2010

In My Busby Berkeley Dreams

Michael Pierce
Virginia Commonwealth University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd

© The Author

Downloaded from
https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/2028

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.
In My Busby Berkeley Dreams

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

by

Michael Pierce
Bachelor of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, 1972

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May, 2010
Table of Contents

Artist Statement ........................................................................................................................................ iii

Introduction ............................................................................................................................................... 1

Being and Relating to The Other ........................................................................................................ 2

Carrying Moral Authority and Providing Beauty ................................................................................ 3

Expanding the Notion of Drawing ........................................................................................................ 6

Exploring My Drawing Connection to Bookart .................................................................................. 10

Attending the Visual Studies Workshop and Curating bookart@artspace ............................................. 14

Moving Forward ........................................................................................................................................ 15

Bibliography ........................................................................................................................................... 17

Appendix ................................................................................................................................................ 18

List of Figures .......................................................................................................................................... 18

Figures .................................................................................................................................................... 19

Resume ................................................................................................................................................... 34
Artist Statement

I use high- and low-tech approaches in my drawings and bookart to address issues of sexual identity and beauty. My work emphasizes process, content, and image. I create pictures using tightly cropped symbolic figurative imagery. I also leave smudges, smears, and traces of what happened in the making of the work to make process more visible.

In my work I would like you to consider what you see and what you don’t see, to smile in recognition of something you might never have really thought about before. And when I really get it right, you might even question your own feelings concerning the content.
**In My Busby Berkeley Dreams**

Most artists are brought to their vocation when their own nascent gifts are awakened by the work of a master. That is to say, most artists are converted to art by art itself. The future artist finds himself or herself moved by a work of art and, through that experience, comes to labor in the service of art until he can profess his own gift.


**Introduction**

My grandmother, Cecile Pierce, and her friend, painter and art educator Dorothy Skelton (1914-1999), the matriarch of the Culpeper Art Group, first introduced me to art. When I was twelve, with a little gentle coaching from Grandma Cecile and Dorothy, I won the popular prize at the Culpeper Art Fair for my watercolor, *Countryside*. Ten years later I graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. Then, almost thirty years after taking art foundation courses, I again took a freshman drawing studio class at VCU. It was such a joy to be a fifty-one-year-old student again drawing alongside young freshmen. A few years later I applied to and was accepted in VCU’s Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) Off-Campus Art Program. I wanted to spend some focused time “labor(ing) in the service of art” to learn, stretch, and push myself out of my comfort zone and see what, if anything, I had to offer in terms of opening others’ eyes to the possibilities of the arts.

My two areas of focus in the MIS program have been mixed media drawing and bookart. Each has influenced the other. I have incorporated many of the tools that I discovered in bookmaking into my drawing process. I have also explored the use of collage as a form of drawing in my bookart. Both my drawing and bookart work address issues of identity. An exploration of critical theory has helped me to clarify and focus the messages I am trying to convey. Process, technology, and form also play key roles in my work. At the same time I want the work to be beautiful.
Being and Relating to The Other

My study of critical theory in the arts led me to examine contemporary ideas as related to the content of my own work. I found that my approach resonates with contemporary postcolonial theory. Postcolonialism asks how the dominant power understands people who look and act differently from them. In his 1978 book Orientalism, cultural critic and theorist Edward Said (1935-2003) described his theory of a “we versus they” dichotomy that separates people from each other (Said 2005, 1006). French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) added to this idea by stating that power defines the way we describe things and how we are structured, and as a result someone almost always becomes marginalized. These theorists were two of the leading proponents of postcolonial theory, which attempts to find empathy with those outside the dominant power, or what has been termed “The Other.”

As a fifty-nine-year-old gay man, I relate to Said’s and Foucault’s concept of The Other. I lived through an adolescence of secrets and then came to art school at VCU in the late sixties. College for me became a protected artificial environment. Oddly for me, being gay or, for that matter, being any kind of outsider in that setting, became a positive attribute. After art school I found that the real world was not so welcoming. So, I used the gathered strength from my art school experience to continue to be true to myself. I fell in love with my African-American partner, Ron, and we have lived here in the former capital of the Confederacy for the past thirty-five years. We have made a home together and are treated as a couple by our friends, families, and co-workers, most everyone. However, I have never really lost the feeling of being treated as The Other. Gay people still don’t quite measure up.

My art has always dealt with these issues of sexual identity. In an essay on flamboyant pianist and entertainer Liberace’s (1919-1987) “open secret” of homosexuality, Dave Hickey (b. 1939), one of the best-known art and cultural critics practicing today, says, “Sexuality is no longer a mere matter of biology and whim. It means something” (Hickey 1997, 59). In dealing with issues of sexuality, some people may even find my art to be prurient. In a 1970 Vogue interview, Andy Warhol (1928-1987) said, “Prurience is part of
the machine. It keeps you happy. It keeps you running” (Goldsmith 2004, 190). I find power in gently conveying the prurience of gay sexuality in my work. In my drawings of men kissing, I have the viewer confront an image pretty much unknown in art history, in my domestic pictures and bookart depicting pies and Martha Stewart, I use subjects not typically depicted by male artists, and in a recent installation I placed sexy, handsome images of men’s faces beside safe images of rabbit faces. I find that my art is a constant quest to find ways to join viewers where they are, and have them join me where I am.

