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A Tale to Tell: The Charisma of Narrative Art

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 Statement

My artwork combines the power of narrative with the sculptural form, and I encourage the viewer to interact with my work. I use the magnetic, hypnotic effect that stories can have over us. My narratives are designed to draw the reader into a willing suspension of disbelief. It is often whimsical because childlike things give people certain permissions of joy and abandon. I use anthropomorphism to invite the viewer to handle my pieces in order to create an intimacy between the viewer and the artwork.

A Tale to Tell: The Charisma of Narrative Art

Introduction: A Story about Me

I produce art, and I suppose that makes me an artist but I don't think I had ever planned to become one. Art is not a profession for me nor is it really a hobby. Rather, art is a primary method of interacting with the world around me, an indispensable part of my language set. When I can not find the words I can find the images, or some combination to say what I mean. My formation and growth as an artist has been directly tied to my development and socialization in life gaining momentum as I gained language, skills, and experience.

In high school I began to train in the technical aspects of my art. Even then, my choice to take art courses was more instinctual and emotional. I sensed that without training my visual language would become too unsophisticated for my rapidly expanding life experience. So, I continued to study art throughout high school and then throughout college, imagery continued to be a partner in my communications.

After college, I entered the professional world as an educator. I had to adapt to the scholastic arena and as a result my artistic development was put on hold. I did not pick up any formal art education again until I discovered the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts (MIS-IAR) Program offered through Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). During my time in the MIS-IAR program, my language expanded to include not only the images and story but the treatment of the surfaces, the materials, and the context of the images and story. This experience has allowed me to bring focus to my desire to communicate and tell stories and to enhance my art with interactive elements, visual narrative, and anthropomorphism.

The Importance of Story

Daniel Pink (b. 1964) is a contemporary business analyst, author, and motivational speaker. His extensive research into using the functions of both the left and right hemispheres of the brain is documented in his book, *A Whole New Mind* (2005). He stresses that success in our current Conceptual Age will depend not just upon the logical, sequential, and analytical skills attributed to the left hemisphere but also on the six aptitudes of the right hemisphere. One of these right hemisphere aptitudes is *story*. In his book, Pink comments on a story's potential for power and interaction. "When facts become so widely available and instantly accessible, each one becomes less valuable. What begins to matter more is the ability to place these facts in *context* and to deliver them with *emotional impact*." (Pink, 103) From my own life experience, I can say it is a fact that there are many foods that look unappealing but have an enjoyable taste. No matter how true, this fact is not likely to inspire anyone into a culinary adventure. On the other hand, Dr. Suess' *Green Eggs and Ham* (1960) makes that point in a story about a food-avoidance epic involving trains, planes, and goats on boats, a book which convinced at least one child to try out a few of those odd-looking foods.

I initially incorporated story in my work because it was such a natural way to communicate meaning. As my art has matured my inclusion of story has become more selective and purposeful. I am more aware of the narrative form, in particular its intrinsic ability to absorb a viewer's attention and coax them into interaction with the piece.

I work primarily as a book artist. This gives me the opportunity to work in two dimensions as I treat the surfaces and illustrate the story, and in three dimensions as I design the book and its intended display. I enjoy the opportunity to engage multiple senses and many of my pieces do that through the use of textures. I make my work accessible for touch and interaction,

to invite viewers into a relationship.

In my initial explorations of bookmaking, the first intuitive and creative breakthrough led me to the production of *Uglybook* (Appendix, 1). The small, fuzzy, yellow book is designed as a three-dimensional creature with eyestalks and earnest blue eyes on the cover. I created a very simple, childlike comedy on his pages (Appendix, 2), in which he struggles with rejection and loneliness before an opportunity for social acceptance comes along.

