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Through My Eyes

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

by

Candace B. Conklin

Bachelor of Liberal Studies, Mary Washington College, Fredericksburg, Virginia, 1999

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
December, 2006

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ARTIST STATEMENT

I am the one my friends call the creepy one. My art is not pretty or happy. It is an expression of my inner feelings and thoughts. I don't make pretty pictures because I find them void of true emotional substance.

I developed my point of view when I photographed my eyes, which have become a consistent theme in my work. Eyes are the window to the soul and the key to my inner emotions. I have since expanded my work to include other images. I continue to seek ways to help my viewers experience my work both emotionally and visually. I want them to see the world through my eyes.

Through My Eyes

In the Beginning

I entered college without a strong background in art. My early years of college are not pleasant memories. A professor once told me that she hoped I wasn't planning a career in art because I had no talent. I took her word for it and left school after two years. This is an example of how a teacher can influence a student's life.

For twenty years I regretted not finishing school. So at the age of forty, I decided to retry undergraduate school. Again, I was in class with more experienced art students. I did well academically but I still dealt with the same insecurities about my artistic ability. Yet, I earned a degree and teaching certificate and in 2000, I began teaching middle and elementary school art.

Shortly thereafter, I began taking classes through Virginia Commonwealth University's Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) Program. The first graduate level class I took was *Computer Transfers* taught by Bob Worthy. I purchased my first digital camera for this class. I could change the images in a wide variety of ways by using a computer program. Manipulating images with the computer became addictive. I sat for hours variously changing a single photo. The possibilities are

infinite and technically fool proof. This process was so much easier than the darkroom with its chemicals and failed attempts at developing. I was hooked.

The computer transfer class led to other classes that tapped into my creativity and helped me find my inner voice for my ideas. I was finally proving my first professor wrong; I was making a career in art. If only that professor could see my work now.

As I See It

I manipulated a vast amount of imagery before finding one that truly interested me. This happened when I decided to photograph my face, focusing on my eyes. Eyes have always fascinated me. It is possible to tell a lot about people by looking into his or her eyes. Eyes are the window to the soul and the key to the true person inside. Working with my eyes has helped me with my own identity issues and to truly see myself.

As a teacher, I direct a lot of self-portrait work with my students. I find it very enlightening. You can learn volumes about a person from viewing how they see themselves. The same was true for me when I began making my own self-portraits. I first tried using my entire face but I began removing pieces, as in *What I See* (Appendix, 1). I removed my

nose by copying smooth portions of my flesh from other parts of my face and placing them where my nose had been. I found that by using just my eyes, I was able to create any type of mood that I wanted. I soon began adding collage elements and color to the images of my eyes without my face. In printmaking, I found that I could change the color of my eyes and even print on top of them for a different effect. This reduction in elements and the ability to manipulate images opened a new creative door for me.

Beyond my own eyes, I also work with the eyes of children. *Circle* (Appendix, 2) is a group of children's pictures surrounding a mirror. As a teacher I see the plight of children everyday. Too often we look but don't see anything. In *Circle*, I used the mirror to make the viewer a part of the picture. The viewer's image is reflected in the center of the picture, surrounded by the children's faces. The small square mirrors on the right and left sides help to create reflections that distort the entire image. In society today, things are not always as they appear. People tend to not want to get involved in difficult situations. They feel as though other people's problems are not their concern. The mirrors draw the viewer into the picture and make them a part of it. They cannot pretend that they don't see the sad children because their reflection is staring back at them. This might be viewed as a social commentary; to me, it's what I see everyday.

Media of Choice

As an undergraduate, I began working with black and white photography by using traditional film and darkroom procedures. The results were beyond my expectations. I had found a form of art I loved. I experimented with various techniques. I tried hand-coloring, infrared lenses, various filters, and different speeds of film. At the time, I was elated with the results. But looking back, the possibilities and results were very limited due to the limitations of the technology associated with darkroom photography.

