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Surface Stories

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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Master of Science, Longwood College, Farmville, Virginia, 1983

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Richmond, Virginia

December, 2006

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Artist Statement

Surface Stories

As an artist, I am fascinated by surfaces and the stories they tell. I have observed that places and objects, like people, wear the effects of age in different ways. Their stories are revealed through peeling paint, rusty metal, and surface patina. My photographs are a record of their state of existence at the moment I am present. I have chosen a point in time when each is at rest, with only the aged surface to hint of a life of use. Their stories unfold with observation through the lens of my camera.

Surface Stories

Introduction

I first heard of the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) Degree from Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) when I accepted a position as Supervisor of Art Education in Newport News, Virginia. I had contacted the university to explore the possibility of locally offering classes for art teacher recertification. What I discovered was something better. Through the MIS Off-Campus Program we could offer graduate classes which could lead to a degree.

These classes were instituted for my teachers but I also took advantage of the opportunity. Initially, I enrolled in a class to sharpen my skills with *Adobe Photoshop*, primarily to have a creative outlet. The position in supervision left little room for creative expression and I missed the energy of my students. When a class in photography was offered, I joined it to increase my knowledge of the darkroom process. I had never worked in a darkroom and I felt I needed the experience to understand effective instruction in that area of my department. After one class I had discovered a new interest and was hooked. I applied to the MIS program and began taking the craft seriously. My educational background had been in painting and I had taught art for many years. My career choices had led me away from the classroom and studio work. I did not have a master's degree in studio art and I discovered that I wanted one. I had participated in art history classes through VCU previously and decided to continue in this area, so I enrolled in the MIS program with a concentration in art history and photography.

In the MIS program, I worked with a variety of photographic processes which included traditional and non-traditional methods. I experimented with interesting printing surfaces including fabric, papyrus, and wood. Aesthetically, I developed a personal preference for the darkroom and traditional methods. My black and white photographs had a strong voice of their own without additional manipulation. Through research, I studied the evolution of critical acceptance of photography as an art form. I approach photography as a fine art, with all the complexities of planning, composition, and problem solving that any art form requires. I am still amazed when slight adjustments in exposure time or a filter change alters the story the photograph tells.

My Photography

I discovered something wonderful when I first looked through a camera lens. The world became focused for me. When looking at a scene I tended to take in everything in the visual field: light, color, texture, movement. I would see a complex jumble of inspirations and conceptions. When looking through the camera lens these elements became condensed and filtered. I was able to focus on the formal issues of composition and hear the individual stories while ignoring the background conversation. I compare this experience to a race horse wearing blinders to focus on the destination and not the distractions. This approach provided a comfortable tool for me, and my camera became my sketchpad.

The first time I entered a darkroom, photography became my art form. I began photographing and developing my images in closely cropped compositions. I had

admired the sharply detailed, close-up photography of Imogen Cunningham (1883-1976). Her personal aesthetic was best demonstrated in her photographs of plants and flowers. Influenced by her subject choices my craft had its start in this direction. My image of a leaf section (Figure 1) is an example of the influence of Cunningham's subject matter and compositional structure on my work.

