



2006

## Dirty Laundry

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## **Dirty Laundry**

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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Bachelor of Arts, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana, 1985

Virginia Commonwealth University  
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August, 2006



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## **Artist Statement**

### ***Dirty Laundry***

Making art is cathartic for me. Working in a visual medium allows me to communicate ideas and feelings that I would find difficult to express in words. I use a wide variety of traditional and non-traditional materials as symbolic elements in my work. While the pieces are not always pretty, my goal is that they contain an element of irony and humor which helps us laugh at ourselves.

## ***Dirty Laundry***

### **Introduction**

While working through the Virginia Commission of the Arts as an Artist-In-Residence at several local schools, I also began volunteering and teaching classes at the Lynchburg Fine Arts Center in 1988. I eventually became the Director of Education and Outreach at the Center, which was part of the Statewide Partnership Program with the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Working with the wonderful museum staff as a liaison for our organization, I learned about Virginia Commonwealth University's Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) program. I soon found myself enrolled in the program with a focus on sculpture and drawing.

### **Introspection**

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) said in *What is Art* (1898):

To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced and having evoked it in oneself then by means of movements, lines, colours, sounds, or forms expressed in works, so to transmit that feeling that others experience the same feeling - this is the activity of art (Dickie, pg. 85).

In addition to Tolstoy's ideas, I believe that pieces of artwork are also the results of artists' questioning their own perceptions, ways of thinking, expressing emotions, and developing tastes.

Tolstoy used a literary art form to convey his message. I use visual art to communicate feelings, ideas, and opinions. Often I use satirical techniques of

irony, exaggeration, understatement, and distortion as a mode of challenging accepted notions by making them seem ridiculous. Satirists are often accused of taking the moral high ground when mocking others but not if they include themselves in the human condition that they disparage. I want us to laugh at ourselves, as with *Trophy Wife* (Appendix, 1), a bronze casting of a female torso placed on a bowling trophy base.

Far from being simply destructive, satire is implicitly constructive. Some artists feel not only justified but perhaps obligated to use their mode of expression in a satirical way as an intended means of provoking social change. For instance, Garry Trudeau's (1948- ) comic strip *Doonesbury* satirized a Florida county that had a racist law that stated minorities were required to have a passcard in the area. The law was soon repealed with an act nicknamed the Doonesbury Act. Dr. Seuss (1904-1991), in over 400 political cartoons, called attention to the evils of fascism, the early stages of the Holocaust, the discrimination in America against African-Americans, and our destruction of the environment. His efforts brought social injustices to light and helped change public opinion.

The intent of these cartoonists was to use their art form in a political way in order to make the world a better place. I try to make a statement in my own work, using visual images to express my opinions and beliefs.



## Aesthetics

I have always worked with the human figure, and worked to perfect a form that was realistic and correct in proportion. In recent work, I've discovered that the use of iconic symbols can evoke emotions and feelings I want to convey, rather than merely portraying the beauty of the human form. The use of symbols also allows for a greater fluidity of interpretation and suggestions of meanings. I find that the lines and curves of the female form can be stylized in a more lyrical way than the male form. I've honed down the female torso and stylized it into a symbolic form to represent humanity. Sometimes the figure is spoon shaped, as with the detail from *Nest Egg* (Appendix, 2). Women have generally been the caregivers in our culture, and a spoon is a tool used for nurturing.

Women have also traditionally dealt with household chores such as laundry. Combined with the feminine forms, a motif of clothespins recurs in my sculpture as a metaphor for our foibles, such as in *Dirty Laundry II* (Appendix, 3) and *Pinned #6* (Appendix, 4).

The materials I use have meaning to me, as well. I cast one of the female figures in *Rainy Day Women I* (Appendix, 5) with discarded cut-up mop heads, again relating to the position women have historically held in the work force as housekeepers. *We're All Bozos On This Bus* (Appendix, 6), another grouping of female forms displayed as hanging on a coat rack, is made with emu egg shells, snake skin, feathers, leather, and fur, showing that we are only part of the fauna

on this planet.

## **Influences**

To borrow from a remote source does not seem to have the same implication of plagiarism as borrowing from a contemporary source. I draw much inspiration from what is termed Primitive Art. An iconography of stylized human forms, such as I use in my work, was prevalent in Neolithic carvings, gracefully executed by the ancient artists with a wonderful sense of proportion.

Traditional African sculpture, often considered primitive, is a highly developed and extremely sophisticated art form with thousands of years of history behind it. Primitive Art was defined by Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) in a letter to his brother, Theo, as an expression of feeling and instinct (Read, pg. 48). Such work had a major influence on early twentieth-century artists such as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Constantin Brancusi, Paul Gauguin, Jean Arp, and Georges Braque in the Modern Movement, as they began using forms to express the intangible. Picasso's *Head of a Woman* (1907) was directly inspired by an African mask shown to him by Matisse (Read, pg. 51).

Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Georges Braque's (1882-1963) interest in the abstracted quality of Primitive Art, art that expressed feeling rather than perception, contributed to their departure from five centuries of traditional European art, which was committed to representation, into a new form of expression, Cubism. Rather than representation, Cubism was committed to

substitution, using symbols elaborated by the artists for expression of ideas. My own evolution as an artist took a similar route, as I worked perfecting my representational skills before realizing that what I wanted to say could be better said in an abstracted way. I reduced my figurative art into a simple torso form expressing humanity as Picasso reduced his symbol of a resurgent Spain into a finely pared form in *Bull Head* (1943).

Some of Picasso's work was created as social commentary, as was mine. *Guernica* (1937) is perhaps his most famous political piece, inspired by the bombing and destruction of the Basque town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. The painting is an outcry against the desolation of his country by a fascist regime. In *1 Dead in Attic* (Appendix, 7), I express my anger and despair at the ruin of my hometown by the floods caused by Hurricane Katrina and the desultory official aid to victims. Picasso used self-satire in his art, shown with *Painter with a Model Knitting* (1927), an illustration for Balzac's *Le Chef-d'oeuvre Inconnu* (1931), a story about a deranged painter who spent ten years painting the portrait of a woman and ended with a mass of incomprehensible scribbles (Arnason, pg. 392). I ridicule myself with the shape of the figure in *Trophy Wife* (Appendix, 1), using the same form of satire.

As my ideas about my art began to evolve, perhaps it was fate that led me to one of my first MIS program studio classes with Anita Walsh. She changed my philosophy on art. She was adamant that art must speak, and convinced me that content gives significance to the form. Amie Oliver is another MIS instructor who



had a great influence on my work, teaching me how to reconcile the use of multiple materials and give unity to my pieces. She also encouraged me to view the work of contemporary artists.

Then I took an MIS studio class, Kiln-Formed Glass with Jude Schlotzhauer, and I was astounded by the medium. I had never worked with glass before and was amazed at its endless possibilities. When I drew my first fused and slumped piece out of the kiln, *Crucified I* (Appendix, 8), I was in love. I had discovered my new art form.

### **Glass Houses**

I had an inspirational leap after reading a newspaper article about William Bennett (1943- ), former United States Secretary of Education, federal drug czar and author of *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories* (1993) and *The Children's Book of Virtues* (1998). Bennett, on his radio show *Morning in America*, was a great defender of traditional values and an unforgiving judge of anyone who offended against them, reminding his audiences that we need "to set definite boundaries on our own appetites" (Bennett, pg. 88). In the article he was under fire for compulsive gambling, losing \$8 million at casinos in the past decade.

He brought to mind Bill O'Reilly (1949- ), another pundit of moral excellence who vilified society for its absence of decency. O'Reilly, host of *The O'Reilly Factor* on Fox News, was hit with a sexual harassment suit just as he



was starting a publicity tour to promote his latest book, *The O'Reilly Factor for Kids: A Survival Guide for America's Families* (2004), touted on his book cover as "a code of ethics by which to live." Add to the list of morality upholders Jimmie Swaggart (1935- ), television evangelist caught in a cheap hotel with a prostitute; Strom Thurmond (1902-2003), United States Senator who ran for president on a segregation ticket but secretly had an illegitimate daughter of African-American descent; Rush Limbaugh (1951- ), conservative radio talk show host and entertainer who was addicted to pain killers (and buying them on the black market) while claiming that all drug addicts "ought to be convicted and they ought to be sent up" (*The Rush Limbaugh Show*, October 5, 1995); and Newt Gingrich (1943- ), former Speaker of the House of Representatives with close ties to the Christian Coalition who publicly chastised President Clinton for an extramarital affair, and called for his impeachment, while he himself had a mistress on the side.

After perusing my list of moralists, I thought about the aphorism attributed to George Herbert (1593-1633), *People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones*, meaning that we shouldn't complain about others if we, ourselves, are not perfect. It occurred to me that these staunch defenders of ethical standards live in the proverbial glass house of hypocrisy. Since they are public figures that openly criticize the conduct of others, they are fair game for reciprocal ridicule. Hence the beginning of my *Glass House* series.

My first piece, *Preaching Virtues From a Glass House* (Appendix, 9), is

dedicated to the above named gentlemen. The walls are fused clear window glass textured with shapes of clothespins, which represent dirty laundry. The walls are held together in a framework of welded steel. Inside, seen through an open area on the front of the house, is a grouping of female torsos cast in dark opaque glass. These represent naked truths, or secrets. Names of the gentlemen are inconspicuously written on the front of the house.