The discovery of digital photography and manipulation expanded the world of photography for me. These allowed me to explore a vast assortment of possibilities for every picture I took. There really weren't any bad pictures. I could correct just about any mistake. Using the crop function, I could select any portion of the picture that I wanted to remove. In the computer transfer *Blue Eyes* (Appendix, 3), I have cut out the eye portion of my face in an irregular manner. I used the crop feature to help establish a mood for my piece. I could also remove unwanted parts through cloning, as I did in *What I See* (Appendix, 1). I also used this feature to repeat or remove unwanted objects in the background. In *Eyes*

(Appendix, 4), I repeated images by selecting and copying them into a single picture. The manipulating of my eyes helped me to deal with things that occurred in my life. I found that manipulating my face and eyes helped me to deal with the turmoil going on inside of me. In summary, I could combine, change, select parts, correct, rotate, and distort any image with the click of a mouse. The possibilities were endless for my art, as well as how I viewed myself.

Bookmaking allowed me to work three-dimensionally and explore a totally different type of media. In *Family Bible* (Appendix, 5), I incorporated the altered book process with clay. I created a compartment inside an existing book by cutting away the center. I attached a paper that resembled a Bible's cover to the existing cover of the book. The skeletal hand emerging from the center of the book was fashioned from clay and joined together by pipe cleaners, so that the fingers can be moved. The piece refers to the old adage about everyone having a skeleton in the closet. Following the same theme, *Shattered Life* (Appendix, 6) is a miniature coffin lined with shattered mirror pieces. When the viewer opens the lid, their image is reflected back from inside of the coffin. This book is about a figurative or emotional death that an individual can experience.

Although I also work sculpturally with books, I find the manipulation of digital media to be the most satisfying. I am able to best

express myself through the editing of images

Poetic Influences

I have included portions of my own poetry in some of my work, as in *Echoes* (Appendix, 7).

A multitude of teardrops
Unheard cries
Echo endlessly
Into silence.

My poetry, like my art work, is dark in nature. Edgar Allan Poe (1809 – 1849) is my favorite poet. He expressed himself through the written word and I express myself in visual art, yet we each tell a story of the true inner voice. We both share a similar aesthetic concerned with the darker side of life. In the poem *The Raven* (1845), Poe speaks of never ending sadness. Through his words he gives a mental image to this feeling in the form of a raven.

“Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!” I shrieked, upstarting-
“Get thee back into the tempest and the Night’s Plutonian shore!
Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!
Leave my loneliness unbroken!- quit the bust above my door!
Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!”
Quoth the raven, “Nevermore.”
(Modern Library, 945)

Through words he can describe his sorrow to his readers. I attempt to share my feelings through visual images. In *Buried* (Appendix, 8), I want

the viewer to experience the image emotionally. The image in *Buried* is that of me buried in the sand. The only parts that are visible are my eyes and fingers. To someone who is claustrophobic, it could be interpreted as literally and physically being buried. But, there are symbolic and metaphorical ways to be buried, such as feeling like there was no way out of a situation. Like Poe, I focus on a feeling of all-consuming loneliness. It is very important to me to have the viewer associate with my work emotionally. Therefore, I emphasize and elaborate on feelings that I want the viewer to respond to. Poe's poem that best summarizes the emotional theme of my work is *Alone* (1829).

From childhood's hour I have not been
As others were- I have not seen
As others saw- I could not bring
My passions from a common spring.
From the same source I have not taken
My sorrow; I could not awaken
My heart to joy at the same tone;
And all I lov'd, / lov'd alone.

(Modern Library, 1026)

As in Poe's poem, the emotional focus of *The View from My Room* (Appendix, 9) reflects the feelings of loneliness, as well as best summarizes my childhood. As in the poem, I always felt different, alone, and isolated. My work reflects me and my feelings. I believe that my audience has had experiences like I have had at some time in their lives, and this is what I want them to recognize in my work.

Visual Influences

Dorothea Lange (1895-1965) is a photographer who has influenced my work. Her photographs of migrant workers and their plight are forever etched in my mind. Their eyes are haunting. They draw the viewer in and refuse to let go. *Ditched, Stalled, and Stranded* (1935) is one example of her powerful and meaningful images. The man's eyes and expression convey his feeling of utter dismay. The viewer feels his pain and despair. In my piece, *Green Eyes* (Appendix, 10), I have tried to incorporate the same type of beckoning stare. The off-centered face peering through the torn deckle frame is intended to reach out to the viewer. The eyes of the face are trying to elicit some type of a response. They are eyes with a message and one that some people may not want to hear. *Circle* (Appendix, 2) is another link to Lange's work. The children's sad faces and the centered mirror are used to draw in the viewer. I feel that my work connects to Lange's *Mother and Children, on the Road* (1939) who are imploring you not to turn away, but to help. I believe, like Dorothea Lange, that there are subjects that people need to be reminded of, the plight of women and children being one of them.

