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Reflection-Refraction

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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Artist Statement

I find my inspiration by looking at the world around me. I take snapshots, compose photographs, and collect physical objects from my surroundings. I interpret these materials by layering printmaking, mixed media, and alternative photographic processes.

I use the simplification of the human form when developing the composition. As my work takes shape, I present a universal person placed in a situational narrative. Layering the human figure with my travels and experiences creates a *pause* or an intimate moment that the viewer shares with the art work.

Reflection-Refraction

Introduction

Entering the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) program for my continuing education was an obvious choice for me. With the expensive price of education I was unsure how I was going to receive a quality education at an affordable cost. During my interview for an art teaching position in Fairfax County Public Schools I found out that Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) has a relationship with Fairfax County. This arrangement provides professional development opportunities to art teachers by offering a Master of Interdisciplinary Studies with a studio focus. Some of the classes available were free or reduced in price; all classes demonstrated the excellence of education at Virginia Commonwealth University. This was one of the main attractions for me to move from Buffalo, New York to Fairfax, Virginia, where I started my first elementary art teaching job.

I began the MIS program in my first year of teaching. Some people questioned my decision to start taking classes so soon. I loved teaching students how to create and to be creative but missed making my own art work. I felt like something in my life had been omitted. I started to make art again with traditional black and white photography. I began exploring and photographing my new and unfamiliar environment. Once I began making art again, I became more comfortable with my new surroundings and became confident in my abilities as a teacher and student. Creating art for me is about communicating

with the world around me

Through the MIS program I was encouraged to try a variety of media. I always felt like I was less experienced than other students in my undergraduate education. I wanted to feel comfortable enough to teach what I learned but also to expand the variety of media in my work. Therefore, I explored jewelry making, bookmaking, printmaking, photography, and mixed media. Each discipline became a thorough study of that material. Putting myself in an intensive learning experience was exciting and inspiring.

As a new teacher in a new city and state, I found I was missing the community of artists that I had grown accustomed to in my undergraduate education. I missed companions and the understanding of people around me who appreciated art. I wanted to connect and collaborate with other art teachers. Having people to bounce ideas around with, or ask an opinion of, became lost in the atmosphere of general education. In this program I was introduced to teachers and people within the community with the same passion for creating as I have. I was able to meet my goals of developing a deeper knowledge of different media, creating a connection with other art teachers and artists, as well as creating my own body of work.

My Subject Matter

The subject matter of my work is derived from the images of the human figure coupled with my travels and experiences. When I moved away from my

family and childhood home, I started to search for my own identity and a sense of belonging to my new community. The different ways I represent the figure in my work symbolizes the diverse person I am, as well as people I have encountered.

I use the image of the figure as the focal point. I simplify images of the human form into contours and silhouettes. I look for physical gestures and develop these silhouettes into symbolic types. For instance, in the diptych *Reflected Movement* (Appendix, 1) I use two images of a woman. These two versions of the same image represent the relationship that the woman has with herself. In the image on the right, the woman's silhouetted figure is filled with a landscape, she is depicted as running in an abstracted negative space. She is bold, colorful, and acting independently of the space around her. In the print on the left, her mirrored silhouette is filled with negative space within the landscape. Here, she literally needs the environment around her to define her existence. These two images are showing two ways that I see myself as I become more mature.

In addition to figures in my work, I also incorporate photographs of physical materials found in my everyday experiences. Insignificant objects are often of the most importance because they are needed in the lives we live. In the image *Conversation* (Appendix, 2), the ground consists of photos of found materials, such as a plastic grid, fabric from a pair of pants, and snapshots of lights. The combination of these photographs went through a series of manipulations, including magnifying and simplifying as well as layering. These

fragments of images symbolize specific moments in time. I layered them on top of one another to create an environment of time and place for the figures.

Like relationships, I think that events are linked together. I believe that small moments in life build upon one another to create seemingly important events. I want to bring attention to these moments by presenting images, such as the distance between people in a crowd, or gestures that people use when interacting with each other. I take elements from these minor situations and isolate them within negative space, calling attention to their importance.