In American writer Barbara Kingsolver’s (b. 1955) novel, The Poisonwood Bible (1998), the author deals with postcolonial themes in a variety of ways. However, I particularly relate to what the character Adah says after she has overcome her disabilities and then questions what value overcoming them has really given her.

But I liked how I was… The arrogance of the able-bodied is staggering. Yes, maybe we’d like to be able to get places quickly, and carry things in both hands, but only because we have to keep up with the rest of you… We would rather be just like us, and have that be all right (Kingsolver 1998, 493).

Like Adah, I do not want to totally assimilate. I am all right like I am, and I will always be and relate to The Other.

Carrying Moral Authority and Providing Beauty

When I am in my studio, it is filled with music, especially the music of songwriter and The Magnetic Fields bandleader, Stephin Merritt (b. 1964). Merritt wrote a song called Busby Berkeley Dreams and it has been an inspiration for much of the artwork I have done while I’ve been enrolled in the MIS program. The song includes the lines “We still dance on whirling stages… We still dance in my outrageously beautiful Busby Berkeley dreams” (Merritt 1999). Busby Berkeley (1895-1976), a Hollywood movie director and musical choreographer, was famous for his elaborate musical production numbers that often involved complex kaleidoscopic patterns of showgirls and objects. Over the course of my time in the MIS program,
my drawings and bookart have become densely layered with images and swirling polka dots like a choreographed scene in a Busby Berkeley film. With my work I am trying to change minds by offering layered messages to the viewer and hoping to add some beauty to the world.

Art theorists and philosophers frequently take a one-sided approach. Some believe that art should only carry moral authority without regard to beauty. Some believe that art should be only about beauty and not take a moral stance. I start from the perspective that art can both serve a social and human value and be beautiful. Otherwise, I don’t believe that I would do it in the first place.

Two artists who convey their own moral perspective, but also give us beauty, are contemporary American artist Kara Walker (b. 1969) and British art collaborative duo Gilbert (b. 1943) & George (b. 1942). Both produce large confrontational work.

Walker, a MacArthur Genius Award winner, explores race, gender, sexuality, slavery, and violence using silhouetted figures. She places cut paper stencils directly on the gallery walls creating a theatrical setting. These beautiful images draw you in and then all of a sudden, like a slap in the face, you’re confronting things you don’t want to see, such as slavery, violence, and rape. She does not give you answers at all; she’s simply raising moral questions. I connect with Walker’s need to ask the questions.

Gilbert & George produce large, colorful, and challenging work that frequently confronts the viewer’s perspective on homosexuality and religion. Gilbert & George say about the high purpose and moral significance of their art that “relationships between people and the world are fraught with enormous misunderstandings and frustrations. Barriers can only be broken down by culture. In our pictures, this is probably our greatest concern” (Gilbert & George 2007, 9). Their work frequently includes images of Gilbert & George themselves in their business suits or naked, other nude men, sexual acts, and body fluids. Both their images and titles are deliberately confrontational. They are raising questions about religion and sexuality and, like Kara Walker, are not giving answers.
Though subtler than either Walker or Gilbert & George, I want my audience to see things they may not have seen before, to think about things in a different way, and to ask questions. Like Walker, I use collage. Like Gilbert & George, I use digital means to project and trace, manipulate, and enlarge images. For me, the best art causes us to see and experience things differently. By “seeing” I do not just mean visually, I also mean conceptually, emotionally, politically, and morally. The difference in perspective experienced through great art causes us to think differently as well. Thinking differently, in turn, can change us morally. I believe that good art can have a moral authority and influence, and that looking at and interacting with great art makes us better morally.

Art critic, artist, and teacher, Suzi Gablik (b. 1934) says, “The goal is to create a resonant awareness, by being a catalyst…” (Gablik 1989, 24). I really like the idea of thinking about an artist as a catalyst. Hickey says, “As a stepchild of the Factory, I am certain of one thing: images can change the world” (Hickey 2009, 35).