When I presented the book, many were curious enough to stop and look but very few were willing to touch the piece, which meant they were not reading it. Gallery etiquette was strongly ingrained and I realized I was going to have to do something more drastic if I wanted *Uglybook* to have an audience. My solution was to add a scaled wooden sign to the display which read simply “I am a book. Please read me.” Not surprisingly, the most willing participants in *Uglybook*’s story were children but the sign prompted a significant increase in the number of adult readers. I even found a few people giving *Uglybook* an appreciative farewell as they put him down and moved on.

While I sat on the gallery bench, I mused on what a telling phrase I had chosen to encourage viewers to interact with my work. “I am a book. Please read me.” It said a great deal for its seven little words. I often see people as the binding of a story, most of them would like their pages to be seen and appreciated. So, they fashion themselves to be attractive to a particular crowd or attention-grabbing or commanding. I see myself that way as well, my humorous t-shirts and comfortable shorts inviting people to come talk with me and read some of my pages. It is the story that is important, after all, rather than the cover.

I am inspired by all sorts of things, from nature’s more awkward creatures to the swirling pattern of the last few Cheerios left in the milk. I find joy in engaging with these random and

often inanimate things and that joy fuels my desire to create. I know that everyone has a capacity for joy but past a certain age there is suspicion given to those who are joyful too often or too easily. We are given the impression that it is a serious world out there and only serious people are going to succeed in it. With my work, I strive to induce a little bit more of that incidental joy.

Interaction

In my early college years I was delighted by the discovery of a book called *Open Me... I'm a Dog* (1997) by Art Spiegelman (b. 1948). This book is a children's tale about a puppy's encounter with an ill-tempered witch, who promptly transforms him into a book. The story is told in the first person, so that it seems the book (formerly a puppy) is speaking to the reader in its own voice. Attached to the book's binding is a black cloth leash, putting this book neatly over the border into the realm of sculpture. With just a well-designed cover and a simple leash, the artist had transformed his book from an object into a character, a being that interacted with readers and excited the imagination.

I was inspired by Art Spiegelman's work, though I did not realize the real brilliance of the piece until I began struggling with the problem that he had resolved with *Open Me... I'm a Dog*. As I had learned with *Uglybook*, I needed viewers to interact with my pieces. I was going to have to learn how to arouse curiosity, excite imagination, and make my books inviting, just as Mr. Spiegelman had. One of the first problems that I had to overcome was fragility. No one was going to handle my books if they appeared delicate or precious in any way, and I needed them to be sturdy beyond mere appearances so that they would withstand the repetitive use.

As an example, one of my more robust pieces is *Secret Life* (Appendix, 3), which is a book built into the top of a coffee table. The pages are 15" x 21". They are constructed from thick Stonehenge paper with a high fiber content. The table itself is set low to the ground, on four

broad legs. Even the Plexiglas top, that acts as the front cover of the book, looks as though it could take quite a bit of use before showing any wear and tear. The appearance of strength allows viewers to be less hesitant in approaching the piece because they are not afraid they will break it.

In addition to making the piece strong enough, I focused on making it intriguing enough to invite interaction. The strongest draw to the piece is context. Until you get close to it, the book appears to be a normal coffee table with a remote control and a plate of crackers on top. Displayed in a living room it would be difficult to notice that it is a book. However, displayed in a gallery the unremarkable table begs the question *Why is there a coffee table in an art gallery?* The question is lure to draw curious viewers close enough at which point they might see the hinges on the Plexiglas top or the little tab that sticks up, making it easier to turn to the first page of the book (Appendix, 4). The title also suggests that the table may be more than meets the eye, encouraging a closer examination.

In *Forest for the Trees* (Appendix, 5), I used a more subtle approach that relies on visual appeal. The book is sized like a paperback but it has the unusual, organic profile of a copse of trees. I meant for the intricate tree line to arrest a viewer's attention in the way a book with a standard rectangular profile might not. I displayed it in a standing, partially open position to enhance the sense of depth between the pages and to display the cover-to-cover binding. Once the viewer has drawn closer, they can observe the textures and patterns of the various trees. The orange and black colors draw attention to the centipede binding technique that stretches from the front cover, across the spine of the book, and onto the back cover. *Forest for the Trees* does not interact with the viewer by way of a story but instead through the shapes of the pages, the interplay of the green tones, and the playful, colorful sewing (Appendix, 6).

