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Light and Life

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

by

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December , 2006

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Artist's Statement

Faith and family are the aspects of my life that bring me joy and inspiration. This joy is represented as *light* and is present both literally and symbolically in all my work. I use light or a flame in my ceramic pieces to represent warmth, love, and spirituality. Images of nature are employed to suggest life. My most recent ceramic work embodies aspects of family and the joy of motherhood. My paintings focus on my family and are centered on the moments or memories that are significant to them. I try to paint the *light* of their lives.

Finding My Visual Voice

Although I have always had a great interest in creating art, my early art instruction was very limited. With very little formal training, studying art in college did not seem practical to me. Growing up in a large family made money tight and we lived by the adage, waste not, want not. This permeated everything I did including creating art. Art work had to be practical, which usually meant it was designed as a gift for someone. Perhaps subconsciously, this gave validity to my creativity which otherwise was something I lacked the confidence to do on my own. Because of this doubt in my artistic ability I did not believe it was something I could utilize to make a living. In college, with the knowledge I wanted to teach, I needed to declare a major in order to minor in education. After researching my options, I realized that with careful course selection a few extra credits would allow me to major in Art and double minor in Middle Education and Art Education, graduating with a Bachelors of Science in Art and two teaching certifications from James Madison University.

I was amazed by the wide range of art courses involving many materials I had never been exposed to. I took classes in as many different disciplines as possible, wanting to try everything at least once. This was both liberating and restrictive at the same time. I loved all my classes but had limited credits to take any extra electives in any one area. This worked out well to satisfy the

requirements for a teaching degree in art, but was not helping me to identify who I was as an artist.

A series of events landed me a student teaching position during summer school in Fairfax County, which led to a fourth grade teaching assignment. While my first two years teaching were rewarding, I longed for the inspiration of an artistic community. I needed my own creative outlet. The art teacher at my school told me about the Masters of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) Program through Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) and I enrolled in my first class.

VCU MIS Graduate Program

Ceramics: Part 1

My first VCU class was in ceramics, a medium I struggled with in college but wanted to try again. I took this class four times, each time getting more comfortable with the material and closer to the freedom of expression I had always strived for. My first two semesters provided me with a sound base in techniques and understanding of the personality and properties of clay.

Most of the emphasis in college had been on the wheel. Still inclined to believe all my work had to be functional, I spent two semesters with George Juliano trying to perfect my throwing abilities. By the third and fourth semesters, I realized that I wanted nothing to do with the wheel and spent my time exploring the possibilities of hand-building. Throwing on a wheel had become frustrating

as I could only work with it in the classroom. Hand-building, conversely, seemed limitless and I began to become excited about my work. Using a slab roller, I was able to create large slabs of clay of a consistent thickness that could be handled in a variety of ways. First I experimented with textures, intrigued by the effect of the glaze on the varied surfaces once fired. There were multiple ways of creating texture. I used texture plates like those for printing or elementary crayon rubbings, sprinkling the surface of the clay with baby powder to prevent sticking and then rolling the back of the plate with a light, uniform pressure. Stepping on the clay captured the tread of my shoe. Imprinting leaves was effective only on very thin slabs of fine clay. Wanting to try more ways to alter the clay's surface, I began carving and cutting into the slabs. This needed to be done when they were leather hard in order to maintain the desired size and shape of the slab itself. The flat, two-dimensional properties of the slab seemed to contradict the standard 3-D aspect normally associated with ceramics. The realization that clay could be used to create something other than pottery excited me and I explored it as a sculptural process. I began to create work that was symbolic and spiritual to me, confident that I could make something expressive versus merely functional for a change.

My first pieces combined Raku ceramics with stained glass. There is a natural contrast between the cold, smooth surface of glass, and the warmth and texture of the ceramic surface. I had taken undergraduate courses in stained glass and was excited to experiment with this combination.

For the first piece, *Glass House*, I used smaller textured slabs of clay to



Figure 1

for sliding stained glass panels providing access to the candle in the center as well as permitting the color of the glass to be switched as desired.

