, Slip and Slide* (Figure 3) was created in this manner, and was inspired by the idea of dependency. After recently getting engaged, I have become acutely aware of my dependency on another person. This is a way of life I have not experienced since childhood, and is a very uncomfortable situation for me as a

typically independent person. Devoting myself full time to my art education and practice has been a central element in our relationship, and I have found myself dependent on him not only financially, but emotionally as well.

The idea of dependency is communicated through the shapes of the two figures, and the relationship between them. I perceive my fiance as a very solid, quiet personality, a supporting and foundational figure. He is represented by the light blue solid figure on the left of the painting, while I become the liquid, highly electric red of the rounded dripping figure. The relationships between the two shapes can appear to be ambiguous, with regard to who is playing the role of stabilizer. This ambiguity is accurate and can expose even more the core personalities of the figures, and that which they represent.

Certain shape characteristics lend themselves well to certain personality traits, and *Balance, Slip and Slide* serves as an excellent example of this idea. Round shapes evoke a feeling of soft, slippery, liquid personalities that can be unpredictable or potentially unstable. I often feel uncomfortable working with these shapes, and to date have never used a completely rounded shape, void of any two straight lines following one another to create an angle. Conversely, shapes made up of primarily straight lines, and therefore angles, evoke a feeling of confidence, solidity and strength. In this way, I chose the shapes to depict the characters in the painting.

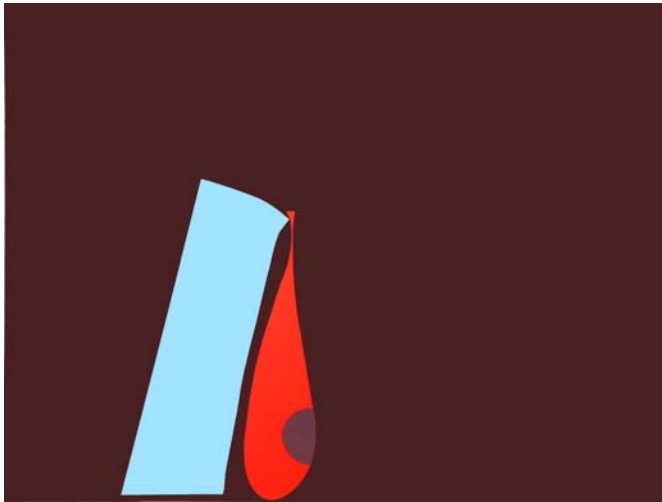


Figure 3

The painting *Rub, Roll, Slide Off*, (Figure 4) was conceived in the same manner as *Balance, Slip and Slide*. The painting serves as an ideal example of my use of color and shape to support the personalities of the characters who are acting out the narrative. The looming grey shape is existing as both dark and heavy in terms of color (as a storm cloud) and light in shape (with regard to the soft, round lines of its underbelly) The electric red color below is bright and optimistic in spite of the looming grey, braced in anticipation to either carry, or repel (slide off) the looming grey.

In both paintings, the dark ground is acting as the psychological context that supports the dynamic between the two forms. The color of the negative space around the figures enhances the narrative similar to that of theatrical mood lighting during a stage performance. It can create a feeling of tension, anxiety, relaxation or grit, and is chosen to further enhance the play between characters.



Figure 4

Approaching a work with a very specific intention, as with *Balance, Slip and Slide* and *Rub, Roll Slide Off*, was a slight shift in the way the painting was informed, and remains a marker in continuing to develop my relationship to a work. As the paintings evolved throughout the semester, the reliance on stock shapes to inform the work became less frequent as I became more comfortable with my ideas and process.

STEP 5: THE PRESENTATION

With each new painting, the main focus of process began to fall away and I was able to change focus to formal issues playing out on the canvas. The way I treat formal issues such as the canvas edge, and the surface of the painting, play a supporting role to the narrative, but are essential to the overall aesthetics and logic of the work. These issues function in a similar way a garnish, platter, or presentation can enhance a cake or torte; they don't change the core meaning, or flavor, they simply enhance it.

All of the two dimensional work made over the last two years dealt with the canvas edge in a similar manner. Rarely do the shapes extend past the edges of the canvas as I treat each rectangle, or square, as a complete narrative contained within the four sides- top, bottom, left and right.

Increasingly, the surface of the canvas is acting in a similar manner as the edges. As a result of my process, paint is built up in hard-edged shapes. Although the paint may only be less than a millimeter thick, the raised area creates a ghost image when painted over, and are very difficult to cover or sand away. The ghost image is problematic as it creates

visual noise and superfluous information in the pared down compositions, especially in the negative space surrounding the figures.

The need for a smooth surface, void of any trace of under painting, has become simplified by the use of drawings. For the first time in my work, I have begun to not only make, but also use, drawings in the form of collage to inform the color and compositions for my paintings. This is the most recent shift in the way the paintings are informed, and is an extremely exciting step for me. It marks the first time I have worked with preliminaries, rather than working out ideas on the surface of the painting.

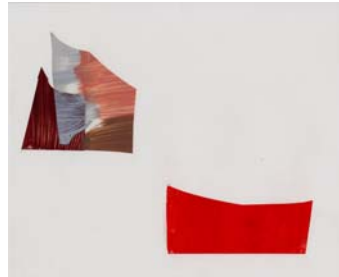


Figure 5



Figure 6

The collages are created using cut pieces of contact paper, which can be peeled off of the paper and reset (within limits, as the contact paper loses tack). The material allows me to return to the working style of improvisational arrangement that was present in previous explorations. Because of the ability for the material to be moved and rearranged, I feel very free to experiment with shapes, color, and their relationships. It is a very loose and intuitive way for me to work through existing ideas, and discover new ones.

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STEP 6: THE CAKE

The Thesis Exhibition marks the end of experimentation in search for materials and sources with which to execute the self-referential narrative. Working with paint on stretched canvas has become the ideal format to execute my ideas.

The exhibition at Anderson Gallery is a compilation of both collages and paintings, hung in a manner that embodies the work itself. The hanging style is a bit awkward, and the work is hung in proximity or distance to enhance each piece. The work is arranged with the architectural elements of the space in mind. (Figure 9) I chose to exhibit the most recent work, as it displays my most current ideas and working style. It is a combination I feel comfortable with, and confident about, and allows me the room to grow and evolve.



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

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VITA

Jody Schwab was born July 30, 1975 in Lexington, Kentucky, where her father was beginning his career teaching at a university. Six weeks later, she was placed in a cardboard box, which was strapped into the back seat of a 1974 Pontiac GT. With her Mother behind the wheel, she was driven, with her older brother, to rural New Hampshire where she spent her formative years, and where her parents still reside.

Directly out of high school Jody attended culinary school at Johnson&Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island. She worked as a pastry chef both in New Hampshire and California before attending Humboldt State University and receiving a BA in art. In 2006, Jody finished her formal education at Virginia Commonwealth University, where she received her Masters in Fine Arts from the Painting and Printmaking department.