On the other hand, I don't want to eliminate the drive to create beauty just to pursue a sociopolitical agenda. Like Australian born art critic Robert Hughes (b. 1938), I believe that art should be about craft, artfulness, and aesthetics but unlike him, I do not limit my view to the fact that only beauty and material skill are what is important, leaving no room for a moral perspective or impact. American art critic Donald Kuspit (b. 1935) also believes that art is first and foremost aesthetic. For him, pleasure and beauty are the keys but he also does not allow for the moral perspective either. He says, “(T)he artist-moralist is determined to make an art that will not be aesthetically seductive… No doubt moralizing art’s anti-aesthetics is regarded as a kind of aesthetics by its advocates…” (Kuspit 1991, 23). I believe that the artist-moralist frequently makes aesthetically seductive art. However, I’m also one of those “advocates” he talks about who believes anti-aesthetics can be a kind of aesthetics. In my own work, this messiness shows in the way I leave traces of the experience of the making of the work and in my sometimes-intuitive combinations of images.
Hickey says, that "beautiful art sells. Art is not idolatry… nor is it advertising. Idolatry and advertising, however, are indeed art, and the greatest works of art are always and inevitably a bit of both" (Hickey 2009, 8). So, I too, believe that beauty and moral authority can exist side-by-side. Even though I take a sociopolitical approach in my artwork, it is not necessary for the viewer to even see or understand that to appreciate the work. It is fine with me if they just see it as a pretty picture. Sometimes, the message is even literally physically hidden under layers in a collage! I believe that art can both change people and society and at the same time provide beauty, and that is what I set out to do in my work.

**Expanding the Notion of Drawing**

When faced with a blank surface, I determine my conceptual focus when I begin to draw. Typically, I start by drawing a rectangle or square several inches from the edge of the paper with graphite. My work typically consists of a single closely cropped image that focuses on a portion of the object or person. I want to emphasize that it is my lens you are looking through. The original source images are usually tiny images (portions of photographs I have taken or web-based images). I am really drawing pictures of pictures. I particularly like to use found web-based images because since I have no personal relationship with them, they automatically create a distance from the subject. They typically are low resolution and have very little detail. I enlarge the images several times, progressively losing more detail, and project them onto the paper, then trace the image. This then becomes the basis for a formal exploration of texture, color, and process.

*A Family Favorite* (Appendix, 1) reflects this approach. I used a 3”x3” web-based image as source material for the resulting 24”x24” oil pastel drawing of a slice of lemon meringue pie. Pie, a simple iconic subject, conveys the sweetness of dessert but it also alludes to prurience of female sexuality. The meringue with its soft shape and whiteness allows the color of surrounding objects to reflect into it. In this drawing I approached the paper aggressively, using oil pastels and graphite to cover the surface. I used a
very energetic diagonal line (from lower left-hand corner to upper right-hand corner) and the image and lines become blurred from the manipulation of the media. Then, I used the pink eraser of a yellow school pencil to move the oil pastels around and blur the image even more. The oil pastel crayons allow me to explore light by color mixing on paper. Layered oil pastel colors create fleeting shimmering effects.

In this image, as well as in much of my work, I want the media handling to be visible and sometimes even a little messy so that the viewer can see that this is indeed a hand-made image. I leave fingerprints and smudges as evidence of my hand and the aggressive nature of my drawing process. I want the viewer to be aware of the materiality of the media. There is an intuitiveness with which I interact with it all, somewhat planned and somewhat improvisational. It is cathartic and liberating for me when I draw. My process is gestural, primitive, and not neat, but seldom so messy that the image is unreadable. I do not do a lot of cleaning up afterwards. Warhol once said, “You can’t do a painting without a drip” (Danto 2009, 14). I want the drips to show too. Therefore, it is not just the images that people recognize but even the smudges and smears are something that everyone knows.

The installation view of *Let’s pretend we’re bunny rabbits* (Appendix, 2) shows a similar approach in application of media in each of the four 24”x24” drawings pictured. On the left, the male face *Spike* and the white rabbit *Benjamin* hang flush with each other against a white wall. To the right of this pair, the male face titled *Rod 1* hangs flush with the black and white rabbit *Peter* against a wall painted pink. This is the same color as the fleshy pink color of the yellow school pencil erasers, the same erasers that I use to blend the oil pastels and smudge the graphite. I had Lowe’s match the paint color to the eraser. I am interested in rabbits because they are nervous, quiet, and cute. The images of the rabbits came from photographs I took at the Virginia State Fair. Everyone loves a bunny but they also have this reputation of being sexual creatures that constantly mate and reproduce, a fertility symbol. So, this safe cuddly little animal that frequently shows up in children’s books and as a symbol of spring and Easter also feeds my need for a little prurience. I also depicted the men in these pieces as beautiful and desirable. The models typically come
from male porn but they’re drawn with the same care and sensitivity that I use with the rabbits. The dominant culture does not think that men should view other men in this way. I want viewers to see the world through my eyes, as I see it, from my perspective as a gay man.

One of the differences in the technique between these drawings and the pie drawing is that with *Let’s pretend*, I treated the paper surface with gesso before drawing on it. The tinted gessoed background is visible behind the figure, but within the white border in *Spike, Rod 1*, and *Peter*. The gessoed surface is roughly applied and somewhat transparent so that it functions as a painted dull, matte gray backdrop. Traces of graphite lines and specs of oil pastels extend onto the gessoed surface. In contrast and as a subtle variation, *Benjamin* has a roughly applied iridescent gold oil pastel applied to the gessoed surface. The background of *Benjamin* shimmers in the light.