The second piece is more about the symbolism associated with the light from the candle, and was the catalyst for a directional change in my artwork. (Appendix, Figure 2) I wanted to infuse my work with implications of the things that have paramount importance to me:

construct a sculpture that houses a tea light or votive candle in its center. (Appendix, Figure 1.) I like the implied spiritual nature of candles as well as stained glass and wanted to highlight both elements. By varying the texture and glaze of the ceramic walls, I was able to maximize the effects of a Raku firing.

I also engineered the walls to allow

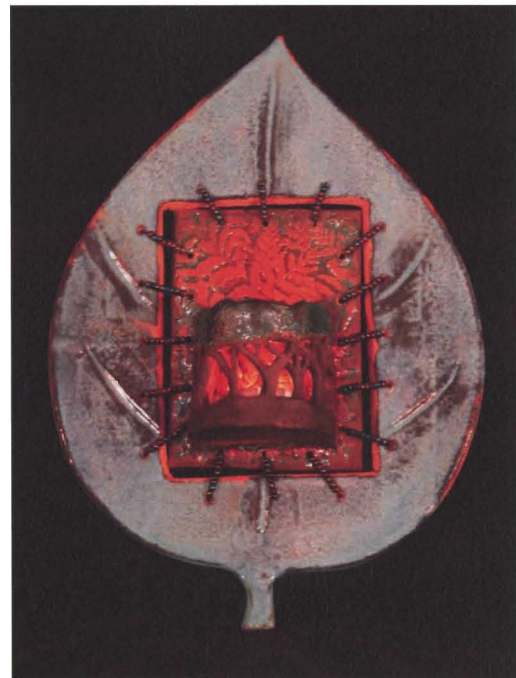


Figure 2

faith and family. Sitting around a campfire and singing songs as a family are vivid memories that bring me joy, a sensibility that I want to imply with my work. The campfire is symbolized by the center, or *heart* of the piece. To capture the intimacy of the memory, I wanted to conceal the candle with a glade of trees. The glow of the candle and not the flame is intended to be the focus of the piece. In order for this to happen, the viewer should approach the piece at eye-level. A vertical presentation was the solution. This format has its own set of challenges since a three-dimensional piece that is hung has no base or support from a table to stabilize it. All seams must be without cracks or flaws because they are constantly fighting gravity. This piece was constructed from four separate slabs that required careful joining. The construction began with a half cylinder affixed to a slab "floor" fused to a textured back panel. The pieces needed to be formed separately and dried evenly so that they could be joined once leather hard. With these components connected, I began carving the walls of the cylinder into trees. This was the most delicate work I had ever done with clay and I had to be very careful to keep the carving from drying too quickly and cracking. Framing the tree's panel within a larger slab would provide the additional scale I was interested in. Wanting the frame to be of equal importance but not distract from the center panel, I decided to use the unusual contour of a large Katalpa leaf, like that of an upside down heart or tear drop for the exterior frame. Glazing the parts differently would give me subtle contrast and keep the focus on the center panel. Using a traditional high fire glaze for the outer leaf, layering a light green

over dark created a muted, delicate color. A Raku glaze on the center panel would maximize the effect of the candle light by allowing it to play across the iridized colors of the glazed surface.

The biggest aesthetic challenge I faced in planning this piece was deciding how to join the inner panel of trees to the outer leaf. This bond needed to maintain a natural feel and mirror the open space found between the tree branches. This decision needed to be made before any firing, because once fired, the structure of the ceramic surface could not be manipulated. I opted to lace the pieces together with a waxed thread which required drilling small, evenly spaced holes around the perimeter of the interior panel, and drilling corresponding holes into the Katalpa leaf while both were leather hard. Once both elements were glazed and fired, I was able to make the decision to embellish the thread with iridized glass beads, adding another quality of texture and detail by mirroring the colors of the raku glaze.

Ceramics: Part II

The last semester with George Juliano was my most fulfilling. It was spring time and my father was converting to Catholicism after raising his four children in the Catholic Church. This experience was moving to me triggering two pieces directly inspired by his faith development. The first was a statue of St. Francis of Assisi that was intended as a gift for him. My father is a lover of nature and I wanted him to have this statue to put in his garden on Easter.