Influences

My interest in the figure, as well as figural sculptures, led me to explore how other artists approached this subject. Early in my studies, I was introduced to George Segal (1942-2000) who is best known for his three-dimensional plaster cast life-sized figures. His figures have limited color and detail, which give them a ghostly, melancholy appearance. The figures are located in reproduced urban environments, such as street corners, buses, or diners. These are places that ordinary people commonly go. The compositions are not separated from the viewing space, so the audience can physically enter the space of the art work enabling them to relate to the figure. Minimal details of clothing, race, and gender make the figures suitable to represent any human being, not a specific person, even though, during the last years of Segal's life he used photographs of the neighborhoods around him and of people in his life as inspiration for sculptures.

When I learned about George Segal's use of figures I began to rethink my own work. I decided to represent people involved in everyday activities. I developed a process, working in two-dimensional mixed media, that related to Segal's process in sculpture of simplifying figures. To do this, I created stencils from my photographs by tracing the figures and a part of the environment, as in *Reflected Movement* and *Conversation*. The stencils are simple silhouettes where I have taken away the details, thus removing a specific individual's characteristics and presenting a universal person. Next, I take the silhouettes and place them in an environment of my manufacture. By creating my images through this process, I feel connected to Segal's ideas of using universal figures placed in a situational narrative.

As I compare my work with that of George Segal, I am reminded of the visual connection which occurs when I look at a figure. By looking at another human, I can relate to a figure's body posture. The lack of details in the silhouettes allows me to relate to the figure more readily. This aspect connects my work to Segal's because we have both created art work where everyday moments become significant. Who the figures are in our work is not what is important. The importance is found in the viewers' life as it relates to the moment the artist captured.

Processes and Media

Each new process that I have used produces new depth in my art work.

Being open to new materials and ideas has made me consider myself a mixed media artist. My process starts with photography, capturing an image at a specific moment in time. Then I have learned to use both the traditional techniques of the dark room and the digital ones of computer programs as tools in manipulating those images.

The images that I am drawn to when using traditional photography focus on a specific image or idea. I am looking for specific everyday images, such as catching a person in a particular moment, capturing cast light on an object, or finding simple shapes or places in my environment. When I am using a digital camera, I am not interested in compositional devices or technical skills. These images are more random and taken quickly. This type of photography allows me to collect elements of everyday moments, such as old napkins, torn pages from books, tea-stained paper, and textures of plants. By collecting these things and incorporating them into art works, I am bringing importance to things that would often be seen as insignificant.

Another influence in my art work are alternative photography techniques. These processes bring a sense of uncertainty and unpredictability in controlling the medium. The processes I use are Polaroid transfers, cyanotypes, and Xylene transfers. The effects that I can achieve with these processes are soft, diluted colors, as well as images appearing to be somewhat aged. The Xylene transfer process can be seen in *Man with Umbrella* (Appendix, 3). This type of transfer allows for control and manipulation in the printing process. This particular image

was printed in four pieces of 11" x 8 1/2" paper using a laser printer. By transferring the image using Xylene, I was able to piece together the picture, making it 17 1/2" x 13". It is valuable to my work because I am able to create larger pieces than standard computer paper sizes and also make details more visible.

In the Xylene transferring process I am also able to soften the edges and control the values in the image. This process allows for a worn look. The idea of layering onto the final paper reiterates my idea of moments in time overlapping or coming together to create one moment.

Monoprints combine the ideas of drawing, painting, and collage. This process creates a one of a kind piece of artwork. Alternative photographic processes are similar to the layering and spontaneity of this type of printmaking. In monoprints I have used ink and Caran d'Ache crayons applied to a Plexiglas surface in different ways. It can be rolled on smoothly, applied with a putty knife, painted, stamped, or layered. The ink can also be removed with mineral spirits or by scratching and wiping. The variety of different applications and methods of removal creates a layered and soft image. This feature can be seen in *Lost in Thought* (Appendix, 4). In this image, water soluble Caran d'Ache crayons have been drawn onto Plexiglas, and then the crayon marks were altered with water and a paintbrush. This process was repeated several times, layering the crayon and manipulating the plate with water. These features created texture and tonal value. The image portrays a lonely person walking slowly. This image originated

from a photograph. I was interested in the moment of showing this environment. I wanted to create interest in this individual's personal story and what this person might be thinking about.