In the installation of these drawings I have paired an image of a male human face on the left with a rabbit’s face (sex indeterminate) on the right. I borrowed the notion of a two-page spread from my bookmaking. Like Walker’s work, I wanted the installation of the work to raise questions for the viewer. I wanted the arrangement of these works in the gallery, with the music playing in the background (a CD of songs about men alternating with songs about rabbits), to create another big piece. The big piece is much more important to me than the individual pieces.

Music plays an important role in both the creation and exhibition of much of my work. As previously noted, I play music in my studio, typically loud dance music. Song lyrics that resonate with me are used to help convey the message in the installation of my work. My exhibitions typically take their names from song titles or lyrics. I create a play list or soundtrack for each exhibition. I often make a CD that plays continuously during the run of the exhibition and provide copies to distribute free at the opening. My process is aggressive and sometimes expressive of the energy in the music I play when I draw, the energy I feel when I create, and the persistent drive of the times we live in.
I am a very pansy sort of person (Appendix, 3) began as an oil pastel drawing on a sheer black and white polka-dotted fabric. By itself, the resulting work looked a little too much like a woman’s scarf, so I used acrylic gels to attach it to a birch panel. In this work, juxtaposition happens not in the installation but instead within the single work. There’s deconstruction going on here. French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) originated the term deconstruction to describe the belief that a work can contain many variations of itself within it and have more than one meaning. I address this concept in my work by torn and repeated images, complicated and mysterious. The next few pieces also address issues of deconstruction.

In this particular work, I scanned pieces of the polka dotted fabric on which I drew the original image and enlarged it, printing it on tracing paper and rice paper. The enlarged polka dots were then torn and collaged on top of and around the pansy image with thick layers of acrylic gel. There is not just the illusion of depth in these pieces but actual physical depth. The resemblance of the polka dots to enlarged Ben-Day dots of old newspaper printing processes connects the work to Pop Art and Andy Warhol. It is complicated how the image is made and I want some of the process to remain a mystery for viewer. The title of the work is embedded in the piece as printed and collaged found text.

In Purple Pansy (Appendix, 4) I first drew the image on gessoed paper with graphite and oil pastels. Then I collaged rice paper, printed with the enlarged polka dots, onto and around the image. The paper curls a bit and results in a more fragile looking work than the previous piece mounted on panel. Pansies carry an obvious sissy connotation and some of this fragility. However their “faces” resemble human faces. Disney’s classic animated Alice in Wonderland (1951) features a chorus of singing pansies. They’re also symbolic of spring. Gay men are sometimes called pansies. As a gay man, Andy Warhol worried about being seen as “too swish” (Warhol 1983, 11) when he was among the male art establishment. Because of the lack of tolerance for this “swish” attitude, most of Andy’s male peers, even if gay, took on a macho attitude. I don’t really worry about being too swish. That is why I feel free to use the pansy as an image for my work. Like the pie image, I have again used a pretty ordinary image here with
simple symbolism that most everyone will recognize to convey an obvious message. There is nothing really deep here in the image itself; I am just pointing out to the viewer the symbolism that they probably already know.

In *Men Kissing / Pansy* (Appendix, 5), I’ve combined an image of a pansy made in oil pastels on gessoed paper with an overlay of a line drawing of men kissing in oil pastels on thin rice paper. My subject matter here is sexual identity and the images within this work and their inherent symbolism directly address the subject. There’s more swirling and layers of images that become somewhat confusing. In addition there’s a bit of Andy Warhol’s need for prurience at work here.

*Martha’s Hair / Pansy* (Appendix, 6) combines a drawing of a portion of iconic figure Martha Stewart’s blond hair with a hot pink contour drawing of a pansy. The blond hair was rendered on paper and mounted on a panel, which became the ground for the pansy on tracing paper. This time I used cold wax to adhere the pansy line drawing to the drawing of Martha’s hair. On top of that I collaged patterns of text from art criticism that had been scanned from the *New York Times* Arts and Culture Section and printed on tracing paper. The thin tracing paper almost disappears when the cold wax is applied and the text seems to float over the image. I do not really intend for the viewer to read the text or know where it came from; it simply functions as texture and pattern, much like the polka dots in the previous images. The blond hair of domestic expert Martha Stewart taken from a K-Mart display sign, a pansy, and text from art history combine to confound the viewer and may raise questions about sexuality and culture, a recurring theme in much of my work.

**Exploring My Drawing Connection to Bookart**

Being an avid reader and book lover, my bookart focuses on the traditional modern book form, called the codex, consisting of pages bound together with a cover. My bookart also addresses themes of sexual identity with a focus on process, similar to my drawing. These bookart works are filled with drawings,
collages, and digitally enhanced photos generally printed on my home inkjet printer or on a blueprint machine.