The Language of Narrative

The language of narrative maintains an unfortunate measure of dread in the hearts and minds of many, whose only experiences with that particular phrase were in mandatory language arts and literature classes. In some classrooms, the language of narrative meant memorizing a passel of jargon like *en media res*, denouement, allusion, and didactic which could reduce an enjoyable story to an act of tedium as pages were picked apart word by word. Such exercises can be important and useful but do not always leave readers with a sense of wonder and confidence.

Most of my art relies in part on my viewer's proficiency with the language of narrative, which I believe almost everyone possesses. In his study of children's book illustration, literary expert Perry Nodelman says

Picture books are clearly recognizable as children's books simply because they speak to us of childlike qualities, of youthful simplicity and youthful exuberance; yet paradoxically, they do so in terms that imply a vast sophistication in regard to both visual and verbal codes. Indeed, it is part of the charm of many of the most interesting picture books that they so strangely combine the childlike and the sophisticated – that the viewer they imply is both very learned and very ingenuous. (Nodelman, 21)

The visual and verbal codes that the author refers to are the pieces that make up the language of narrative, which most young readers have an intuitive grasp of by the time they are reading picture books.

The language is so easy to learn because the threads of narratives large and small run throughout every part of our lives, including anecdotes we share when catching up with a friend, episodic and serial television shows, print and digital articles, and diary entries. Even if the term hyperbole never enters our minds, we are well aware when someone is exaggerating a part of their story for the sake of emphasis. We are aware of this because narratives are so pervasive in

our culture that we have developed an intuitive sense for them just by being so constantly exposed. I like to tap into this intuitive language with my work because it bypasses many of the social and mental barriers to understanding. No viewer need fear that they are engaging with an aloof or esoteric artwork. It's just a story, and everyone knows how to approach a story.

Of course, narratives do not exist only within the vaunted halls of literature. Even before the literacy rate skyrocketed in the modern world, stories were being told orally and with pictures. Narrative art can include a wide variety of things, including a single artwork that suggests a story or a sequential series of works that show various stages of a tale. Within those two broad categories one finds illustrations, print series, graphic novels, cave paintings, sculptures, art books, comic strips, photography, and just about every other form of art. There is a new language set to learn in narrative artwork, symbolic conventions such as lines behind a running character to indicate speed. Though my experience with children's books, photography, and film had given me a basic grasp of the visual language of narrative, I found I needed a much deeper understanding when I began work on the pages for *A Familiar Story*, a short graphic novel. For that expertise, I turned to *Understanding Comics* (1993) by Scott McCloud (b.1960).

Scott McCloud follows in the footsteps of Will Eisner (b.1917), an expert sequential artist and one of the first to publish well-accepted commentary on graphic novels as literature. Scott McCloud has built his professional life around the production and study of narrative art, and in particular sequential art. From his book, I learned many of the conventions for suggesting sound and the passage of time on a drawn page. For instance, in *A Familiar Story* I used borderless panels to suggest continuous, related action (Appendix, 7) while long rectangular ones represent a pause or silence. In a similar vein, *Loot* (Appendix, 8) features a page wherein the characters are rappelling down into a hole in the ground. I represented this descent by using three

very tall vertical panels which get successively lower on the page, until the last one bleeds off the bottom edge. The shape of the panels, the movement of the characters within them, and the placement of the panels on the page all assist in denoting movement and the passage of time. The ability to suggest time and non-visual sensory input on a drawn page allowed me to engage viewers more fully in my story.