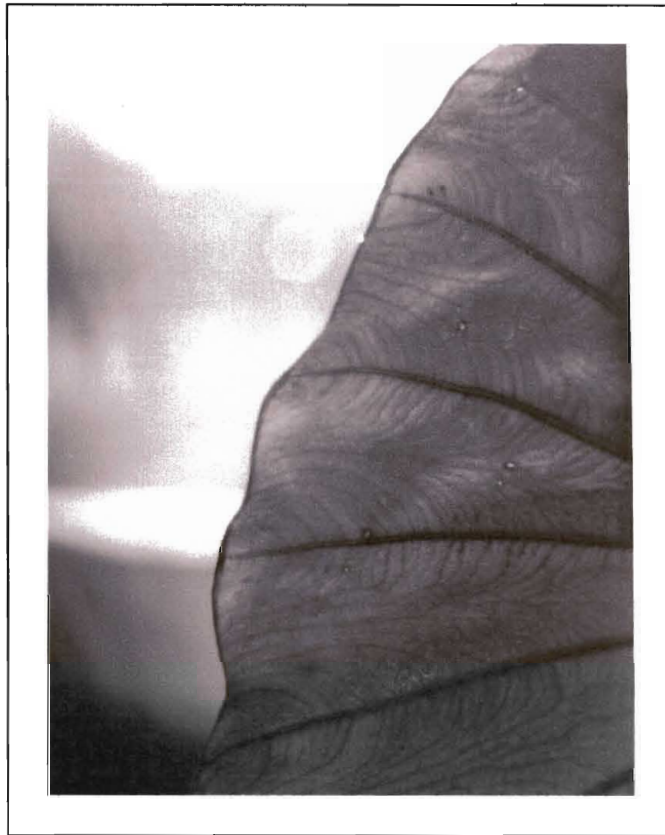


Figure 1. *Leaf Section*, Gelatin-silver print, 9½"x 7½", 2004.

It did not take long to discover that I preferred to photograph on location. I enjoyed finding my subjects rather than composing them in the studio. I soon expanded beyond macro close-up compositions. I felt that my photographs needed the reference of location to be fully understood. Pots lined up by a mission wall in Arizona and storage

pots from Knossos, Greece hinted of their contents when viewed in context. Rather than extreme close-up compositions, I chose to include a small slice of location. This reference lent strength to the surface voice.