In Conclusion

Attaining my Master of Interdisciplinary Studies degree at Virginia Commonwealth University has been an emotional journey for me. In the beginning, I was frightened and lacked confidence in my ability as an artist. Through experimentation, observation, and determination I have learned and accomplished more than I could have ever imagined was possible. I now have the confidence and ability I need to reach my goal of being a credible artist. I am no longer fearful of people viewing my art work and I am looking forward to exhibiting my work. I finally have attained the goal I set for myself thirty years ago.

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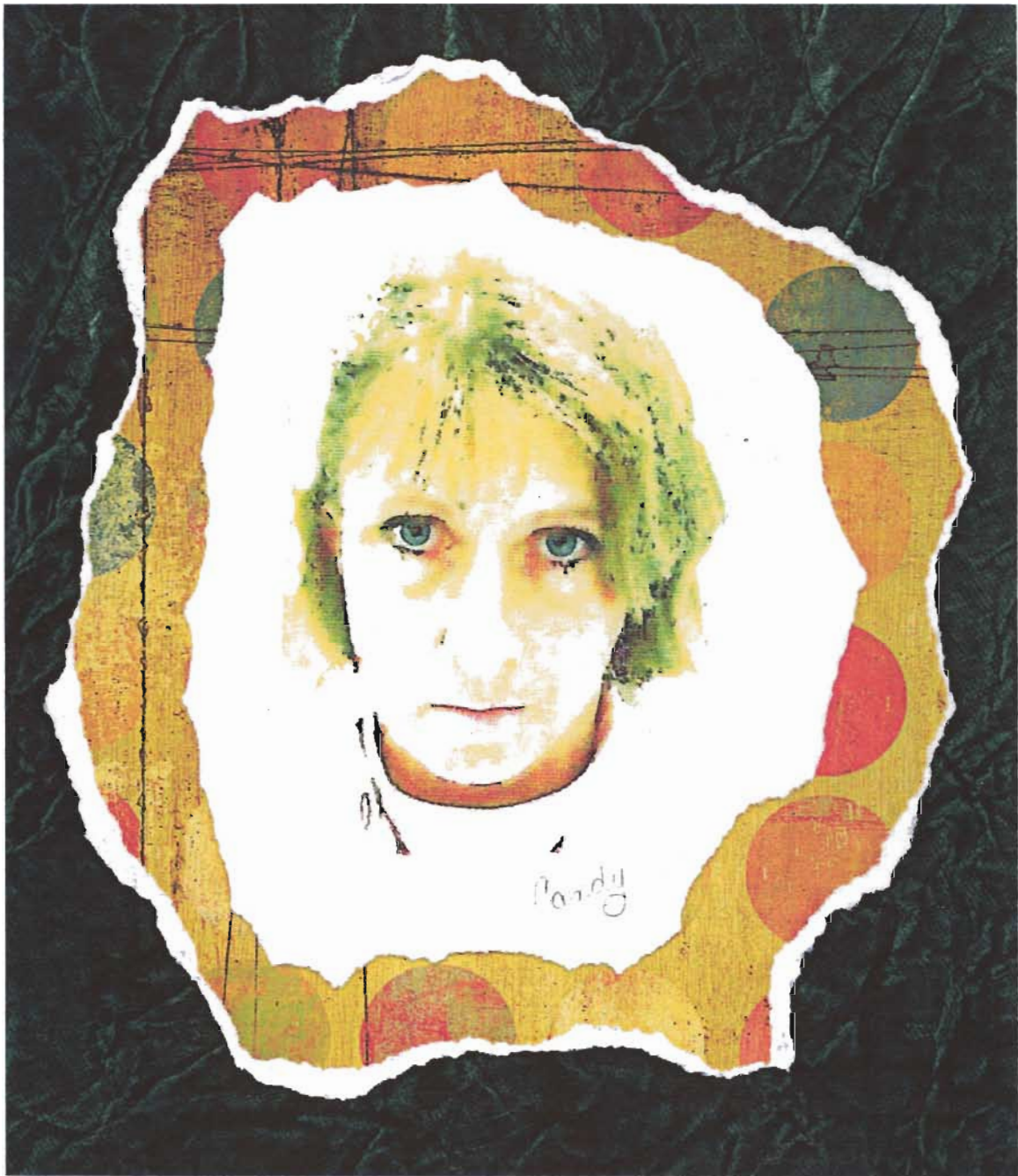


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Figure 2. *Circle*, digital prints and mirrors, 24.5" x 22", 2004.



