In the Blink of an Eye

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In the Blink of an Eye

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

My art is where I go to relax, rebuild, and replenish. It is an escape that allows me to remember a simpler time of traveling and watching my daughters grow. It is through these images that I find my focus in the beauty of nature and the love of being a mother.

In my work I strive to emphasize the contrast of textures and colors in a shell, or the way light from a sunrise dances across the waves and sand. Life and our environments change quickly and should be remembered and shared with the next generation. Through my art, I want to convey my creative passions in the hope that it will inspire others.
In the Blink of an Eye

Introduction

My college education began right out of high school but after only one year I decided to enter the workforce. For the next twenty-seven years I worked in the banking and retirement investment industries. During that time I got married, bought a house, and raised two daughters. Experiencing many trying times, I turned to my art as an escape, a distraction, and a way to cope with my problems. Art began as a fun hobby as a child but I never took any art through my public school years. As an adult, I experimented with crafts through a group of ladies from church, and made Christmas presents with my girls. I enjoyed many different media, such as knitting, painting porcelain, weaving baskets, designing flags, making dolls, and woodworking. Art became much more than a hobby, it became my passion.

Even though I had accomplished a lot in my personal life, I felt as if something was missing and I was not satisfied with my career choice. When the bank was bought out, I took that opportunity to rethink what I truly wanted to do with my life. I decided to pursue my childhood dream of being a teacher but I did not have the credentials to do so. Following that dream, I enrolled in college to get my Bachelor of Fine Arts in art education at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). It took me six years of part-time study to earn this degree while I worked full-time and raised my family.

I graduated, received my credentials, and started to teach that same year. After teaching for two years, I began to miss the learning and the experience of personal growth going to school had given me. As a teacher, I believe it is very important to keep developing one’s own mind and abilities. I decided to apply and was accepted to the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) Off-Campus Graduate Art Program at VCU. The two disciplines that I concentrated my
attention on for my degree were crafts and printmaking.

**Aesthetics**

My art focuses on images from photographs I have taken throughout my life. As a child, my family traveled all over the United States, and when I married I was fortunate to travel all over the Caribbean Islands, Europe, Russia, and China. Along with the travel photographs, I recorded stages in my daughters’ lives as they grew. These memories of love and laughter inspired and motivated me to express the objects and places seen, but more so the feelings of the moments we shared during these simpler times.

Nature also inspires and influences my art. The beauty all around me constantly reminds the artist in me to stop, to look longer and closer. In the present day we are always in a hurry going here and there. In my art I hope people see something they missed or something they want to look at longer. The colors, the shapes, the lines, the movement, the pure wonder of each perfect flower or shell is there if only we take the time to really look. I have taken that time to look at a simple object of nature and marvel at how original it is or how perfectly shaped or to think about the unusual color. Then, I try to share my insight in a piece of art.

**Clay Starts**

When I work with clay, time has no meaning. I begin with an image in my head and I just start to build. I don’t use a potter’s wheel for any of my clay pieces but prefer to hand-build because I have more control of the clay. I start to recreate the image in my mind’s eye. I work intuitively and as a result I often change my plan from my original thought. If my original idea is strong enough, I may resist the urge to make many modifications. The carving of my clay
pieces take weeks, if not months to complete. After carving, I am ready to fire it in the kiln for the first time. Sometimes, prior to the first firing, I may add underglazes to the greenware (unfired clay) for the unique coloring. However, on most pieces the glaze is applied to the bisque (fired clay) on the final firing.

My first piece of hand-built clay, called *The World Becomes Me* (Appendix, 1), was inspired by the many memories of the countries in which I have traveled. Built in terra cotta red earthenware clay are the Eiffel Tower, the Great Wall of China, St. Basel’s Cathedral, and the Statue of Liberty, all places I had visited. I merged the landmarks with the features of my head and face. In finishing I used a lightly tinted underglaze on the landmarks to coloristically accent them as they merged with my features. I wanted to show how my travels had influenced and became part of my self-identification. I wanted to see myself changing and growing from my travel experiences.