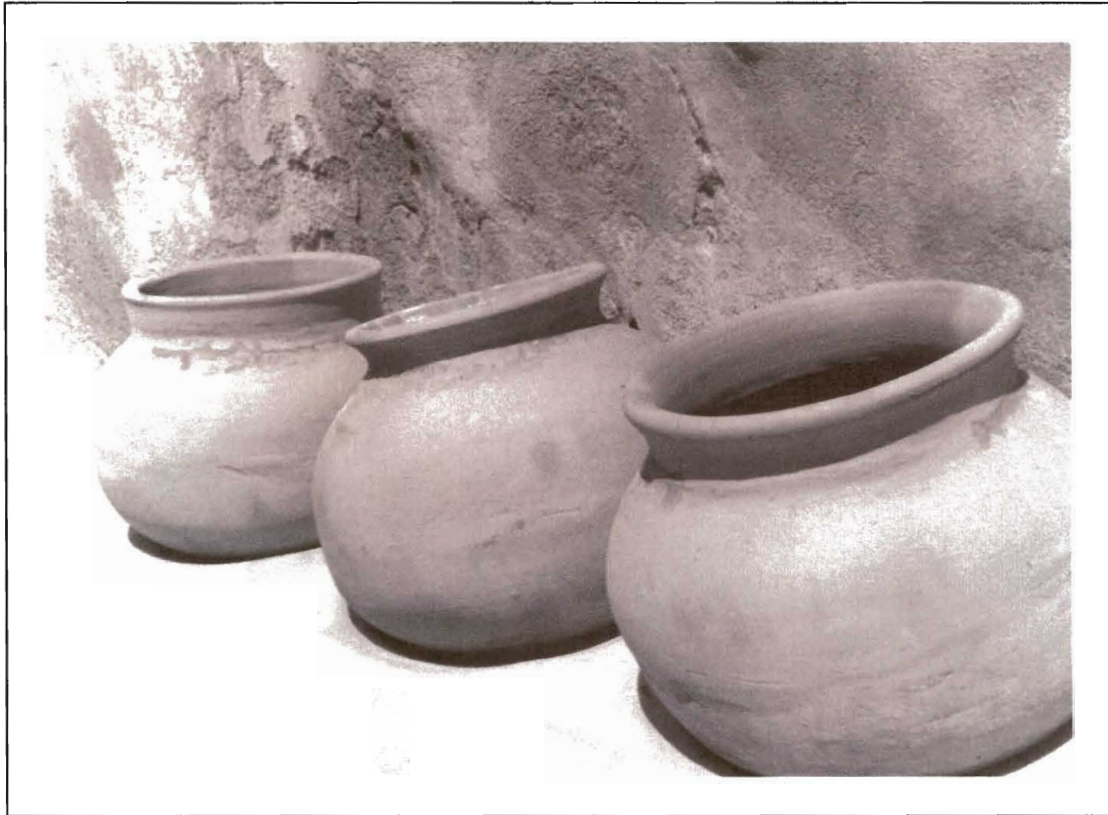


Figure 2. *Pots at San José de Tumacácori, Arizona*, Gelatin-silver print, 8½”x12”, 2006.

In the photograph of the pots at San José de Tumacácori (Figure 2), I was drawn to the elongated composition created by the line of three pots with the textured wall behind them. I had photographed a section of one pot concentrating solely on the weathered surface. In comparing the two photographs I realized that the image had a stronger voice when it included the range of pots and the rough adobe wall. The pots were original to the site and had been used as storage containers. They had been placed in

a sheltered area running the length of the structure. I decided that establishing relationships between the objects and the location would help the viewer to relate to the subject.

Influences

I began taking photographs long before I developed an interest in the history of photography. With the study of photographic processes and trends, I started to identify photographers and styles I could relate to. My attraction to common threads of interest in subject matter, technique, and composition, led to identification of a preference for the approach of straight photography in relation to documentary photography subject matter. The influence of photographers who produced work in this manner evolved naturally.

I could easily relate my own work aesthetic to the subject matter presented in a number of Walker Evan's (1903-1975) documentary photographs. My image of *Mucking The Washing Stall* (Figure 3) and his image *Kitchen Corner in Floyd Burroughs' Home, Hale County, Alabama* (1936), share a striking resemblance in composition, tonal value, and genre. I admired his clean images and his selection of subject matter location. His documentary photographs told stories of people and places without the necessity for captions. I began to study examples of his work and realized I was drawn primarily to his images resulting from a straight photography approach. The photographs I preferred documented the condition of the subjects on site, with little or no manipulation of the subject or the photographic image. The stories his images told were quietly powerful and I worked to develop this approach in my own subject choices.

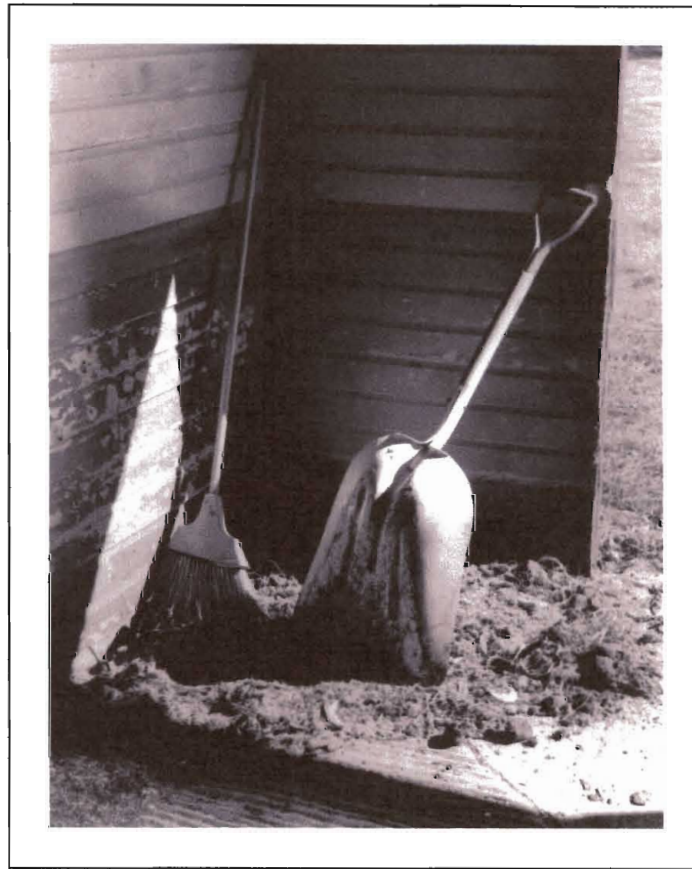


Figure 3. *Mucking The Washing Stall*, Gelatin-silver print, 9½”x 7½”, 2005.