Figure 3. *Blue Eyes*, digital transfer, 8" x 10", 2005.

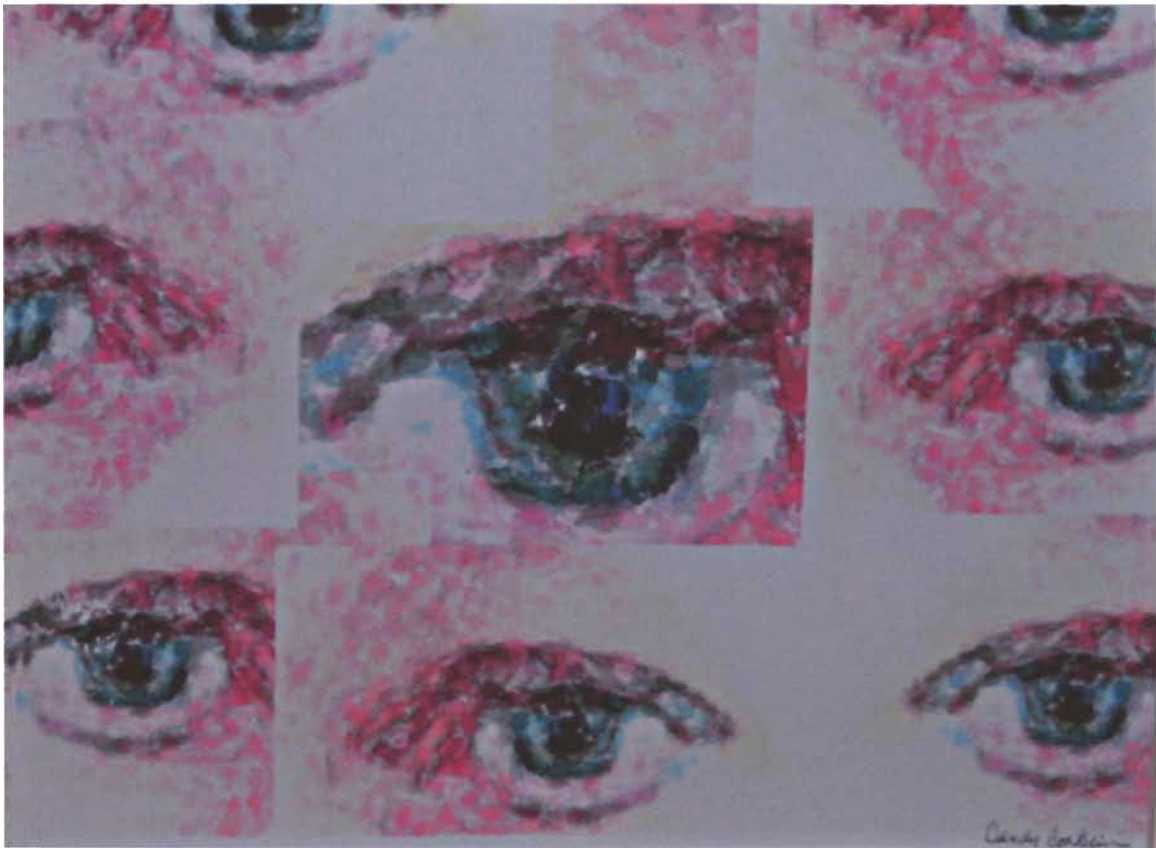


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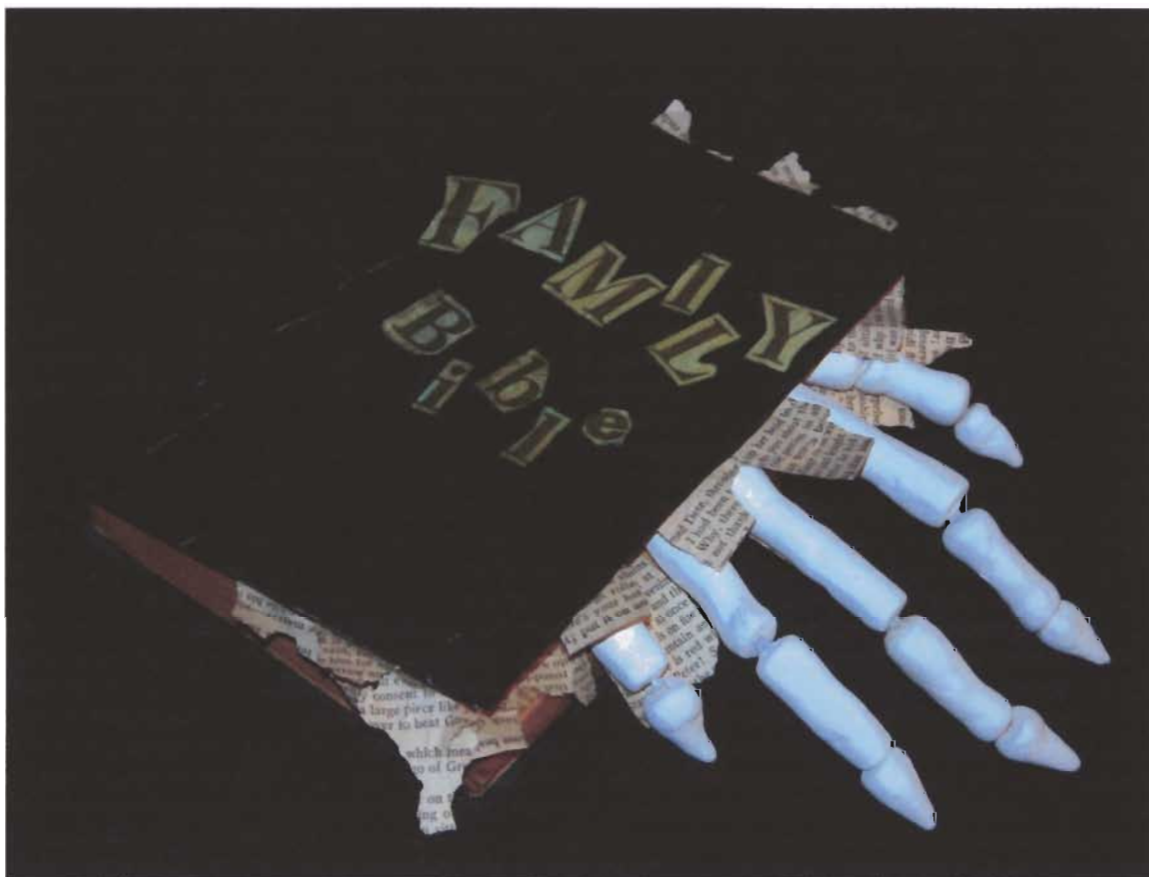


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Figure 10. *Green Eyes*, digital transfer, 13" x 16", 2002.

Candace Conklin

Education:

- 2006 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.
- 1999 Bachelor of Liberal Studies, Mary Washington College, Fredericksburg, Virginia. Major in Art.
- 1976 Associate of Arts Degree, Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale, Virginia.

Teaching Experience:

- 2000-Present Traveling Art Teacher, Stafford County Public Schools, Stafford, Virginia.

Professional Organizations:

- 2003- Present Stafford Educators Association, Stafford, Virginia.
- 2006 Virginia Art Education Association

Exhibitions:

- 2006 *Through My Eyes*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, The Daily Grind, Fredericksburg, Virginia.
- 2004 *Group Show*, Frame Designs Gallery, Fredericksburg, Virginia.
- 2002 *Group Show*, Colonial Art and Frame, Fredericksburg, Virginia.
- 2001 *Computer Transfer Show*, Colonial Art and Frame, Fredericksburg, Virginia.
- 2000 *Computer Transfer Show*, Colonial Art and Frame, Fredericksburg, Virginia.
- 2000 *Faculty Show*, Stafford County Public Schools, Stafford, Virginia.