The next piece, *Untitled* (Appendix, 2), was a porcelain piece that was inspired by nature. I started building with the clay intuitively because it was the first time I had worked with porcelain. The textural experience of this rich, no grog (no sediment) clay was so smooth and luscious that I knew I wanted it to have a floral motif. I built three leaf-shaped legs for this piece and then built the bulb of a flower to rest on top of the leaves. I knew I wanted to have leaf-like shapes surrounding the bulb but I needed a connecting piece to attach the bulb to the leaves. So, I made a funnel shape to hold the bulb. I liked that look and added two more funnel shapes, one inside the other. I rolled down the top edges of the funnel shapes giving them an organic feel, then I attached the leaf-legs. At this point I started to carve into this smooth surface to recreate a floral appearance. I thought the piece was too heavy looking due to the mass of clay in the central funnel section. So, I carved out portions from the middle funnel shapes to give it a lighter
feel. At this point it was ready for the first firing. In finishing I used a multi-colored, pale green glaze for the middle section and legs, and a golden glaze color for the bulb. After the glaze dried I rubbed the whole piece by hand. This step helped me to create the irregular tonal coloring and give it a more natural organic look.

The next piece I made was also influenced by nature. The bowl, *Mother’s Harvest* (Appendix, 3), represents harvest time, the time families will reap what they have worked hard on all year. I have childhood memories of helping my grandparents in the fall of the year to gather what the gardens had provided for us to survive the long hard winter. On this bowl, I have designed a woman’s face surrounded by the fall leaves, fruit, and vegetables of the harvest. The basic shape is oval representing the gathering together of food, as a family gathers around the table to eat. The white clay was painted with an underglaze in the first firing to give an accent of color to each item carved around the bowl. I finished this piece in raku glazes and by firing again. This process blackened the clay and cracked the glaze. I wanted the cracking of the glaze to represent the dying of the plants that had produced the bountiful harvest.

The next bowl symbolized winter, called *Snowy Old Man* (Appendix, 4). Again, I go back to my childhood memories of winters in Virginia. Back then we had a lot more snow than we do now, and the wind chilled one to the bone. My brother and I would play in the snow until our teeth chattered and our lips were blue. Our mother had to make us come in to thaw out. To represent winter, I chose the square shape for the bowl. This shape is exact and unyielding, as is the cold of winter. I used the face of an old man to symbolize the ending of the year. I depicted the man blowing the wind and snow flakes that accent the outside of the bowl. I used high fire white clay and painted it in white and blue glazes to give it the cold harsh feel of the season.
Clay is my medium of choice. I feel that I can express my ideas best in clay because it is familiar. Because of my experience with clay work, I developed the confidence to experiment with other media and see what else I could do.

**Working with Glass**

Working with glass has become my second love after clay. The main influence for my glass work began with Michelangelo (1475-1564). At the age of sixteen I traveled to Italy and saw *David* (1501-1504). The hands and arms of *David* were my favorite parts. They touched me with their strength but also their grace.

In *The Path of Life’s Hands* (Appendix, 5) I created a puzzle-like grouping of molded glass inspired by Michelangelo’s sculpted hands. Each puzzle piece was first built in clay. Then, a plaster mold was made of the carved clay. When the plaster had dried, the clay was extracted. I constructed the mold with an opening for glass to enter the form. The last step was to load special 90 COE (90 coefficient of expansion) glass into a clay flower pot (with a hole in the bottom) and set the pot of glass chunks on top of the plaster mold. The 90 COE glass has to be fired slowly in order to melt the chunks of glass. As the glass melts it flows through the hole in the bottom of the clay pot into all the detailed areas in the plaster mold. After the glass melts, the temperature of the kiln was cooled slowly in order to keep the piece from cracking. When the pieces were taken out of the kiln, the plaster was broken away from the glass to reveal the finished work.

Each piece of glass in this grouping shows a different stage in life. The piece in the upper left depicts a mother’s hand holding an infant’s hand. The following pieces (from left to right at top, then bottom, right to left) depict an aspect of the child’s life as she discovers nature
(a caterpillar sitting on a child’s finger), discovers play (a child’s hand holding a ball), or starts to learn (a child’s hand holding a book). More pieces show the child gaining her independence (an adolescent’s hand holding keys) and starting a new life (a young woman’s hand with a wedding band). The changing puzzle shapes and the hands lead the viewer through the new experiences in this child’s life.

This process of creating a plaster mold from a clay sculpture gave me a chance to use my expertise with clay but also to take it to another level by incorporating glass. I was able to see how the glass enhanced the original clay sculpture model and gave it transparency that could never have been accomplished with clay.

Besides sculpting with glass I wanted to work with stained glass. Again, I was influenced by my travels. Having seen beautiful stained glass windows in the cathedrals all around the world, I was inspired to make Sisters (Appendix, 6). This design was inspired from an image of two angels I saw once, and having two daughters, I reworked the image as my two girls. In a typical stained glass piece an artist usually uses colored glass which can not be fired in a kiln. Instead, it is cut into various pieces and soldered together with lead and copper foil. Since I was familiar with special glass that could be fired, I wanted to use a different technique to create my own colored glass, designs, and effects. This became a labor-intensive project because there were numerous steps in preparing the glass ahead of time before a design pattern could be created and cut.