Soon after completing my drawings of pies, images of pies became the subject for several bookart pieces (Appendix, 7). In the same way that installation is important in the exhibition of my drawings, covers and containers are important for my books. I filled each of the two small codex pie books, with inkjet prints of pie images and used polka dot fabrics on their covers. Either white dots or black dots on red fabric connect them to several drawings described earlier as well as the patterns of kitchen curtains and dishtowels. I also created a large book composed of single Davey board pages sewn together. On each page I mounted a portion of a 36”x36” oil pastel drawing of a cherry pie slice that had been torn into squares. Davey board is a bookbinder’s board that is sturdy and resists warping. Therefore, the book, which also contained no text, alluded to children’s picture board books. I used clear packing tape to attach the images and to create a shiny rippled reflective surface over the collaged drawing pieces. The cover was a red glittered vinyl typically used to upholster 1950s diner booth seats. The book was placed in a pie-carrying case that was covered with a fabric collage of cherry pie kitchen dishtowels sewn and taped with the clear packing tape. Red tulle also filled the inside of the pie case. Opening it was like finding a red ball gown wrapped around a book. There is something a bit cheeky about a male making books with all of these allusions to traditionally feminine activities. However, I am also quite an accomplished baker and make all of my own pie crusts from scratch for the fruit pies that I bake. The truth is that these books are actually very personal.

I have also used clear packing tape to create the structure of several of my other books and to make collages in many of them. One such book, *Pinocchio Barbie Pasta Seeds* (Appendix, 8), used this tape to “laminate” collages made of found images, Valentine cards, and seed packets. These collages could be viewed from both sides of the pages in the book. The speed of using this simple tape adhesive allowed me to also incorporate chance and randomness into the work. The edges of the clear packing tape and
creases and buckling remain visible in the same way that I leave smudges and extraneous marks in my drawings. I consider the collages in these books to be drawings, with the torn edges and shapes serving as drawn marks and lines. I also used the tape to "bind" the book and hold the pages together.

I frequently make meta-books that reference previous books. I selectively scanned portions of images from the pages of *Pinocchio Barbie Pasta Seeds*, in much the same way that I select a portion of an image to draw, and called it *About Pinocchio Barbie Pasta Seeds*. In this book the scanned images were printed on the pages prior to the hand-sewn binding. *About Pinocchio Barbie Pasta Seeds* was a book about a book.

One book that has held a lot of attention for me is a tiny 2” square book, *MSL&MF1* (Appendix, 9). It is composed of tiny packing tape collages using photographs and text from two separate articles in *Martha Stewart Living* and *Men’s Fitness* magazines. This book deconstructed images and text from an article about flower arranging with an article about how a man can please a woman. I reproduced the text from both articles using stamped letters that looked like typewriter type. The contrast of images and the mishmash of the two texts continued a theme of mixed sexual identity, the domesticity of a female and the prurience of a heterosexual male, in a humorous way.

Another example of a book about a book is *MS&MF2* (Appendix, 9), an 8½”x8½” print-on-demand (POD) edition of five books. POD is the commonly used term for the digital printing technology that allows a complete book to be printed and bound in a matter of minutes. Digital printing makes it easy and cost effective to produce one or two books at a time or in small lots, rather than in much larger print runs. I created this book by scanning and enlarging the pages of the tiny book. In place of the stamped text, I created computer-generated typography. I also made five boxes to hold each of the editioned pieces.

I have also experimented with the altered book form, using an existing book as the media. In *Blinded by the Light* (Appendix, 10), I took a Bible and shredded its pages with a utility knife to resemble fringe, opened it flat, and then coated the fringed pages with glue and glitter, inserting artificial pansies into the
glittered fringe. For the most part, I was obliterating the text and words of the Bible and instead turning the pages into an illusion of rays of light. I am concerned by the way that some Christians use the word of the Bible against homosexuals. That is where the choice of the pansies comes in. I am suggesting that we forget about the words of the Bible and focus on the intent. The words are just the texture. It’s the light that’s in the book that is really important.

The clear packing tape collage technique that I developed for my bookmaking also found its way into a larger series that I called *Proust-Rabbit-Pistol-Parrakeet-Pajamas* (Appendix, 11). This series falls somewhere between bookart and drawing. For me it functions as a poem composed of images rather than words. All five of the panels are constructed completely from the pages of one single book, the “P-R” volume of an old Encyclopedia Britannica, and clear packing tape. The clear packing tape covers most of the work, adhering collage pieces to the background. These collages recreated several tiny illustrations that I found in that encyclopedia volume. The original images were approximately 2” wide, but the resulting collage images were almost 36” wide. The increase in scale allowed me to use collage to mimic my gestural drawing style. For the collages, I only used pieces of the various tiny images and text from the single encyclopedia volume. Each torn piece slapped down with clear packing tape functioned a bit like a stroke of an oil pastel or graphite in my drawings. These pieces were hung on the wall using magnets. Like *Purple Pansy* (Appendix, 4), each piece is iconic representing a familiar object.

