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Drips

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

by

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Artist's Statement

My work is intuitive and process oriented. I begin by layering drawings or photographs of images on top of small stacks of patterned paper or cloth. These images consist of organic, natural objects. With a sewing machine, I sew shapes through all the layers in stacks using the lines that I find interesting on the top image. Then, I cut into the sewn stacks to reveal new juxtapositions and associations of fabrics from the various layers. I intuitively search for the beauty within these layered stacks knowing that cuts cannot be changed, yet knowing each piece has an infinite number of permutations and combinations.

Drips

The Beginning

I come to art from a family of artists. My German mom drew charts and graphs and large poster images for the PTA. My dad hid in the basement after his day with the Federal Government and worked to create wooden sculptures that were German-inspired. To me art was something functional you did in free time. I grew up thinking that art was peripheral to all other studies, and had only a small role in school. This was confirmed by the nuns who made me stay in during recess and after school to *do* the bulletin boards. I could not *do* bulletin boards during class since all the other classes were more important than art. Art was clearly not as important as academics. It had a decorative function.

In high school art was always an afterthought and any time I put toward it was in class or stolen moments at home. When the local mall opened a few of the high school artists tried to sell work on the weekends. Mine sold well and I started to see that the real use for art was scholarship money. That is, until I started painting drips like Marilyn the Cheerleader.

My high school art teachers did not teach art history. However, Marilyn the Cheerleader had learned about Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) somewhere and was quite taken with him. She dripped oil washes on her canvases and I thought it was amazing. Once I began to drip, my German parents no longer allowed my art to go out of the house to be sold. It was unworthy. It was not functional or traditional. When I decided to go to art school, my parents told me that studio art was a serious threat to the establishment. They would not fund me. Thus, I was to go to school to become a teacher. Art was okay as long as I had something to fall back on, namely

teaching.

So, my influences were German iconic traditions and Marilyn the Cheerleader. What I took to college was raw, underdeveloped talent. I took education classes for the art education major and a wide assortment of studio classes for my art education, avoiding the painting classes since I already knew I could not paint.

When I accidentally discovered art history, in my junior year in college, I swooned. I could read about art, study art, and learn about art intellectually but not have to confront the *is-it-art-and-why-do-I-do-it-demon*. I had the textbook-rulebook and I was safe. I knew what *good* art was. I knew what was *beautiful*. I knew that art history functioned as a mediator between the two worlds of the intellectual and the artistic. After receiving my Master of Arts in Art History I was good, and safe, and understood it all. I finally could face the German parents with dignity and the grace of a scholar.

This could have been it. But it was not. For years, I was compelled to paint for myself during the summers only. I came to the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts (MIS-IAR) program because I knew I was not going to stop teaching, and I decided that I should fill out the art history side of me with the studio approach that had long eluded me.

My Aesthetic

I do not believe all art is equal. Some pieces of human creativity are superior to others. I believe that many people can follow directions and create crafty art but very few artists create work that makes me sit up and pay attention, or that changes the way I see or think. When this happens, the piece is unique and special and worth looking at over and over again. This is what I consider a work of art.

In my process I set out to create problems for myself to solve. I often use my photographs or drawings of the natural world as a starting point. Then, I enlarge the images to enhance the detail and create more abstract forms. I continue to increase the detailed areas until the original image can no longer be readily identified. Often, the images are so distorted that the differentiation between the positive and the negative shape is lost. At that point using fabric, canvas, paper, and gesso, I enhance and develop the varying shapes and forms.

In some work I assemble a layer of fabric under one of the enlarged photographs or drawings. Then, I select and emphasize contours and lines, found in the enlarged image, with stitched line. Next, I use scissors to cut out sections of fabric from each layer. This action reveals patterns and colors from previous layers and juxtaposes them with completely different fabrics, creating new compositions and colors and patterns. This approach allows for endless possibilities from within the layers of fabric.