A second house, titled *Feet of Clay* (Appendix, 10), is held up by clay feet. Having clay feet signifies a weakness or hidden flaw in the character of a respected person and stems from the following biblical story:

King Nebuchadnezzar has a dream. The image that appears to him has a head of gold, breast and arms of silver, belly and thighs of brass, and legs of iron. The feet of this image are made of iron and clay. A stone hits the feet and the whole image breaks into pieces. (Daniel 2: 31-40, KJV)

The walls of this house are also constructed of clear fused window glass with the clothespin motif in a framework of welded steel. The front of the house is enclosed, making the red and black cast-glass odalisque figure on the inside more elusive, indicating something hidden. Names written on the front wall include Ann Coulter (1961- ), a syndicated columnist, author, and television personality who has suggested that the right to vote for women should be repealed; Jim Bakker (1939- ), another television evangelist caught in a sexual scandal, and convicted of financial fraud; and President George Bush (1946- ) and Vice President Dick Cheney (1941- ), who have always managed to keep themselves and their loved ones out of combat while sending others into the

preemptive fray.

The title of house number three, *Casting Stones* (Appendix, 11), relates to the King Nebuchadnezzar story, the George Herbert quote, and to another biblical reference as well. According to St. John 8: 3-7 (KJV), an adulteress was brought to Jesus to be stoned to death in agreement with Mosaic law. He mitigated the situation with "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone," and the woman was set free.

*Casting Stones* has a shape similar to that of an outhouse, a repository of repugnance from which none of us are free. It contains a large transparent cast-glass clothespin. The walls are fused window glass with drawings of nude figures added with a transfer process. It is also held together with a framework of welded steel.

A post-Hurricane Katrina article in my hometown newspaper, the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, inspired another house. The article, and my piece, is titled *1 Dead in Attic* (Appendix, 7). It is a raised Acadian-style model of a house in fused glass with a slanted roof and porch. On the front of the house is a symbol, such as used by rescuers in New Orleans, to show it has been checked and marked as containing a victim. This piece is dedicated to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), whose insufficient response to the disaster may have contributed to the deaths of flood victims.

My latest house is titled *Nest Egg*. It has, perhaps, the most positive viewpoint so far. The fused glass walls in a steel frame have a birdhouse look to



them, with a round hole for a door. It contains a nest compiled of pulled glass strands. To me, a birdhouse and nest mean home and sanctuary. In the nest is a glass egg and in the egg is a small bronze spoon-shaped female figure (Appendix, 2). The spoon figure represents the inner core of our being, the strength that we sometimes need to draw from in times of duress, and the core of goodness that I believe is in all of us. We can all be giving and nurturing.

Although this series expounds my exasperation with the blatant hypocrisy of public figures, points out bureaucratic ineptitude and our human fallibility, it also includes our meritorious side. It encompasses human nature. When we fail to see the eccentricities in ourselves and to be amused by them, we take the chance of becoming monsters of self-regard. We all have dirty laundry. We all live in a glass house. We are all human.

## **Conclusion**

Virginia Commonwealth University's Master of Interdisciplinary Studies program has opened up a new realm of possibilities for me. I've learned new media, such as kiln-formed glass, and how to integrate natural objects into my work effectively. I've experimented with new mold-making methods, and learned new techniques I'm excited about teaching to others. I've found new ways to use my old media, and new ways to view other art. Through networking with other artists I've found material suppliers and venues for exhibition. I feel rejuvenated and full of ideas. I want my new art to reflect my faith - not in the doctrinal sense,

but simply faith in nature and life; faith in the significance of art; faith in humanity.

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Willett, Frank. *African Art*. New York, NY: Thames and Hudson, 1993.

## Appendix

### Slide List

1. *Trophy Wife*, bronze, 9" x 4"x 2 ½", 2005.
2. *Nest Egg*, detail, glass and bronze, 2 ½" x 2 ½" x 3", 2006.
3. *Dirty Laundry II*, bronze, 15" x 12" x 3", 2005.
4. *Pinned # 6*, mixed media, 48" x 16", 2004.
5. *Rainy Day Women I*, mixed media, 30" x 40", 2005.
6. *We're All Bozos on This Bus*, mixed media, 18' x 38", 2006.
7. *1 Dead in Attic*, glass, steel, and copper, 11" x 11" x 8", 2006.
8. *Crucified I*, glass and steel, 19 ½" x 7", 2005.
9. *Preaching Virtues From a Glass House*, glass and steel, 12 ½" x 8" x 6", 2005.
10. *Feet of Clay*, glass, steel, and clay, 13" x 9" x 6 ½", 2005.
11. *Casting Stones*, glass and steel, 12 ½" x 4" x 4", 2006.