Figure 3

I had never sculpted a figure before, nor any piece this ambitious in size. I knew I wanted it to stand at a finished height of around 18" as well as be durable enough to withstand the elements if left outside. Calculating the shrinkage before hand was something I had no experience doing and designing for the elements demanded careful consideration. The piece would need to be hollow for drying and firing which could be used to my advantage.

(Appendix, Figure 3) Designing an open and hollow form would allow water to run in and out of the piece without getting trapped preventing it from freezing and cracking the statue when left outside. I constructed the figure by draping and folding slabs to mimic robes on a body, concealing the openings while preventing water from collecting in the piece. The base was formed by standing a thick slab on its side and pinching it together to create an inverted cone that was wide and open at the top and bottom. This would be the lower half of the body, which meant it had to set up before the top part of the torso could be added. A smaller slab was draped around the top of the cone and hunched over at the neck to create the shoulders and arms of a robed figure. The arms were slightly raised with the hands together, leaving the center open through the base. This would guarantee that air could easily escape during firing, reducing the risk of breaking

in the kiln. I attached the head to the back side of the opening, concealing the neck in folds like that of a hood. My first attempt was a disaster. Not only did it blow up in the kiln because of incomplete drying, but the face was frightening, not at all the gentle and nurturing expression I intended. The second attempt was more successful. Fashioning eyelids over the open eyes softened the face, while using thicker slabs allowed me to add an extra inch to the height. I understood that glazing the statue would help protect it from the elements but I wanted a finish and color that would fit with the idea and purpose of the piece. Patti Koreski, another member of the class, had a glaze she called Bronzed Green. She had used it successfully on several outdoor pieces making it a natural choice for the glaze.

The final work from this semester was less obviously religious in nature, but more spiritually significant to me. After completing the statue, I was eager to continue hand building. I wanted to return to the combination of raku and glass, this time employing the idea of



Figure 4

the trinity. (Appendix, Figure 4) Realizing that my faith was private and personal, I wanted to express it without overtly displaying it. I had given the book *The Tale*

of Three Trees: A Traditional Folktale, by Angela Elwell Hunt and Tim Jonke, Illustrator (1989) to my parents the previous Easter, and re-read it during this class. Looking at the subject of the book and the content of my previous artwork, I realized that I could once again use trees to tell a story in another vertical piece. My design was to have three ceramic trees, one for each part of the Holy Trinity, in relief in front of a mirror backdrop. At the base of the trees, is a shelf that displays three candles. The glow from the flame illuminates the face of the viewer with their reflection showing in the mirror visible between the trees. Approaching this project, I relied heavily on the skills acquired in the production of the previous two pieces. The mirror backing and glass votives required the ability to calculate shrinkage to control the final size of all parts of the components. The appearance of the piece: the carved trees, candle light, raku surface, as well as fabricating it from slabs that needed to be carved and joined at leather hard had me revisiting the techniques used in my earlier MIS classes. My progressive path through these ceramic courses had come full circle. I was using all of the skills initially taught in separate projects that finally resulted as personal freedom of self expression.

Painting: Part 1

My first painting class was landscape painting with Kurt Godwin. Unlike ceramics, I had no formal instruction working with this medium. Although I did not take any painting classes at James Madison University, I was very eager to

refine my skills at the graduate level now that I had time to devote to it.

Independent learning was enjoyable, but I needed the support of an instructor and the feedback of peers to advance my skills. The format of the summer class was the perfect environment to meet both of these needs. I had experimented with acrylic paints for a few years and had recently tried oils. Oils, being so new to me, were exciting so I chose to continue working with them this semester.

Working outside was liberating and it was thrilling to be able to work directly on the canvas from observation. I found the extended drying time of the oil forgiving and easy to manipulate for blending and rendering details. I became caught up in the details and frustrated when they did not come out exactly as I wanted them to. The free and fluid compositions I saw in my mind were not translating onto the canvas. My brush strokes were tight and controlled rather than loose and carefree.