I try to solve the formal problems that I have created by arranging a series of steps, with a variety of choices. For example, I like to layer the fabrics and sew the line in advance of the cutting. By doing this I forget what is underneath. The chance that one fabric is next to another, the chance that one section is cut revealing a fabric and another is not, allows a certain randomness to the execution that creates a visual interest as the work becomes more and more complete.

I use a similar process when working with paper. The papers that I use for drawings are often riddled with flaws and damaged areas. I purposely choose these flawed papers in order to create formal and compositional problems to solve within the drawing. The flaws force me to make choices about hiding or exposing the damaged areas. By creating situations that involve choices and decisions to be made, I create visual mysteries that unfold for me.

For this same reason, I like to read mystery books. I welcome the closure at the end of a book and at the end of a series of books. Like mystery stories my pieces have a plot line circuitously stitched into the fabric of the story. The characters are color and pattern that take on lives of their own. I have learned to let the elements in the pieces evolve after constructing the backbone of the work. I learned to rely on and trust this process which makes me work hard and requires that I uncover unusual solutions.

Influences

My ideas have been influenced by a few artists. Andy Goldsworthy (b. 1956) is one of these artists. He is an artist who collaborates with natural elements that occur by chance in the environment. His work develops from what is around him. For example, in *Green Circle* and *Russet Circle* (1989) Goldsworthy selected found leaves that had tips of green or russet. He fit the leaves into a circle with the colored tips facing inward. These leaves formed a circle. The reading of the work involved observing the circular pattern that emerged from the leaves. The leaves were observed in an unusual and unlikely configuration than would be found in nature. This idea of the chance meeting of artist and materials at a given time and place is reflected in my aesthetic. Goldsworthy welcomed the freedom of finding colors and patterns and texture in nature. I welcome the same freedom to look at the colors and patterns and lines beneath and in between layers of fabric that are created as a result of my process.

The influence of Christo (born Christo Vladimirov Javacheff, 1935) and Jeanne Claude (Jeanne-Claude Denat de Guillebon, 1935- 2009) are reflected in my work as well. In their work they wrap large objects and in doing so make the negative space around the objects more apparent. They have wrapped shorelines and coastlines, wrapped islands and buildings, wrapped trees and valleys. They highlight a very large but often overlooked world and make it pop-out

into plain sight. While they find hidden things in large negative spaces, I find what is hidden in small areas. Their work helped me look for objects, shapes, and colors by uncovering overlooked combinations of sewn lines, fabric, photographs, and drawings. For example, in *The Fabric Book, Page 3* (Appendix 1, 2), while cutting out images of vertical trees from a layer of fabric, I discovered a horizontal landscape. I enhanced the landscape by turning the composition on its side. I also expanded the horizontal lines found in the surface photograph into the border fabric. I discovered the hidden landscape within the layers of fabric.

My greatest influence of all is the early twentieth-century Dada movement. Coming from a parochial, traditional, and rigid household, the Dadaist idea that chance and randomness could be incorporated into art was a refreshing concept to me. The creation of my process was a step in that direction. Using fabrics in non-traditional and non-quilting methods, using gesso as a media instead of paint, and using flawed papers instead of pristine drawing paper was another step in that direction. Stitching the lines in the layered imagery and fabrics and then cutting on those lines and into the layers, to expose whatever fabric lay beneath the surface, was another movement toward randomness. Like words thrown onto the floor and randomly made into poetry, I felt that setting up visual problems to solve would create a way for me to work that would ultimately lead to unexpected exploration.

Techniques and Processes

I avoid the traditional practices of sewing exactness, matching corners, trimming seams, and making invisible stitches. Instead, I allow my fabrics, colors, patterns, and stitches to breathe without those constraints. The process that I use for the fabric works begins with photographs of the natural world. In these photographs I look for strong negative space and detail

in the outline of the images. I print these chosen areas on muslin that has been treated to hold color. Using a laser printer I print in 8"x10" format. In the next step I begin to select fabrics. To insert an element of chance, I typically pick the next four or five fabrics that are stacked in a pile. These are stacked underneath the photograph and pinned together. I then sew through the layers all at one time with white or black thread. If the photograph is dark I use white thread, and if it is light I use dark thread. When sewing I try to follow the dominant contour lines that I see. I am careful to choose lines that create shapes. This makes the cutting easier and ensures that the work does not fall apart when cut.