Mona Mullins Williams

## EDUCATION

- 2006 **Master of Interdisciplinary Studies**, Sculpture and Drawing  
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
- 1985 **Bachelor of Arts**, Sculpture and Art History  
Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana

## CERTIFICATION

- 1986 **Teaching Certification classes**, Art Education  
Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE (SELECTED)

### EDUCATION FOR ADULTS

- 2006 **Instructor**, Academy of Fine Arts, Lynchburg, VA
- 2002-2004 **Adjunct Faculty**, Central Virginia Community College, Lynchburg, VA
- 1988-2004 **Instructor**, Lynchburg Fine Arts Center, Lynchburg, VA
- 1991 **Instructor**, Lynchburg Montessori Parent Workshop Series, Lynchburg, VA
- 1990-1991 **Instructor**, Holy Cross Regional School Community Workshops, Lynchburg, VA, sponsored by Virginia Commission for the Arts
- 1989 **Instructor**, Boonsboro Elementary School Teacher Workshop Series, Bedford County, VA, sponsored by Virginia Commission for the Arts

### ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

- 2006 **Instructor**, Step-With-Links *African Masks Workshops*, Academy of Fine Arts for Lynchburg City Schools, Lynchburg, VA
- 1987-2004 **Instructor**, Lynchburg Fine Arts Center, Lynchburg, VA
- 1998-2004 **Instructor**, Step-With-Links *African Masks Workshops*, Lynchburg Fine Arts Center for Lynchburg City Schools, Lynchburg, VA
- 2001 **Artist-In-Residence**, Forest Elementary School, Forest, VA
- 1994-1997 **Mini Unit Instructor**, Lynchburg City Schools, Lynchburg, VA
- 1992 **Instructor**, Young Artisans Summer Program, Sedalia Center, Big Island, VA
- 1990 **Artist-In-Residence**, Holy Cross Regional School, Lynchburg, VA, sponsored by Virginia Commission for the Arts
- 1989 **Artist-In-Residence**, Boonsboro Elementary School, Bedford County, VA, sponsored by Virginia Commission for the Arts



**JUROR EXPERIENCE (SELECTED)**

- 2000 **Blue Ridge Poison Center Poison Prevention Poster**,  
Lynchburg, VA
- 1999 **New London Academy PTA Reflections Contest**, New London,  
VA
- 1998 **Job Corps State Art Show**, Amherst County, VA
- 1997 **Annual Kaleidoscope Student Show**, Lynchburg, VA

**ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE (SELECTED)**

- 1994-2002 **Director of Education and Outreach**, Lynchburg Fine Arts Center,  
Lynchburg, VA
- 1997 **Artist Workshop Selection Panel Member**, Virginia Museum of  
Fine Arts, Richmond, VA
- 1992-1994 **Visual Arts Coordinator and Curator**, Lynchburg Fine Arts  
Center, Lynchburg, VA

**EXHIBITIONS (SELECTED)**

- 2006 **Dirty Laundry**, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis  
Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Art 6 Gallery,  
Richmond, VA  
**Annual Area Art Juried Show**, Academy of Fine Arts, Lynchburg,  
VA
- 2005 **Roanoke City Art Show**, Art Museum of Western Virginia,  
Roanoke, VA
- 2004 **Step-With-Links Exhibition**, Lobby Gallery, Lynchburg Fine Arts  
Center, Lynchburg, VA
- 1990-2001 **Annual Area Art Juried Show**, Dillard Gallery, Lynchburg Fine  
Arts Center, Lynchburg, VA
- 1993-1994 **Women Sculptors of Southwest Virginia Traveling Exhibition:**  
Squire Center, Blacksburg, VA; James Center, Richmond, VA
- 1992 **Two-Woman Show**, Upstairs Gallery, Langhorne Manor,  
Lynchburg, VA
- 1985-1986 **Edible Art**, group exhibition, collaboration, New Orleans Museum  
of Art, New Orleans, LA
- 1985 **Group Exhibition**, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA
- 1983 **Group Exhibition**, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA

**AWARDS AND HONORS (SELECTED)**

- 2005 **Best-In-Show Award**, Roanoke City Art Show, Art Museum of  
Western Virginia, Roanoke, VA
- 1999 **Sculpture Award**, Annual Area Art Juried Show, Lynchburg Fine  
Arts Center, Lynchburg, VA
- 1990 **Study Grant Award**, Virginia Commission for the Arts, Richmond,  
VA