Another influence on my work came from the straight photography of Paul Strand (1890-1976). I studied his close up views incorporating mechanical parts and natural objects. Strand made use of *chiaroscuro* and an infinite range of tonal values as demonstrated in *Rock, Porte Lorne, Nova Scotia* (1919). I also identified with his stark, isolated building compositions. *Town Hall, Vermont* (1946) is an excellent example of qualities in his work which have had an influence on mine. My image of the windmill on Mykonos (Figure 4) has a similar compositional perspective to Paul Strand’s architectural subject. The worm’s eye view and the dramatic lighting accentuate the surface texture and aura of the location.

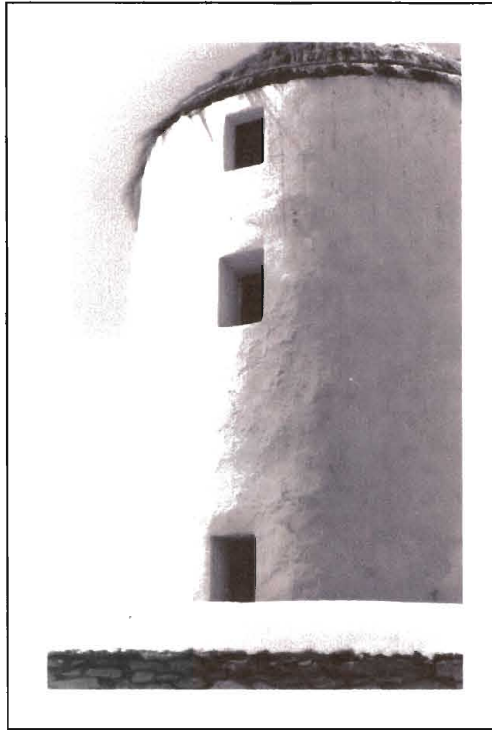


Figure 4. *Windmill of Mykonos, Greece*, Gelatin-silver print, 8½”x 5¾”, 2005.

During my coursework, I studied writings by photography critics. In 1904, art critic Sadakichi Hartmann rendered a wonderful definition of straight photography when he said:

Rely on your camera, on your eye, on your good taste and your knowledge of composition, consider every fluctuation of color, light and shade, study lines and values and space division, patiently wait until the scene or object of your pictured vision reveals itself in its supremest [*sic*] moment of beauty, in short, compose the picture which you intend to take so well that the negative will be absolutely perfect and in need of no or but slight manipulation. (Newhall, 167)

I adopted a straight photography aesthetic for my own work. The objects and locations are photographed as I found them. They are not staged. In rare cases, I returned several times at different hours of the day in order to capture the angle of light I wanted. My photographs are not composed in advance. I rely on the basic properties of

photography (my camera, lens, and emulsion) to produce the story I want to tell.

Another critic in particular held special interest for me and influenced my direction. This was Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) who wrote the essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. In his writing, he stated that the “reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: it’s presence in time and space” (Benjamin, 220). This *presence* includes its place in history, the change in physical condition over time, and the history of its ownership. He stated that the concept of authenticity is outside the sphere of reproducibility, and that the *aura* of a work of art is lost in the mechanical or technical reproduction of it. According to Benjamin, because the technical reproduction of an image through photography can show aspects of the original not perceived by the naked eye (such as enlarged close-up views) it alters the perception for the viewer. (Eisinger, 267)

Benjamin’s writings first led me to consider if a photograph can capture the aura of a person, place, or thing and present it to the viewer. Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary defines aura as *a subtle sensory stimulus and a distinctive atmosphere surrounding a given source*. As I read Benjamin’s essay, his views influenced me to look more closely at my own compositions. I reasoned that an image can cause the viewer to empathize with the subject and feel the circumstances surrounding the location. This is a fundamental purpose of documentary photography. I realized that I was working to communicate a mood with my handling of lighting and the developing process. It was at this point that I began to consider the surface stories as I chose the objects and places I photographed.