Cutting is the next step. It takes time and requires several different cutting tools. I cut out each shape in one layer at a time. In each cutting, and in the removal of one layer of fabric, I look for colors and patterns and their relationship to the surrounding fabric. I look for strong design and strong contrast. If, after cutting out a layer of fabric I achieve these qualities I move to another sewn shape, and if not, I continue cutting.

My drawing process involves using photographs as well. I enlarge and project the photographs onto a piece of handmade paper that contains flaws and textures. I trace the contours from the photograph onto the paper. Then, I use a monochromatic series of colored pencils to fill in the spaces, using parallel hatch lines. I stay within one color grouping and enjoy seeing the positive shapes evolve out of the hatch marks. I keep the lines very close together and keep the paper and the colored pencils in the same color range.

Sometimes when drawing, I focus on the small bits and pieces of the natural world that I see everyday. In my *Drawing Series on Yellow* (Appendix, 3) I took a piece of flawed, yellow paper with flecks of green, white, and dark brown marks within its fibers. I secured the paper to the ground outside and left it there for hours. On this windy day I waited to see what would be

blown onto the paper. Then, I took a photograph of the natural detritus that had settled on the paper and enlarged it. Then, I traced images from the photograph onto the paper. I filled in the images of the detritus and enhanced them using a contrasting series of white and gray colored pencils. The brown and green areas that were already part of the light brown paper became part of the natural world of detritus revealed by the white and gray drawing.

Works

My work is prompted primarily by the need to solve visual problems, as in *Liriopscape* (Appendix, 4). In this piece, I used gesso on raw canvas to depict aspects of the plant. The long pointed leaves overlap and create negative spaces of raw canvas that are also long and pointed. This allowed the raw canvas lines to be a focal point and show up dramatically. The organic, unevenly cut left edge contrasts the traditional straight lines of the canvas. This contrast helps shift the focus back to the negative space around the plants.

When working with color the formal problems are more complicated. In *Small Cut Pieces Blue* (Appendix, 5) I set up visual problems that must be solved but also had several solutions. In this piece the top photograph consisted of blues, purple, and green tones. I realized there was one piece of fabric with multiple bright colors and printed in very small patterns. I was uncertain if that piece of fabric would cohesively fit with the other patterned and colored fabrics. I spent a long time deciding how much of it to use and where it would work the best. Another swatch, the brightest blue with a circular pattern, was a difficult color and pattern to balance as well. The variety of patterns and colors of these fabrics made the process more complicated but generally permitted a more interesting outcome.

Using paper that contains unpredictable flaws creates another set of visual problems. In

White Drawing (Appendix, 6) I used large paper with multiple large flaws. The flaws were a consideration while drawing in the hatched lines. The brown, rough spots on the paper and the uneven texture meant that I had to incorporate these elements into my finished piece. The white shapes I made in colored pencil echoed the brown shapes that were flaws in the fibers of the paper. I added cool gray tones with the colored pencil that gave the white hatched lines some depth and distinction.

Because of the rules that I set for myself, there are times when pieces start to come together and times when they simply do not. One such instance was when I varied the size of my format. In the instance of the *Rolled Scroll* (Appendix, 7) the drawing that I used was the shadow of a tree as it fell on a wall. I traced the entire tree and realized after completing the piece that it just did not work as a large piece. I cut the large piece into strips of varied widths and began to piece them back together. I reconnected these pieces by attaching the strips of the fabric in a sequence beginning with the narrowest and moving toward the widest width. The tactic worked. The pieces fit together and formed what appeared to be a long landscape scroll. Even though the fabric was cut into strips and reassembled in an order according to the cut widths, the lines, patterns, and colors flowed from one segment into another.