I was happy with my paintings, but not with my artistic development and enrolled in two more semesters of painting with Kurt to continue the learning process. Acrylic paints are easier to transport and are Kurt's chosen medium, so I decided to use them to take advantage of his knowledge. These next two classes were also focused on landscapes, but this time, we were working inside using other visual references. Still desiring to free up my brush strokes and break away from tight detail, I tried working with a palette knife for an entire composition. I had never worked with one before and found the experience a welcome deviation from the brush. By the third semester, I was beginning to feel

comfortable with a style in-between the tight realism of the first semester and the looser experimental strokes of the second. It was during this semester that I completed *Trinity Window*. (Appendix, Figure 5) Although the under painting



Figure 5

began with acrylics, with the intention of finishing it in oils, a glazing demonstration changed my mind. Using thin washes of paint and diluted

acrylic medium achieved a depth of color that I previously thought was only possible with oils. I applied this technique to my painting several times, first a dark wash over the entire canvas to unify the planes and colors. After a second layer of highlights and detail work, I glazed it again, this time only in select areas I wanted to push back. The third time I glazed it was with a lighter wash of paint to control the viewer's eye by highlighting the focal points of the composition. I was pleased with the result. For the first time, I felt like I had created a painting that conveyed a mood. This composition was taken from a photo my sister took during a semester abroad in Ireland and was completed as a gift for her. I began

to realize that a connection to my work, whether directly to the subject or the purpose of the piece, had a huge impact on my satisfaction with the completed piece.

Painting: Part 2

All my artwork was going through an evolution. I found myself returning to my old habit of creating things for other people with the difference that it was now out of creative necessity not the handicapping need for everything to have a practical purpose. I had created several pieces, both two dimensional and sculptural, as gifts and the fulfillment I derived was addictive.

I was ready to try my hand at oils again, and took two classes with John Figura. Fueled by the skills acquired in the previous semesters, I decided to try my hand at portraits. Not wanting to be traditional, and intimidated by the subtle tones of flesh, I opted to do monochromatic representations of my sister's three children. Their distinct personalities and passions made choosing the colors for each of them easy, however, finding the right hue was not. I had no idea that there could be such difference in tones within a single color. My original choice of dioxazine purple for the most animated and vivid of my nieces, resulted in a cold, death-like complexion. With a problem time like this, having an instructor experienced with oil and color theory was invaluable. John suggested cobalt violet and the difference was remarkable. Changing the color literally brought life back to the painting and I began to really think about the impact of color choice

on a composition. I was satisfied with the likenesses I had achieved in the portraits of my nieces and nephew and felt ready to challenge myself with additional portraits, yet unsure about the compositions. I wanted images that captured a moment and told a story. I wanted to convey something about the relationship of the subjects in a moment of joy, much like the tender moments of family portrayed in works by Mary Cassatt. Two paintings, *Grandpa's Seedling* and *Sisters* are an attempt to do this. (Appendix, Figures 6 and 7)



Figure 6



Figure 7

Jewelry and Unification

Nearing the end of my course work for the VCU/MIS program, I still needed some electives. Craving change and something totally different, I signed up for Jewelry Making with Carmen Alvarez-Keefer. Working with PMC (precious metal clay) was a much needed creative departure from my previous media

choices but still a hands on process. I was finishing a leave of absence from the program for the birth of my first child and needed the time for myself as an artist. Free to experiment, I tried many different applications for the material and was excited by the possibilities. Carmen required a final ambitious piece that utilized a majority of the techniques we had learned in the class. Not wanting to let the potential for a truly unique piece pass me by, I chose a project that employed knowledge and subject matter derived from my two main bodies of my work up to



Figure 8

creation, water, and wind. (Appendix, Figure 8) There are seven blue sapphires set in the center tree to represent the seven days of creation.

this point: ceramics and painting. The resulting pieces called *Trinity Triptych* are three independent pieces that work as one unit as well. Each one represents a singular part of the Trinity while depicting the same imagery I used to symbolize it in *Three Trees*. The first of the series is the blue piece symbolic of the *Father* or

The second piece, the *Spirit*, is red like the element fire, and the tongues of flame



Figure 9

used in biblical depictions of the Holy Spirit. Seven red rubies are set in the center tree for the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church.