My Subjects

When I began photography I photographed objects close to home. The subjects I chose in my rural farming area spoke a familiar language. I had no difficulty in hearing their stories through the lens of my camera. Old equipment left rusting in the field spoke of a life of hard use and abandonment. Old home places and barns had acquired a rich patina speaking of love and laughter. Some now stood empty and seldom visited. Old saddles and bridles conjured visions of trail rides. Barn cats reminded me of the ones I had, as a child, joyfully watched my uncle feed from the udder of a cow.



Figure 5. *Barn Cats and Horseshoes*, Gelatin-silver print, 11"x 14", 2005.

Barn Cats and Horseshoes (Figure 5) documents an essential element in the daily life around the shoeing area. Cats are encouraged to remain close to the stable and feed storage areas to reduce the rodent population. My photograph of these elements related to rural farm life is an example of a straight approach to a documentary photography subject.

I soon expanded my search for surface stories. I have been fortunate that I have been able to travel extensively and photograph objects and places in many locations around the world. During my travels, I began the practice of photographing doors unique to each region I visited. The entryways into homes provided insight into the lives of the individuals living there.

In the Mediterranean, doors tended to be a variety of bold colors. On the islands of Greece, doors were predominately a unique azure blue, presenting a brilliant contrast to the whitewashed walls of the buildings. The color matched the Aegean Sea, which gave these fishing communities their livelihoods. I recognized that the color had become a hallmark of the Greek islands. The color distinguished the doors of Greece from those of other countries. It had understandably become a symbol for Greece and was incorporated into the Greek flag.

Blue Door (Figure 6) and *Red Door* (Figure 7) were photographed in the port area of Pireaus, Greece. The surface is weathered by salt air, wind from the sea, and strong sunlight. It was the entrance to an abandoned building but there were still traces of color in the peeling paint. The door image was printed on fiber paper. This type of photography paper has a slightly absorbent surface perfect for hand-tinting with oils. Using

photographic oil paint, I lightly tinted the door in each of six matching images, creating a range of color from blue to red. I wanted to convey how the effect of subtle color can alter an image and influence the aura it projects.



Figure 6. *Blue Door*, Gelatin-silver print, 9¼”x 6½”, 2005.



Figure 7. *Red Door*, Gelatin-silver print, 9¼”x 6½”, 2005.

While traveling in Italy, I had photographed pots which had been unearthed in Pompeii (Figure 8). Their organic forms and variety of textures attracted me. In looking through my camera, I could see the texture through the play of light and dark. I saw their age, use, and misuse through their surface scarification. The pots were openly stored under an outdoor three-sided shed. The location of the pots among the cast plaster body forms of the victims of Vesuvius lent voice to the tragic history of the site. These images were taken with a digital camera. Later, I used a Polaroid transfer process to enhance the

appearance of age of the vessels. The transfer process allowed me to take the modern digital color images and present them in a medium which preserved an aura of the past.

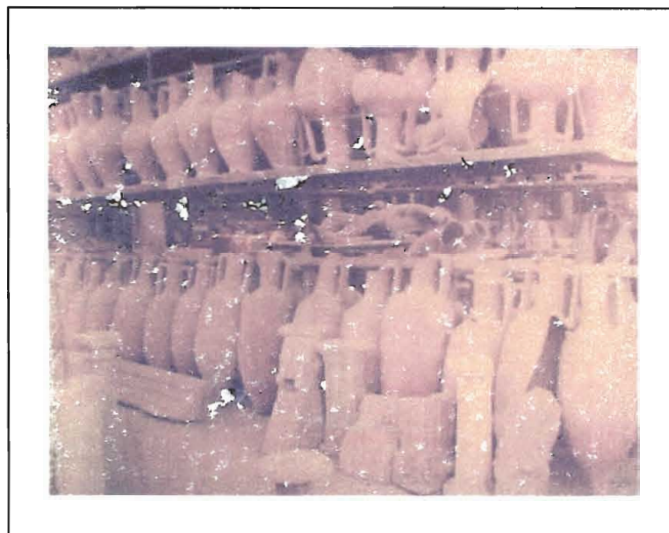


Figure 8. *Pots at Pompeii, Italy*, Polaroid Transfer, 2 $\frac{7}{8}$ "x 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ ", 2006.