In creating formal problems to solve I have developed a process that I trust and one that gives me a variety of avenues to explore. I like that the process includes random elements and decision making that forces me to take some chances with the work. My process is very flexible and allows me to work intuitively and with a range of media.

Conclusion

When I walked into my first Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts

(MIS-IAR) class I was scared. I relived the drip paintings that Marilyn the Cheerleader had made in high school and as I walked in the door I felt very insecure. The students knew each other and the teacher knew them. When it was time for introductions we were asked to tell what we were working on this semester. Almost all the students had an answer, a sample, or an idea that they put forward. I did not. I thought I had come to get direction. It looked like I would have to decide myself where I would go from here.

The MIS-IAR program made me grow up as an artist. It required that I answer to the class about the work, have a plan, take chances, critique others, make mistakes, and admit them. It required that I create a process from which to work and to respect that process. It required that I go to gallery talks and view exhibitions to see how other artists worked. It required preparation for each class and experimentation. I have done all of this and feel like without this program I would not have gone this far on my own.

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Appendix

List of Images

- Figure 1 *The Fabric Book, Page 3* (open) fabric, pellon, stitched line, 15"x24", 2010.
- Figure 2. *The Fabric Book, Page 3* (detail), fabric, pellon, stitched line, 13"x17", 2010.
- Figure 3. *Drawing Series on Yellow*, colored penciled, yellow paper, 22"x28", 2009.
- Figure 4. *Liriopscape*, gesso, raw canvas, 20"x26", 2006.
- Figure 5. *Small Cut Pieces Blue*, fabric, mixed media, stitched line, 11"x16", 2007.
- Figure 6. *White Drawing*, colored pencil, grease pencil, brown paper, 22"x28", 2008.
- Figure 7. *Rolled Scroll* (detail), fabric, indelible marker, stitched line, 14"x158" (entire piece), 2010.



Figure 1. *The Fabric Book, Page 3* (open), fabric, pellaon, stitched line, 15"x24", 2010.