I used a blueprint machine to create *These Works Truly* by enlarging small collages (Appendix, 12). I first made 5.5”x5.5” collages of torn images and text from reproductions of black and white Bible illustrations, and enlarged them to 22”x22” using the blueprint machine. I created many of the collages by placing torn images and text upside-down onto the sticky side of the clear packing tape. I chose the hate-filled text from Leviticus in the Bible that is frequently used against homosexuals along with art criticism text that comes from the Arts and Culture pages of the *New York Times*. I did not really know what each collage would look like until I completed it, picked up the packing tape, and viewed it from the other side.
Deconstruction, chance, and process played major roles in creating this piece. Almost accidentally, there is a resemblance to my own hand-drawn lines when the printed lines from the Bible illustrations are enlarged. I also created some larger 36”x36” blueprint pieces using the same images. These larger blueprint pieces function independent from the book form and were hung on the wall using magnets.

Many of my most recent books have been created using POD. I have added handmade elements to some of these, such as hardback covers or boxes. I created a book to accompany my installation Mens is Dogs (Appendix, 13). The title of this installation is based on a ridiculous song line from Black singer and drag performer RuPaul (b. 1960). In an extended monologue, RuPaul’s character describes how her lover jilted her, and rants, “Don’t mess with mens. Don’t mess with mens, cause mens is dogs.” (RuPaul 1997). This book includes black and white images of the pieces from the exhibition, which consisted of drawings of men in suggestive poses paired with drawings of hot dogs. It also included source photos for the drawings (from the web and men’s magazines), and at the end of the book was a play list of music that played during the run of the show. However, most of the book consisted of a poem I created using random bits of text from lyrics of songs about hot dogs juxtaposed with random text from stories from gay men’s magazines. Again, the obvious message concerns sexual identity, prurience, and deconstruction.

**Attending the Visual Studies Workshop and Curating bookart@artspace**

I had the opportunity to incorporate several unique experiences into my degree program. In 2008 I attended a summer graduate class at the Visual Studies Workshop (VSW) at the State University of New York in Rochester. In the fall of 2009 I also curated an invitational bookart show that included artists from across the country.

At the VSW I made several bookart works, worked closely with others in the bookart field, and examined seminal examples of many bookart works. I worked with instructor and bookartist Joan Lyons (b. 1937), author of *Artists’ Books: A Critical Anthology and Source Book* (1987), on how to move a viewer
through a bookart work. I also explored the VSW Research Center, which maintains archival and research collections about the media arts of photography, independent film and video, electronic imaging, visual books and the publication arts. The Center has 5,000 artist's books which students are allowed to handle and view while attending classes. While there I consulted with book artist Scott McCarney (b. 1951) about POD technology, which I went on to use in several of my own books. Joan also took us to the University of Rochester to see *Pages as Stages*, a retrospective of one of America's foremost book artists Keith Smith (b. 1936). In that show, Smith's book *Redhead* (2003), a text-based accordion book with a story that is a satire on the Church’s stance on homosexuality, had a profound effect on me.

Later, as an independent study project for the MIS program, I curated *bookart@artspace* (Appendix, 14), showcasing over seventy bookart works by forty-seven artists. My criteria for inclusion in the show was that the artist be thoroughly involved in the making of the bookart work, whether it be a one-of-a-kind piece, an editioned work (POD, small press, published, or handmade), altered or sculptural book form, or simply an artwork conceptually related to the idea of the book. The show was a very personal selection of works and I attempted to show a variety of approaches to bookart work. Keith Smith lent me *Redhead* to be part of the show. I wanted to give the public an opportunity to see and experience some of the unique bookart work that is being made today. I created a POD catalog (Appendix, 15) as both a work of my own and to serve as documentation of the exhibition.

**Moving Forward**

The MIS program helped me expand my knowledge of techniques and gave me an opportunity to focus on improvement of my drawing and bookmaking technical skills. It increased my realization of how much I don’t know and how much more there is to learn. It also showed me that I have something valuable to give back to the community. I want to continue to surprise myself, to surprise my audience, and to create things that have never been seen before.
Some of us dream of a time and place where we can be who we really are, do what brings us most joy, and say what we want in our own clear voice. When I was twelve years old, I found that place in the Culpeper Art Group and today I am finding it again in the classroom and in my studio. Much of my recent work reminds me of my beginnings with the Culpeper Art Group and Dorothy Skelton. Dorothy wore hats wherever she went and dressed in bright flashy patterns. She was exotic to me because I had never left rural Virginia and she had lived all over the world. She was a wonderful batik and watercolor artist. In rural Culpeper where I grew up, she was The Other. I don’t know whether she intuited my sexuality; I certainly never told her about it. However, she certainly accepted me as The Other and supported my dreams to be an artist. I stayed in contact with her until her untimely death in 1999. Lately, as I have been making my new work, I often think of her. Maybe it is the polka dots, which might come from a pattern on one of her dresses or from a ribbon on one of her hats. Maybe it is her embracing of difference and her creative spirit. She is there with me in my studio as it fades to black and becomes a huge pencil-eraser-pink Hollywood soundstage filled with hundreds of scantily-clad men marching and dancing in formation while cute little pastel colored bunnies hop around in fields of pansies and on swirling stages painted with giant polka dots, as text from art criticism and the Bible is projected over it all, floating and scrolling across the screen to the rhythm of The Magnetic Fields. Yes, lately I can see Dorothy in my Busby Berkeley dreams.
Bibliography


Appendix

List of Figures

Figure 1: *A Family Favorite*, oil pastels, and graphite on paper, 24”x24”, 2006.