During a visit to Greece, I spent some time viewing artifacts in the archeological museum in Athens. The collection there of early Greek vessels was impressive. In addition, the display reinforced my conception of the value of location in establishing an aura of context. The pots in the museum setting held only academic interest for me while I was aesthetically drawn to the large vessels I found in and around the ancient sites. Those I found on location retained an aura of history and therefore made a stronger impression on me. In addition, I came to the realization that my choice of printing media affected the story the image told.

The pots near Mycenae (Figure 9) were large terra-cotta storage vessels. These discarded containers were chipped and broken. They were clustered outside of a working pottery shop in the region of the ancient site of Mycenae, which was destroyed in 468

BC. In the bright Mediterranean sunlight they provided sharp areas of value creating an interesting composition. I chose to use a warm tone paper as the printing surface. This softened the image and preserved the aura of age. In my photograph, it is difficult to tell if they were from an ancient site or were recreations of an ancient style. Although the tradition of straight photography limited printing to glossy paper, I found that my paper choice influenced the surface story and enhanced the aura of the image.



Figure 9. *Clay Pots Near Mycenae, Greece*, Gelatin-silver print, 7½”x 9½”, 2006.

The pot at Knossos on Crete (Figure 10) was photographed on site in the restored city complex. It was housed in an interior room where it was found during excavation. The bright colors were preserved by years under the earth and controversial restoration techniques. Although it is a relic of the 5,000-year-old Palace of Knossos, the use of a

digital camera recording the vessel in color reduced the aura of age. It appears much newer than the Mycenae area pots.

Although I had found manipulating photographic process and experimenting with a variety of printing surfaces interesting, the straight photography aesthetic remained the dominate focus for my work. I felt that preserving the aura of a subject could be accomplished through composition, attention to textural detail, and the effects of natural light. By controlling selection of subject, composition, exposure and development, I could achieve the results I sought.

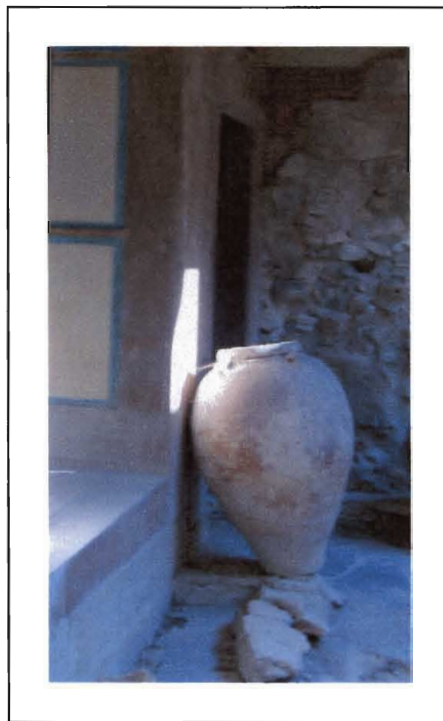


Figure 10. *Pot at Knossos, Crete*, Digital Photograph, 5"x 3", 2005.

Continuing to develop this container series, I began to seek out and photograph pots in a variety of countries. Some were incredibly old and others new and in good

condition. In the beginning, most were made of clay. Later, I added photographs of vessels made from brass, copper, and gourds.