(Appendix, Figure 9) The final piece is the *Son*. Painted only in neutral earth tones, it represents the earth from which we come, and the idea that Jesus was the “son of man”. The center tree is adorned

with gold leaf, another basic element, to set it apart from the other two.

(Appendix, Figure 10) Each set of trees is set over a mirror to further unite them to the ceramic work and to subtly invite the viewer to interact with each of the pieces.

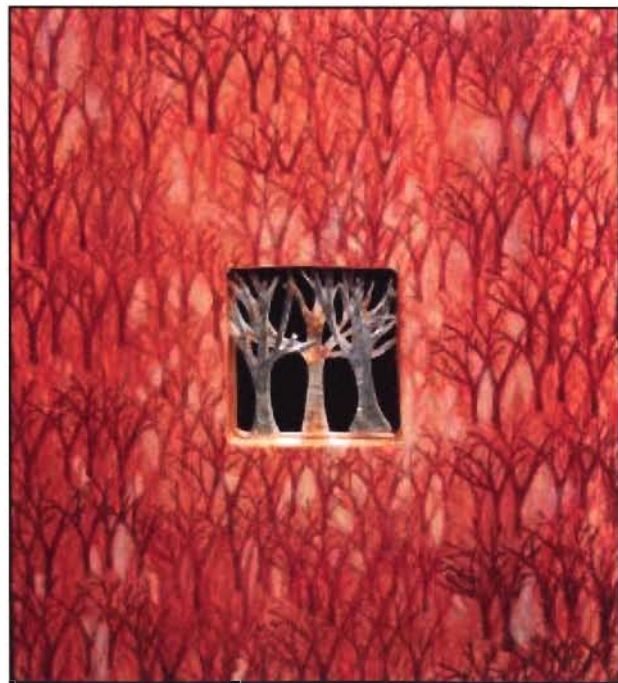


Figure 10

Sculpture

My most recent class in clay and final studio course was Ceramic Sculpture with Margaret Boozer. This class really moved me forward in my ideas about the possibilities clay holds as a sculptural medium. My previous boundaries in terms of size and subject matter were abandoned. Although this class was all hand building techniques, it was more physical and we were urged to become much more in touch with ourselves and the clay. For the first time in all my clay work, I did not approach every project with a set outcome in mind. I truly let the process define the piece and as a result, the pieces that were produced are a direct extension of who I was at the time. My work, still spiritual, now also embodies my joy being a mother. At 5 1/2 months pregnant with my second child, my pieces centered around family and being a mother.

The first piece, *Unit* was designed as a study for a much larger monumental piece, but I was happy with it as a final work on its own merit. (Appendix, Figure 11) As my identity is strongly linked with my family and faith, this piece is intended as an abstract depiction of



Figure 11

both. The center square is like the “child”, or in a religious sense, the “Son”. It is

protected in the center by two sides, leaning in to convey shelter. The smaller side is the “mother”, and the larger one the “father”. Growing through the entire piece is a single tree, symbolizing the idea of life connecting everyone. The same image of three trees from my earlier works is repeated in the opening at the top of the back wall of the main chamber.

After creating the study for *Unit*, I began to focus on just the center box. I forgot about assigning it any preconceived significance and began to think about the interaction of the tree with an external cage. The edges of the square softened and the idea of an egg emerged. I was enchanted with the idea of what it could represent, especially with life in the form of a tree inside it. I began to experiment with different methods of construction. The first was taking smaller