Figure 2: *Let’s pretend we’re bunny rabbits*, installation view of left to right: *Spike, Benjamin, Rod 1*, and *Peter* (oil pastels and graphite on gessoed paper), each 24”x24”, 2007.

Figure 3: *I am a very pansy sort of person*, oil pastels, graphite, collage, and acrylic gel on paper mounted on panel, 24”x24”, 2009.

Figure 4: *Purple Pansy*, oil pastels, graphite, collage, and acrylic gel on gessoed paper, 24”x24”, 2009.

Figure 5: *Men Kissing / Pansy*, oil pastels, graphite, collage, and acrylic gel on paper, 24”x24”, 2009.

Figure 6: *Martha’s Hair / Pansy*, oil pastels, graphite, collage, and wax on paper mounted on panel, 24”x24”, 2009.

Figure 7: *Untitled* (top), board, vinyl, cord, oil pastels, graphite, paper, and clear packing tape, 13”x26”, 2007. *Untitled* (bottom left), board, fabric, graphite, inkjet prints on paper, sharpie, and thread, 8”x12”, 2007. *Untitled* (bottom right), board, fabric, graphite, inkjet prints on paper, and thread, 6”x13”, 2007.

Figure 8: *Pinocchio Barbie Pasta Seeds*, books, Valentine cards, and clear packing tape, 8.5”x11”x.5”, 2007 (top). *About Pinocchio Barbie Pasta Seeds*, inkjet prints on paper and clear packing tape, 5”x5”x1”, 2007 (bottom).

Figure 9: *MSL&MF2* (top), print-on-demand edition of five and handmade box, 8.5”x8.5”x.5”, 2008. *MSL&MF1* (bottom), paper, clear packing tape, thread, ribbon, and stamped ink letters, 2”x2”x.5”, 2008.

Figure 10: *Blinded by the Light* (detail), Bible, glue, glitter, artificial flowers, acrylic gel on blueprint, fabric and pedestal, 12”x12”x6”, 2007.

Figure 11: *Proust-Rabbit-Pistol-Parrakeet-Pajamas series*, collage using encyclopedia pages and clear packing tape, each 44”x32”, installation view, 2008.

Figure 12: Untitled two-page spread from *These Works Truly*, handmade book composed of blueprints of scanned collages of Bible illustrations and text, newsprint, and clear packing tape, 44”x22”, 2008.

Figure 13: *Mens is Dogs*, print-on-demand open edition, 7.5”x7.5” (dimensions closed, top image), 2008.

Figure 14: *bookart@artspace*, artspace gallery, Richmond, Va., installation view, 2009.

Figure 15: *bookart@artspace catalog*, print-on-demand open edition, 7.5”x7.5” (dimensions closed, top image), 2009.
**Figure 1:** *A Family Favorite*, oil pastels and graphite on paper, 24”x24”, 2006.
Figure 2: Let’s pretend we’re bunny rabbits, installation view of left to right: Spike, Benjamin, Rod 1, and Peter (oil pastels and graphite on gessoed paper, each 24”x24”), 2007.
Figure 3: *I am a very pansy sort of person*, oil pastels, graphite, collage, and acrylic gel on paper mounted on panel, 24”x24”, 2009.
Figure 4: *Purple Pansy*, oil pastels, graphite, collage, and acrylic gel on gessoed paper, 24"x24", 2009.
Figure 5: *Men Kissing / Pansy*, oil pastels, graphite, collage, and acrylic gel on paper, 24"x24", 2009.
Figure 6: Martha’s Hair / Pansy, oil pastels, graphite, collage, and wax on paper mounted on panel, 24”x24”, 2009.
Figure 7: *Untitled* (top), board, vinyl, cord, oil pastels, graphite, paper, and clear packing tape, 13”x26”, 2007. *Untitled* (bottom left), board, fabric, graphite, inkjet prints on paper, sharpie, and thread, 8”x12”, 2007. *Untitled* (bottom right), board, fabric, graphite, inkjet prints on paper, and thread, 6”x13”, 2007.
Figure 8: *Pinocchio Barbie Pasta Seeds*, books, Valentine cards, and clear packing tape, 8.5"x11"x.5", 2007 (top). *About Pinocchio Barbie Pasta Seeds*, ink jet prints on paper and clear packing tape, 5"x5"x1", 2007 (bottom).
Figure 9: MSL&MF2 (top), print-on-demand edition of five and handmade box, 8.5"x8.5"x.5", 2008. MSL&MF1 (bottom), paper, clear packing tape, thread, ribbon, and stamped ink letters, 2"x2"x.5", 2008.
Figure 10: *Blinded by the Light* (detail), Bible, glue, glitter, artificial flowers, acrylic gel on blueprint, fabric and pedestal, 12"x12"x6", 2007.
Figure 11: Proust-Rabbit-Pistol-Parrakeet-Pajamas series, collage using encyclopedia pages and clear packing tape, each 44”x32”, installation view, 2008.
Figure 12: Untitled two-page spread from *These Works Truly*, handmade book composed of blueprints of scanned collages of Bible illustrations and text, newsprint, and clear packing tape, 44"x22", 2008.
Figure 13: Mens is Dogs, print-on-demand open edition, 7.5"x7.5" (dimensions closed, top image), 2008.
Figure 14: bookart@artspace, artspace gallery, Richmond, Va., installation view, 2009.
Figure 15: bookart@artspace catalog, print-on-demand open edition, 7.5"x7.5" (dimensions closed, top image), 2009.
EDUCATION:
2010 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA - Specialization in Drawing and Bookmaking
1972 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Art Education, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