Anthropomorphism

As I had learned in the *Uglybook* experience, all of my research into narrative language would become moot if my books were not engaging enough to pick up in the first place. I am inspired by the joy I feel in finding a fleeting relationship with an inanimate object. If I am with a friend and I spot a particularly charismatic object, my impulse is to point it out to them so they can share in my happy moment. In particular, I am delighted when I discover an object that has a resemblance to an expressive face, such as the back of a vehicle in which the tail lights form the eyes and the bumper forms a stretched mouth. My impulse to create comes from much this same desire to share a meaningful moment with others, only on a larger scale. I find something that makes me feel a certain way and I want to share it with a larger group of individuals. After all, relationships between two or more things in the world are the building blocks of a story.

There is an extremely long tradition of anthropomorphism in human history, mostly tied to art and literature. In the western world, fables and fairy tales are a rich source of anthropomorphic characters who often act as a stand-in for a particular human trait or set of traits. These stories are so prevalent that I can assume at least some familiarity with them in the majority of my audience, and use that familiarity to help readers connect with the human-like qualities of my books.

One of the most important functions of my books is their ability to participate in eye

contact. While the significance and customs surrounding eye contact vary from culture to culture, it is universally an important and meaningful method of communicating. This capacity for eye contact is designed to create anthropomorphism in which the viewer will assign human traits to the artwork. In this vein I created *Egglantine* (Appendix, 9), a small book with the appearance of an anthropomorphic fried egg. The colors are plain and the size is unassuming. However, the small face on one side of the yolk has its eyes upturned to catch the eyes of viewers. A small smile embroidered onto the cloth communicates mood in a wordless way. I have designed *Egglantine* so that viewers are prompted to reference their understanding of social cues, and that in turn invites a relationship with the piece.

In *I'm a Book, Please Read Me* (Appendix, 10), I approach anthropomorphism in a different way. This book is a representation of me and rather than humanize it by giving it a face I have given it a voice. The front board is covered with part of a t-shirt, the collar still visible. Below the collar, 96-point font displays the title, which is also a direct invitation the viewer. I'm a book, it announces. Please read me. This first plea gives the book its voice, which continues throughout the piece. Each page is written as half of a conversation and the other half is inferred from the reader (Appendix, 11). The book, like the artist, is trying desperately to interact with the audience.

I am driven more by a need to communicate than to create and the result of that need is a constant quest for more perfect tools. The more resources and methods I have at my disposal, the more likely it is that I will successfully communicate my intentions. My linguistic and artistic skills developed together like siblings but with art as the younger, less capable one. As a result, many of my attempts to communicate with art were cobbled together, incoherent because of the gaps in my understanding of visual language.

Conclusion

The MIS-IAR program has given me the opportunity to pursue fluency in visual communication. Through the program I have discovered book arts, which is a perfect fit for my equal love of storytelling with words and storytelling with pictures. My concentration in that area allowed me to expand my communication tools to areas I had not previously considered. I have become competent at using mixed media and sculpture as part of the bookmaking process, both of which facilitate easier communication with my viewers. Through my experience in the MIS-IAR program, I have made solid construction, visual narrative, and anthropomorphism integral parts of my artwork. After a lifetime of trailing behind, my visual communication is an equal partner with my words.

The growth of my understanding was not limited to my artwork. As a student, I have also come to terms with myself as an artist. Each class I took prompted an examination of my motivations and methods that led me to realize that I am driven by a desire for vicarious interaction. Perhaps most valuable to me, I have been able to hurdle the instinctual, directionless creation that was the sole source of my art in earlier years. The MIS-IAR program has led me to see what I was trying to do with my art and as a result I have been able to focus on developing the things that inject purpose and meaning into my creations.

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Figure 1. *Uglybook* (three-quarter view), mixed media book, 8"x 6" x ½", 2008.



Figure 2. *Uglybook*, (open view), mixed media book, 6"x16"x 1/2", 2008.



Figure 3. *Secret Life* (closed view), mixed media book, 24"x28"x22", 2010.