Bookmaking is another media that has been a way for me to share my imagery with viewers. I am interested in how the viewer will take time to interact with a book, engaging with each page. It is an intimate way of communicating with an audience. I have created accordion books, pop-up books, and altered books. For a multiple page book, I break a singular image or idea down into component pieces, thereby presenting a narrative in various stages. The *Wooden Accordion Book* (Appendix, 5) is created from ripped and layered pieces of snapshots, text of a book, and colored translucent wax. This book was inspired by the idea of a nesting Russian doll set, in which you can see the relationship of an object within a similar object. In this book, I presented a moment that had been broken down into smaller units, each unit comprising an integral part of the whole.

In *Altered Book* (Appendix, 6), the cover depicts a window framing a silhouette of plants. This view through the window is from the inside looking out. Each page focuses on a specific image from my travels, the images on the individual pages are often repeated using different processes. In this work, I used Xylene transfers, Polaroid transfers, cyanotypes, and printing on transparency film and cardboard. Each process shows the image in a different way. In *Altered Book (Detail)* (Appendix, 7) I have presented the same image of a photograph of

two dress mannequins through different processes. The blue cyanotype, on the left-hand side of the page, has an old-fashioned look. This version has many tones and values within the photograph. The transparency printed image on the right, is larger and has a Pop Art, iconic feel. It is dark black and text is showing through the transparent sections. The central image is a Xylene transfer. This mannequin has fuzzy contours and is simplified. Using different processes demonstrates how one image can be seen from multiple perspectives, and how one moment or object in time can be viewed differently.

The idea of collecting insignificant moments and creating simplifications of the human form has given me a deeper understanding of how I see the world around me. I can see a situation or an object with curiosity, and reflection. With the slow processes of working with different media and combining imagery I sorted out some of the multitudes of people, photographs, and objects to get a better understanding of how I interpret the world.

Conclusion

Creating this body of work challenged me to be more observant and consciously aware of what was happening around me. Each piece has started out in one direction and evolved through different processes and experimentation. It was not until the end of the MIS program that different stages of my work began to come together conceptually. This body of art work is very personal to me because it records my life as I moved to a new area and went

through numerous experiences.

As I have learned new techniques and skills I feel confident in teaching what I have learned to my own students. Making a monoprint is a wonderful way to teach both drawing and painting. Water soluble materials such as watercolor paints and crayons make printmaking possible in an elementary school situation. It also has automatic satisfaction and allows for “happy” mistakes. It can be a positive reinforcement for young students who are excited about creating but do not have the patience or skill required for other media.

I also want students to become more personal in their work by using the moments that create their own lives as inspiration. By using true stories in their art work, students are more likely to invest time and produce meaningful works of art.

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Appendix
List of Figures

- Figure 1. *Reflected Movement* (diptych), Monoprints, 17" X 13" (each), 2007.
- Figure 2. *Conversation*, Mixed Media, 17" X 13", 2008.
- Figure 3. *Man with Umbrella*, Xylene Transfer, 17 1/2" X 13", 2008.
- Figure 4. *Lost in Thought*, Monoprint, 16" X 12 1/2", 2007.
- Figure 5. *Wooden Accordion Book* (Detail), Mixed Media, 10" X 43" X 7" (open), 2008.
- Figure 6. *Altered Book* (Front Cover), Mixed Media, 9" X 6" X 2", (closed), 2007.
- Figure 7. *Altered Book* (Detail), Mixed Media, 9" X 6" X 2", (closed), 2007.