My photograph, *Hanging Gourds, San Cayetano de Tumacácori, Arizona* (Figure 11) was taken outside of Tucson, Arizona while exploring a group of old missions. The title of the photograph comes from the name of the original site of the first mission in Arizona established in 1691. For many years, it was a visiting station of the mission headquarters at Guevavi. In this photograph, the gourds were hung on the post of an adobe cooking hut, where flat bread is prepared today. Although the gourds are relatively new, the practice is ageless. The composition of the photograph recalls an earlier time in the life of the mission. In terms of composition, the post and gourds stand in sharp contrast to the dark doorway leading into the cooler adobe interior. The scene is reminiscent of that first adobe mission structure, San Cayetano. The dark doorway alludes to the dark history of the Pima Indian rebellion which led to the relocation and name change of the original site.

The photograph of the hanging dipping gourds combined my subject interest of doors and pots. In this photograph, the juxtaposition of dark and light areas creates an aura of mystery. In addition, the surface of the rough hewn weathered post stands in contrast to the polished surface of the gourds worn smooth by time and use. The visual surfaces tell their stories in relationship to one another and their existence in time and space. By using a straight approach, I was able to capture the existing site and present an aura to the viewer. The photograph has a *distinctive atmosphere*, or *aura* created by the interplay of light and dark.

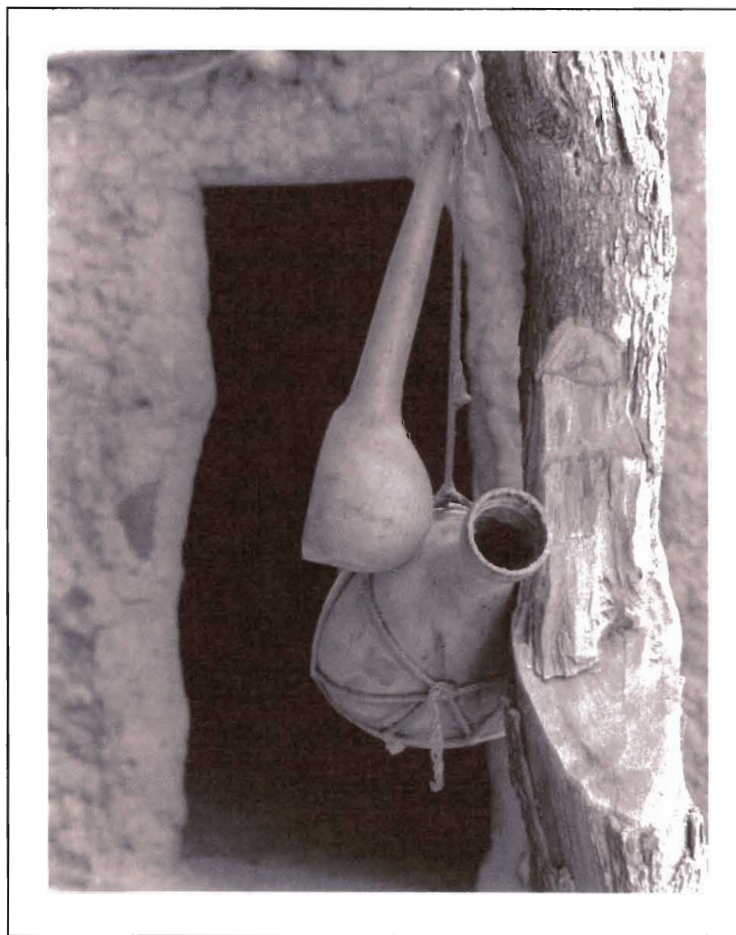


Figure 11. *Hanging Gourds, San Cayetano de Tumacácori, Arizona, 9½”x7½”*, 2006.

In working to develop my personal aesthetic, I discovered that I enjoyed the challenge of capturing an aura through a straight photography approach. By photographing on site, I was able to document a particular moment and place. I seldom include people or record scenes where the objects are actively in use. I prefer to present the voice of my subjects through their surface conditions. With an eye for selection of subject, light, and composition, I create negatives which result in photographs documenting Surface Stories.