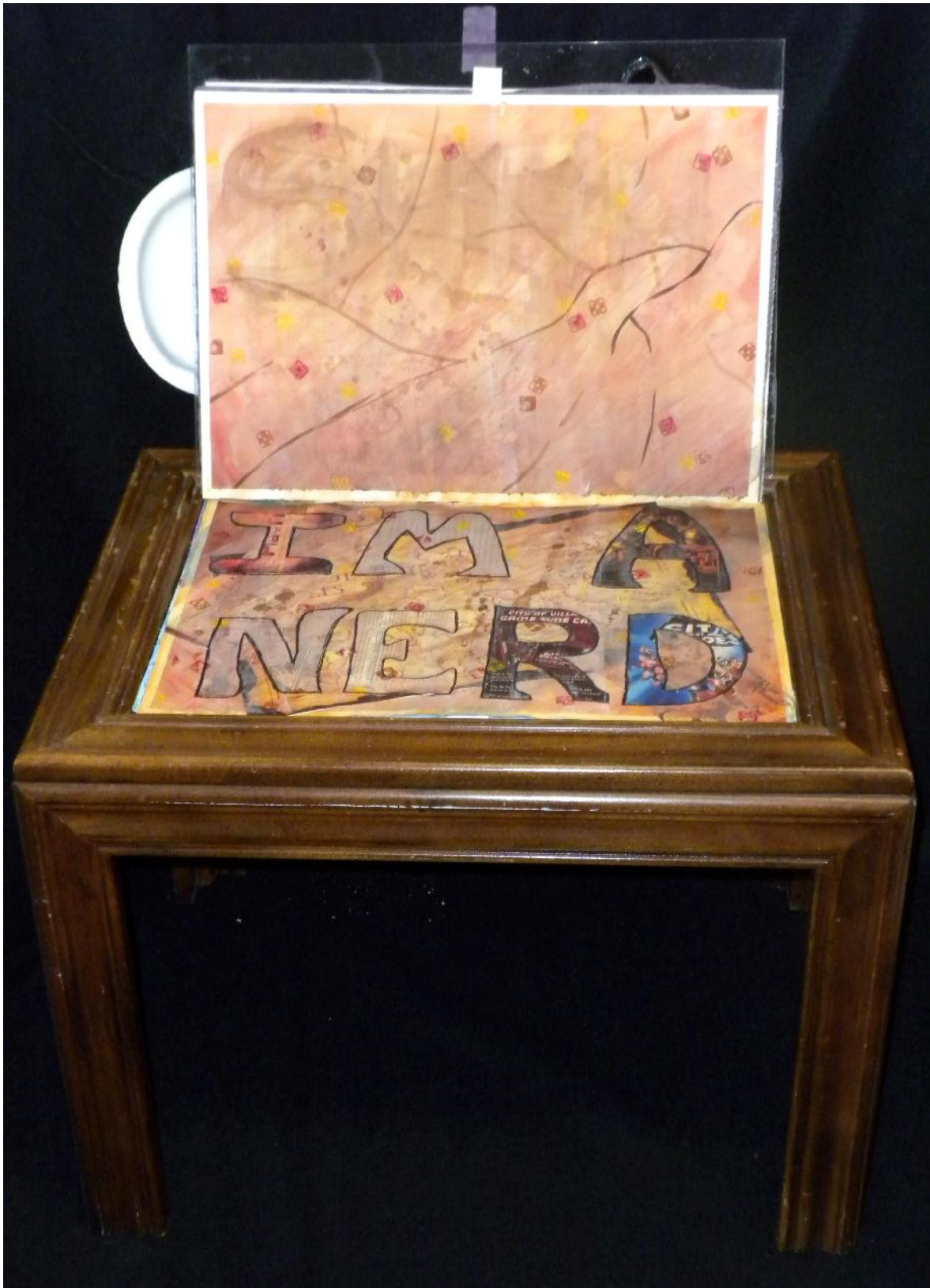


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