Figure 1. *Reflected Movement* (diptych), Monoprints, 17" X 13" (each), 2007



Figure 2. *Conversation*, Mixed Media, 17" X 13", 2008



Figure 3. *Man with Umbrella*, Xylene Transfer, 17 1/2" X 13", 2008

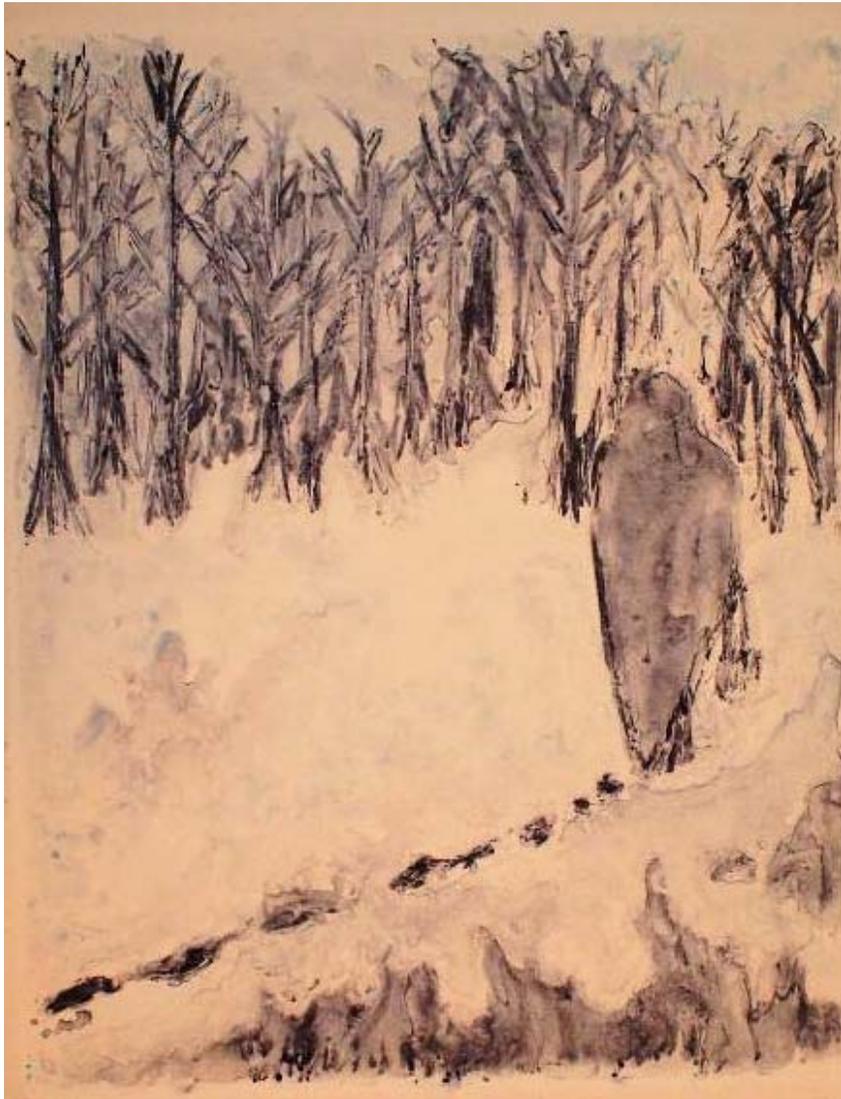


Figure 4. *Lost in Thought*, Monoprint, 16" X 12 1/2", 2007

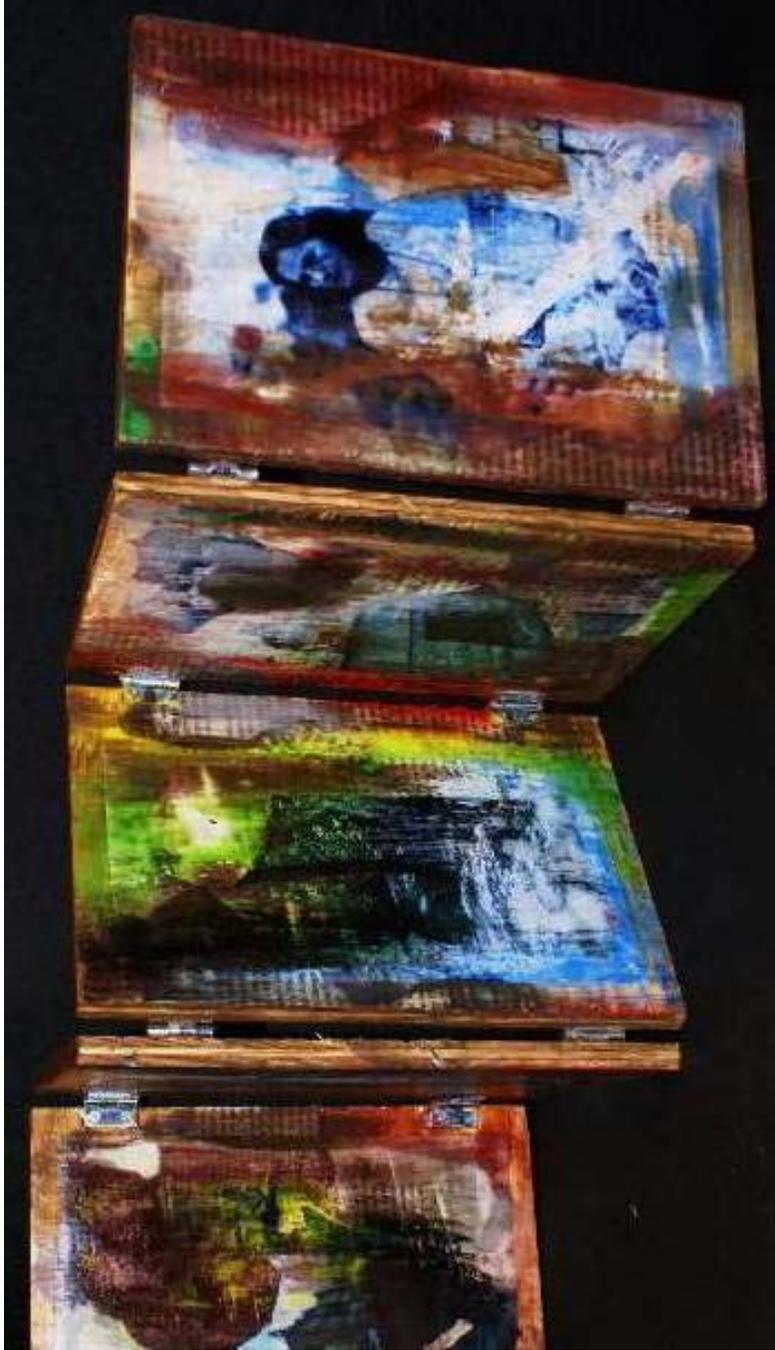


Figure 5. *Wooden Accordion Book (Detail)*, Mixed Media, 10" X 43" X 7" (open), 2008



Figure 6. *Altered Book* (Front Cover), Mixed Media, 9" X 6" X 2", (closed), 2007



Figure 7. *Altered Book* (Detail), Mixed Media, 9" X 6" X 2", (closed), 2007

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EDUCATION:

- 2009 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA. Specialization in Mixed Media and Photography.
- 2004 Bachelor of Fine Art, Alfred University, Alfred, NY. Concentration: Expanded Media, Minor: Education.

CERTIFICATIONS:

- New York State Certification of Qualification in Art Education, k-12.
Virginia Collegiate Professional License in Art Education, k-12.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE:

- 2006- Pres. Art Teacher, Island Creek Elementary School, Fairfax County Public Schools, Alexandria, VA.
- 2005 Art Teacher, Churchill Road Elementary, Mclean, VA; Flint Hill Elementary, Vienna, VA; Willow Springs Elementary, Fairfax, VA, Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax, VA.
- 2005 Substitute Teacher, Dunkirk City Schools, Dunkirk, NY; Forestville Central School, Forestville, NY; Silver Creek Central School, Silver Creek, NY.

RELATED EXPERIENCE:

- 2005 Art Teacher, State University of New York at Fredonia Research Foundation Upward Bound Program, Fredonia, NY.
- 2004 Art Director, Montgomery County Recreation, Silver Spring, MD.
- 2002 Gallery Intern, Adams Art Gallery, Dunkirk, NY.

EXHIBITIONS

- 2009 *Reflection-Refracton*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA. Center for the Arts, Manassas, VA.
- 2007 *Wish You Were Here*, Del Ray Artisans Gallery, Alexandria, VA.
- 2004 *Senior Show*, Harder Hall, Alfred University, Alfred, NY