Conclusion

I have benefited greatly from participation in the MIS program. It has been a perfect fit. In this creatively structured graduate program, I could do my job as an art education supervisor and still make time for my personal development as an artist. Through the MIS program, I have been able to build strong working relationships with the staff and faculty of VCU, as well as connect with my Newport News teachers as artists. The program has benefited me as an artist and as an educator.

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Patricia Bruce Franklin

Education:

- 2006 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Art: Photography and Art History
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia
- 1983 Master of Science: Supervision and Administration of Education
Longwood College, Farmville, Virginia
- 1973 Bachelor of Arts: Fine Art Studio
Averett College, Danville, Virginia

Certifications and Endorsements:

- 2005-2010 Virginia License, Post Graduate Professional
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- 1990 Certification: Administration of Education
University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA
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Norfolk State University, Norfolk, Virginia

Teaching Experience:

- 2001- 2006 Supervisor of Art Education
Newport News Public Schools, Newport News, Virginia
- 1989-2001 Fine Art Department Head and Coordinator Talented & Gifted Program
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- 1978-1989 Art Teacher, Coordinator Middle School Talented & Gifted Program
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- 1987-1989 Adjunct Faculty, Art
Southside Virginia Community College: Daniel Campus
Alberta, Virginia
- 1973-1976 Art K-12 Teacher and Earth Science Teacher
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Related Experience:

Coordinated adult art education summer international travel 2005 Greek Islands and Turkey; 2003 Italy; 2001 Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia; 1999 England and Scotland; 1997 Greece; 1995 Italy; 1992 Mexico; 1989 France; 1986 Spain

Virginia State Department of Education Project Teams:

- 2006 Art Standards of Learning (SOL) review
- 2001 Led workshop for correlation of core Standards of Learning to Fine Arts Standards of Learning, Region 8, Buckingham County, VA
- 2001 Fine Art Curriculum Writing Project, Lunenburg County, Kenbridge, VA
- 1997 Art Standards of Learning Revision
- 1989/90 Virginia Art Teacher Certification Task Force
- 1989 Standards of Learning Revision: Visual Arts Assessment Materials
- 1987 Virginia Standards of Learning for Fine Arts
- 1987 Strengthening the Basics Across the Curriculum

Professional Memberships/Offices:

- 1980-2006 National Art Education Association, Reston, VA; 2006-2008 Delegates Assembly Representative for Virginia; 2005-2006 Southeast Regional Supervision Division Representative
- 1980-2006 Virginia Art Education Association, Reston, VA ; 2006-2008 President; 2003-2005 Supervision Division Director and 2004; State Conference co-chair; 2001-2003 Secondary Division Director; 1991-1995 Membership and Awards Chair; 1987-1989 Director Secondary Division
- 2002-2006 Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
- 1989-2006 Delta Kappa Gamma
- 1984-2006 Phi Delta Kappa

Other Leadership Roles and Accomplishments:

- 2002-2006 Board of Trustees and Exhibitions Committee, Peninsula Fine Arts Center, Newport News, VA
- 1992-2006 Teacher Advisory Council, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA
- 1983-2002 Virginia Alliance for Arts Education, Richmond, VA; 1990-1991 Membership Chair; 1989-1990 Public Relations Chair
- 1998-2000 Board of Directors, McCullum Moore Museum, Chase City, VA
- 1989-1990 Vice President, Fine Arts Museum of Southern Virginia, Chase City, VA
- 1980-1989 Roanoke River Art Association, Virginia Museum of Fine Art Affiliate, Chase City, VA, 1987-1989 President; 1985-1987 Vice President

Professional Honors:

- 2006 Virginia Art Education Association Art Supervisor of the Year
- 1990 Virginia Art Education Association Art Teacher of the Year-High School
- 1986 Virginia Art Education Association Art Teacher of the Year-Middle School

Exhibitions:

- 2006 *Surface Stories*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Falk Gallery, Christopher Newport University, Ferguson Center for the Arts, Newport News, Virginia.