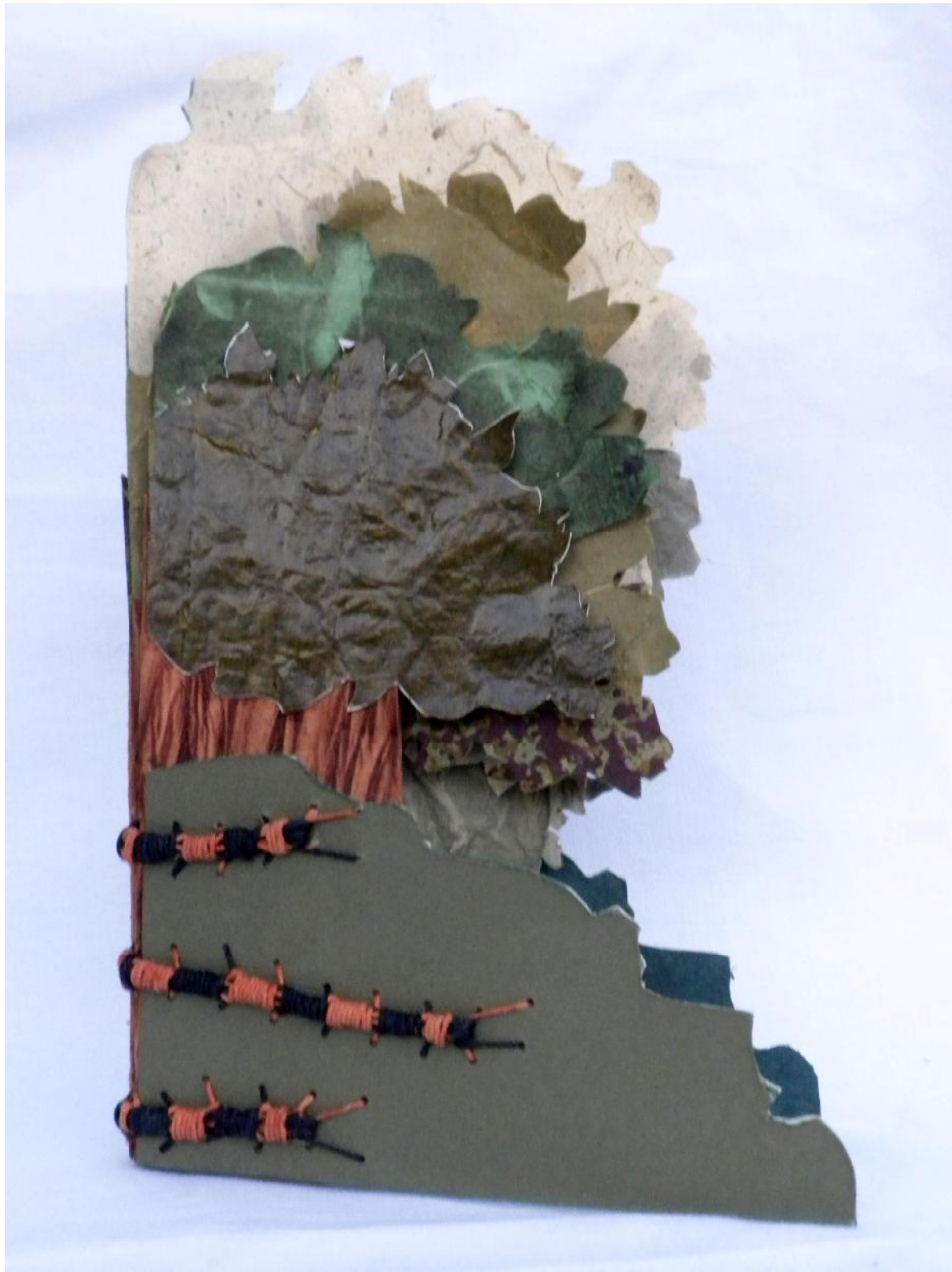