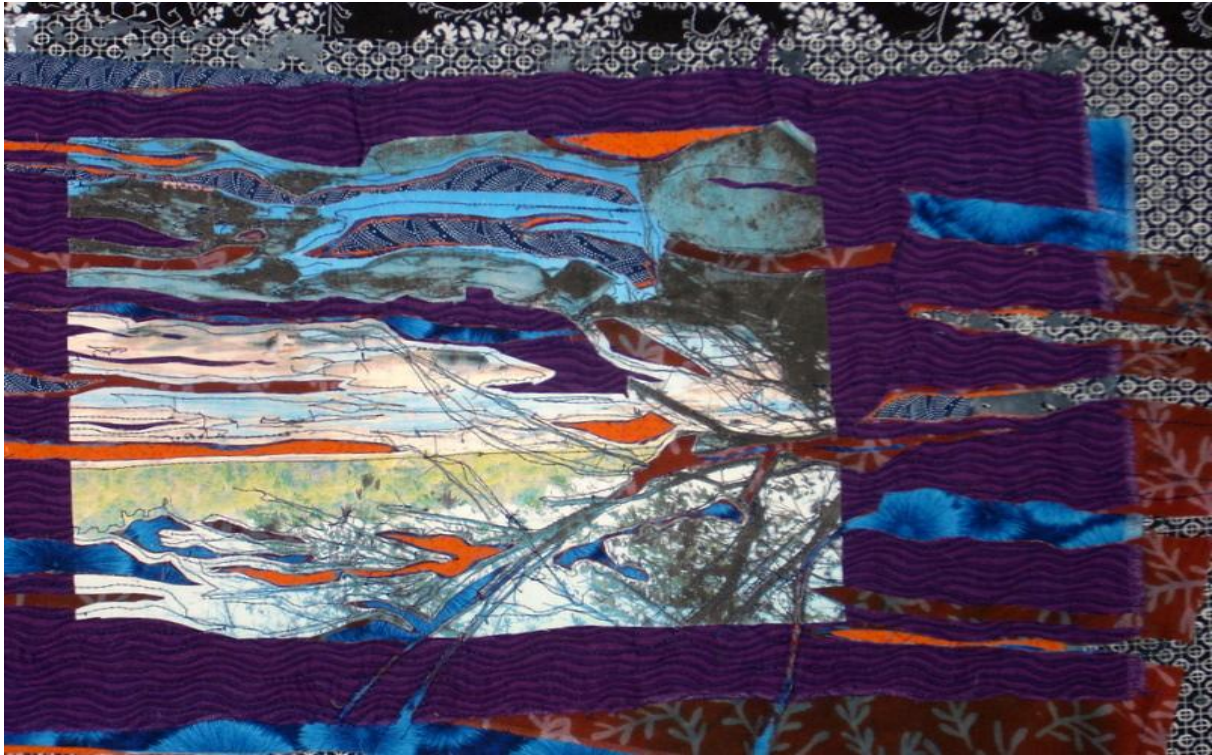


Figure 2. *The Fabric Book, Page 3 (detail), fabric, pelted, stitched line, 13"x17", 2010.*



Figure 3. *Drawing Series on Yellow*, colored pencil, yellow paper, 22"x28", 2009.



Figure 4. *Liriopscape*, gesso, raw canvas, 20"x26", 2006.



Figure 5. *Small Cut Pieces Blue*, fabric, mixed media, stitched line, 11"x16", 2007.



Figure 6. *White Drawing*, colored pencil, grease pencil, brown paper, 22"x28", 2008.



Figure 7. *Rolled Scroll*, (detail), fabric, indelible marker, stitched line, 14"x158" (entire piece), 2010.

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- 1995-present Teacher and Art Director, Brilliant Summer, St. Catherine's School, Richmond, Virginia
- 1998-2008 Art History Teacher, Dual Enrollment Program, J. Sergeant Reynolds Community College, Richmond, Virginia
- 2004-2006 Art Teacher, Virginia Commonwealth University Outreach Program, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia
- 1988-1994 Art Teacher, Math Magic, Richmond, Virginia
- 1988-1989 Teacher, Special Program for Academic and Creative Excellence, Richmond Public Schools, Richmond, Virginia
- 1976-1979 Elementary Art Teacher, Crestwood, Greenfield, Henning, A.M. Davis, Chaulkey Elementary Schools, Chesterfield County Public Schools, Chesterfield, Virginia
- 1972-1976 Lead Teacher, American Pre-School, Richmond, Virginia

RELATED EXPERIENCE

- 2000 Curriculum Designer, Maymont Park, Richmond, Virginia

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS or MEMBERSHIPS

- 1978-present National Education Association, Richmond, Virginia
- 1978-present Virginia Education Association, Richmond, Virginia
- 1982-present Richmond Education Association, Richmond, Virginia
- 2006- 2010 Board Member, Office of Secretary, Art 6, Richmond, Virginia

EXHIBITIONS:

- 2011 *Fused*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia. Artspace, Richmond, Virginia.
- 2011 Artspace Richmond Public Library Membership Show, Richmond, Virginia
- 2010 Artspace Membership Show, Richmond, Virginia
- 2010 *Negative Spaces*, Grove Avenue Starbucks, Richmond, Virginia
- 2009 *Negative Spaces*, Richmond Public Library, Richmond, Virginia
- 2009 *High School Art Teachers*, Art6, Richmond, Virginia
- 2009 *605*, Artspace, Richmond, Virginia
- 2007, 2009 *Think Small*, Art6, Richmond, Virginia
- 2007, 2008, 2009 *National Art Program*, Annual, Richmond, Virginia
- 2007, 2008, 2009 *Undiscovered Artists*, Annual, Jewish Community Center, Richmond, Virginia
- 2008 *Fabric Works*, Art6, Richmond, Virginia
- 2007 *Watercolors*, Stony Point Gallery, Medical College of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia
- 2007 *Watercolors*, Uptown Gallery, Richmond, Virginia