The glass I used for the accent pieces in the dresses of the girls was made from two different colored 90 COE glasses, which I cut into small strips and laid side-by-side, alternating colors. Then, I fused these together into one sheet of glass. This method creates a striped piece of glass in the two colors. For the faces, hands, and arms of the sisters I wanted to sculpt the
features into the glass itself. So, I used fiberfrax paper to cut and shape the features. Fiberfrax is a type of paper that does not burn in the kiln. After cutting the fiberfrax paper into the desired shapes needed, I laid the 90 COE glass over the cut paper and put it in the kiln to be fired. In the firing the glass melts around the fiberfrax paper features. This piece of glass was used to cut the pattern pieces for the face, hands, and arms in the design.

At this stage, these individually colored pieces were ready to be assembled. Then, the remaining pieces were cut from traditional sheets of stained glass. In addition to 90 COE and stained glass, I used plain window glass and cut out two identical sets of pieces representing the hair for each girl. I put actual human hair in between the piece of window glass for added texture. Then, I applied copper foil to the edges of all the various glass pieces. The last step was to lead solder all of the individual glass pieces into one finished work. Normally, these different types of glass are not used together in one piece. However, I was able to combine them after the 90 COE was sculpted and fired.

This technique allowed me to combine different types of glass, each having their own unique coloration or tactile features. It allowed me to rethink how to construct a sculpture or an image. It’s versatility helps me to create new work in multiple formats using a variety of materials.

Printmaking and Painting

After working with clay and glass I ventured into printmaking with Sunrise (Appendix, 7). This print was inspired by a photograph I took on a walk with my family. The colors painted by the sunrise were so beautiful dancing over the waves and hitting the sand. To recreate this image I ended up using multiple plates for this piece. I created a different plate for each color, a
total of seven plates. On each plate, ink was applied with a brayer. Then, the image on the inked plate was transferred to the paper by rubbing the back of the plate with a barren (a smooth disk). Each color had to dry before the next layer could be applied. The separate plates for each color gave me a sense of control that I would incorporate into my process.

For the print *Shell* (Appendix, 8), I looked at numerous, differently colored scallop shells I found at the beach. I discovered there were many varied shades of pinks, blues, purples, and even blacks throughout the shells in random patterns. I wanted to use multiple plates again in depicting this shell. So, I selected several features in the patterns and developed four separate plates using different colors to depict the shell. Again, the multiple plates allowed me to carefully manipulate the use of color. In *Shell 2* (Appendix, 9) using the same plates but different color combinations, I printed another version.

Next, in *Shell Mix* (Appendix, 10), I again used these same four plates from the scallop shell but this time I added another plate. This additional plate was inspired by the beautiful spiral design in the Baby’s Ear shell. I used all five plates to make a color print. However, instead of depicting a single shell, I printed each plate in random and overlapping positions creating an abstracted image of shell designs. I have continued to experiment with images by varying the color, order, and positioning of plates.

Printmaking led me to make an exploration into painting. I decided to create a mural of sequential images. For *In the Blink of an Eye* (Appendix, 11) I used several of my photographs as inspiration to represent one day at the beach. The mural was 48”x96” and painted in acrylics on luan. It is the largest work I have ever undertaken. It is the story of my family growing up on the beach of Emerald Isle, NC, where we go every year for vacation. Each image was taken from an actual picture of us on the beach. The mural imagery is read from left to right. On the
far left, the day begins and sunrise is depicted on the beach. Moving towards the right of the mural, I have painted selected views, from a time period of numerous years, of my family walking on the beach, sunbathing, playing in the sand or the waves, and fishing. Finally, on the far right I depicted my husband and myself walking into the sunset. This mural is a timeline of our lives.

I can record my memories of places and things in my life by using a variety of media. This has enabled me to express my interest in the details of life and nature in multiple formats and processes. My art has reminded me to stop, look closely, and listen to what life and nature have to tell me.

Conclusion

In the time I have been in the MIS program, I have grown as an artist. My professors have pushed me to experiment with different media and concepts, to communicate my love of art, and to express my memories in my images. In the blink of an eye, life and our environments change and should be remembered and shared with the next generation. It is my desire to convey my passions in my art in the hopes that it will, in some way, inspire others.
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Alice H. Barnett

EDUCATION:

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2005-present  Homebound Teacher, Hopewell High School, Hopewell City Public School, Hopewell, VA

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2007  Hopewell Fine Art Festival, Hopewell High School, Hopewell, VA