OTHER EDUCATION:
2008 Master of Fine Arts coursework, Visual Artist Workshop, State University of New York, Rochester, NY

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS or MEMBERSHIPS:
2005-present Artist Board Member, Exhibition Committee, Artspace, Richmond, VA
1986-1990 Artist Board Member, Executive Committee, 1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA
1985-1986 Docent, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS:
2010 In My Busby Berkeley Dreams, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, Artspace, Richmond, VA
2009 Martha, Food and Flowers, Barksdale Theater, Richmond, VA
2008 Mens is Dogs, Gay Community Center of Richmond Gallery, Richmond, VA
2007 Let’s pretend we’re bunny rabbits, Artspace, Richmond, VA
2004 Simple Equations, Artspace, Richmond, VA
2003 Men Kissing, Shockoe Bottom Arts Center, Richmond, VA
1990 Oil Pastels, The Quarberg Gallery, Norfolk, VA
1988 Details, 1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA
1987 Recent Drawings, Jennifer Moore Gallery, Greensboro, NC

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS:
2009 Garden of Earthly Delights, Linden Row Inn, Richmond, VA
2009 Save Planet Art, 1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA
2008 PlantZero@Artspace, Artspace, Richmond, VA
2005 Think Small, Artspace, Richmond, VA
2005 Artspace Member Show, University of Phoenix Richmond Campus, Richmond, VA
2004 Gay Art Today, Queer Space, Richmond, VA
2003 Universe, ADA Gallery, Richmond, VA
1990 Flight 1708 - Group Exhibition of 1708 Gallery Members, Richmond International Airport, Richmond, VA
1989 Outside the Main - Artists from 1708 Gallery, Pleiades Gallery, New York City, NY
1989 Tenth Anniversary Show, 1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA
1989 Four From 1708, PREMNET, Richmond, VA
1989 Hot, Gallery 10 LTD, Washington, DC
1989 Group Show, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA
SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS (Continued):
1988  Michael A. Pierce and Ragan Reeves Freeman, Virginia Beach Arts Center, Virginia Beach, VA
       Small Works Invitational, Theater Art Galleries, High Point, NC
       Coastal Exchange Show Selections, The Athenaeum, Alexandria, VA
1987  Sunday, 1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA. (Two-person show with Ron Lee)
       1708 Exchange, NEXUS, Philadelphia, PA
       Nightmares, Gallery 10 LTD, Washington, DC
       Sofa Size, 1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA
       Affordable Masterpieces, Arts Council of Richmond, Richmond, VA
       Erotica, ISIS studio gallery ltd, Richmond, VA
1986  New Talent Show, Four Artists, Gallery 10, Washington, DC
       Small Affordable Works Exhibition, The Florance Gallery, Richmond, VA
1985  Rituals, Rites, and Relics, Foundry Gallery, Washington, DC
1984  John Morgan and Michael A. Pierce, Andrews Gallery, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA

EXHIBITIONS AS CURATOR:
2009  bookart@artspace, Artspace, Richmond, VA (co-curator with Ginna Cullen)
1990  Bruce – A Tribute, 1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF EXHIBITION REVIEWS:
2009  “Picture It - Save Planet Art at 1708 Gallery.” Brick, February 26 – March 4.
2008  “Contradictory Colors – For Artist Michael Pierce, Opposites Bring the Vision Together.” Urge, Fall.

COLLECTIONS:
Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, VA
Wheat First Securities, Inc., Richmond, VA
E. R. Carpenter Company, Richmond, VA

WEBSITES, LOCATIONS OF WORKS ON-LINE:
https://sites.google.com/site/michaelsayslifeisbutadream/Home
http://www.artspacegallery.org/members/michaelpierce/index.htm