Figure 12

fragments and strips of white clay slabs, piecing them together with an equal amount of positive and negative space. The result was a very fragile almost mummy like shell. The second egg, made from terra cotta clay, has a much sturdier stature. (Appendix, Figure 12) It was formed from thick coils, joined and smoothed on the inside and out. This process was much quicker than the strip formation of the first egg and led to a larger,

more symmetrical form. Not happy with the surface of the smooth clay as it was,

I began to think of ways to alter it. The first piece started as small pieces brought together to create a single form. I wanted to do something opposite to this process. The combination of inquisitive students and a professor open to experimenting led to some rather exciting demonstrations, one of which became the technique I would use on my final work. In a discussion of firing and drying, the idea arose to see what would happen if direct heat from a torch was applied to a leather hard clay body. Potters often use torches to speed up the drying process and produce leather hard conditions in a short amount of time, but they are careful to keep the heat moving without the flame ever directly touching the clay. We wanted to know what effect the heat would have on drying clay when aimed directly at the piece. When Margaret held the torch steady on a mostly dry slab, the result was small pieces of clay exploding off the main form as the water and air inside heated up and tried to escape. The ability to control this type of destruction was interesting and was the kind of new process I was looking for. That afternoon, I went to Home Depot and purchased a torch. At the next class, amidst stares from passersby and nervous classmates coming to check on me, I began to torch my egg. The summer heat and my pregnant state required me to take frequent breaks. Fortunately, this process also needed to be done in stages because of the amount of shock to the clay body. If not given enough time to expand and contract with the extreme changes in temperature, the entire piece could break apart. The class ended before I could finish the egg, and it was completely dry by the time I was able to work on it again at home. When I tried

to use the torch on it again, much larger holes with radial cracks formed. There was not enough water in the clay to control the spread of the heat. I had a choice: stop and be stuck with a piece I did not like, or try to figure out a way to regain control of the process and risk destroying the entire sculpture. I decided to keep going, knowing that I was excited enough by the process to recreate the piece if the first one was destroyed. Water was the only element in the surface of the clay I could manipulate so I decided to re-introduce it surgically. I wet a small sponge and held it against the surface of the clay where I wanted a hole. When I applied the torch: Eureka! Clay pieces flew off where the water had touched. I applied more water on the newly exposed surface, repeating the process until the hole penetrated through to the center and worked my way around the entire shell until satisfied with the altered appearance. Fearing that additional glaze firings would be too much stress on the egg's structure, I decided to treat the egg with paint and shoe polish after the bisque firing, giving it a worn and weathered appearance.

Conclusion: Coming Full Circle

When I began taking classes with VCU's MIS program, it was an attempt to satiate my hunger for a creative release. I thought I was happy in the general education classroom and only needed an artistic outlet, yet the more time I spent in a creatively supportive environment discussing my own artwork as well as that

of my classmates and their own students, I began to realize I needed a change. I took a position in the art department at Lake Braddock Secondary School in Burke, Virginia. Fears of inadequacy that had kept me out of the art room as a teacher were eased by my conversations with other VCU classmates. I realize that I did not need to know how to do everything, as long as I was open to learning along with my students. This new freedom has found its way into my art work as well and I finally feel like I am truly an artist. I have found a sense of self in my work as both a teacher and artist that I would not have before my knowledge and experience gained in the VCU/MIS program.

The natural world, specifically trees or some form of plant life is present in almost all of my work. This began as a subconscious coincidence, but the further I got into the VCU/MIS program, the more I began to see connections in my work which I had previously thought to be unrelated. As I approached the thought of my final exhibition, themes of Light and Life have come forward. Light existed in my work literally as the flame of a candle, and in the symbolic form as things which give joy to life: faith and family. The body of my work encapsulates the two. When I attempted to address these themes in my undergraduate work, they seemed out of place in relation to the work of the other art majors. I lacked the self assurance to see the artistic validity in this form of self-expression. It has taken me the better part of a decade to realize that these themes are who I am and portraying them in my work is my identity as an artist.

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CHRISTINE E. BISHOP

EDUCATION:

- | | |
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| 2006 | Master of Interdisciplinary Studies
Virginia Commonwealth University
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TEACHING EXPERIENCE:

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OTHER WORK EXPERIENCE:

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| 2005-present | Youth Minister
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2004-present Member, Vienna Arts Society, Inc., Vienna, Virginia

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