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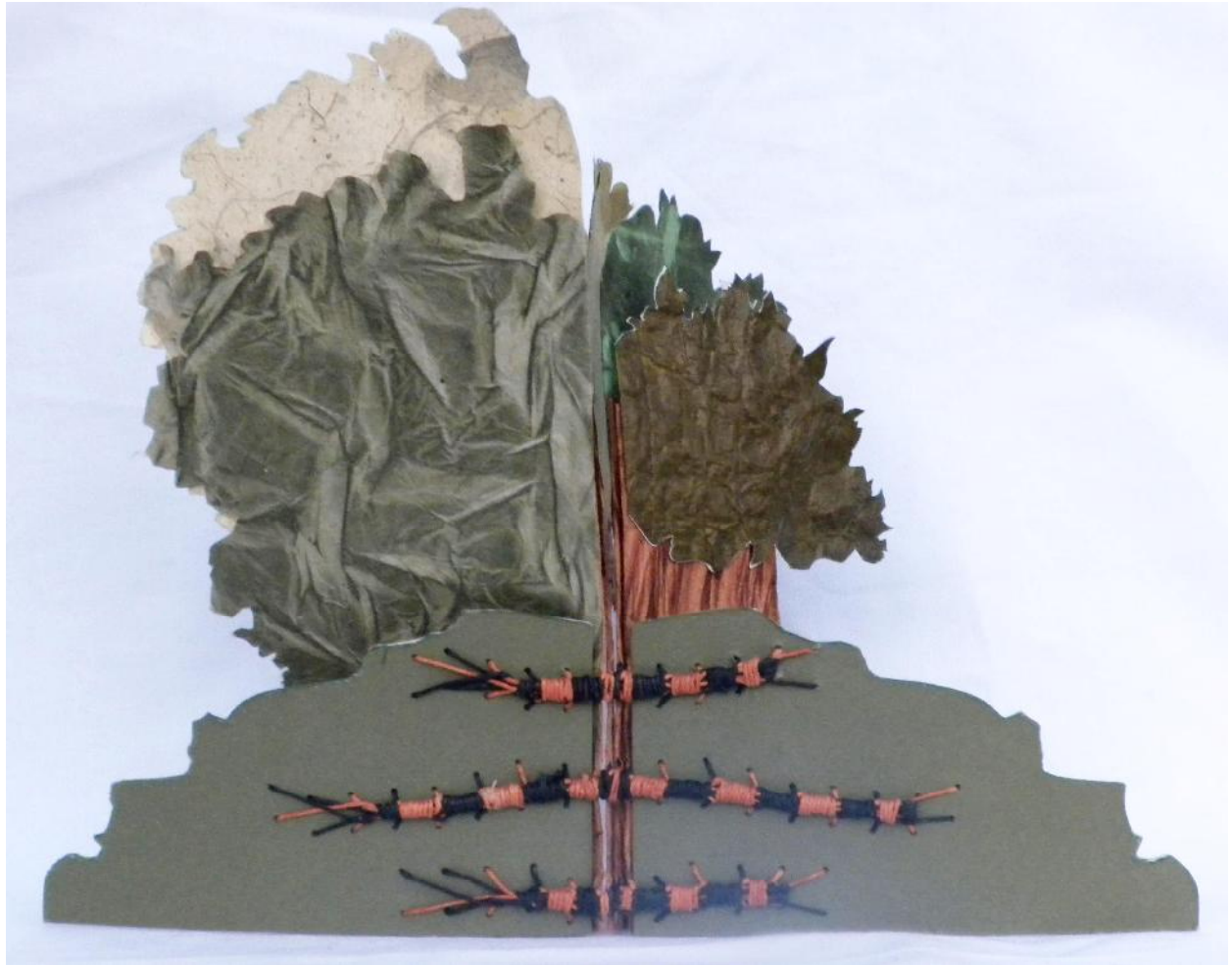


Figure 6. *Forest for the Trees* (open view, cover), mixed media book, 8"x12"x 1/8", 2009.



Figure 7. *A Familiar Story* (Page 5), technical pen and halftones, 7 ½"x5", 2006.

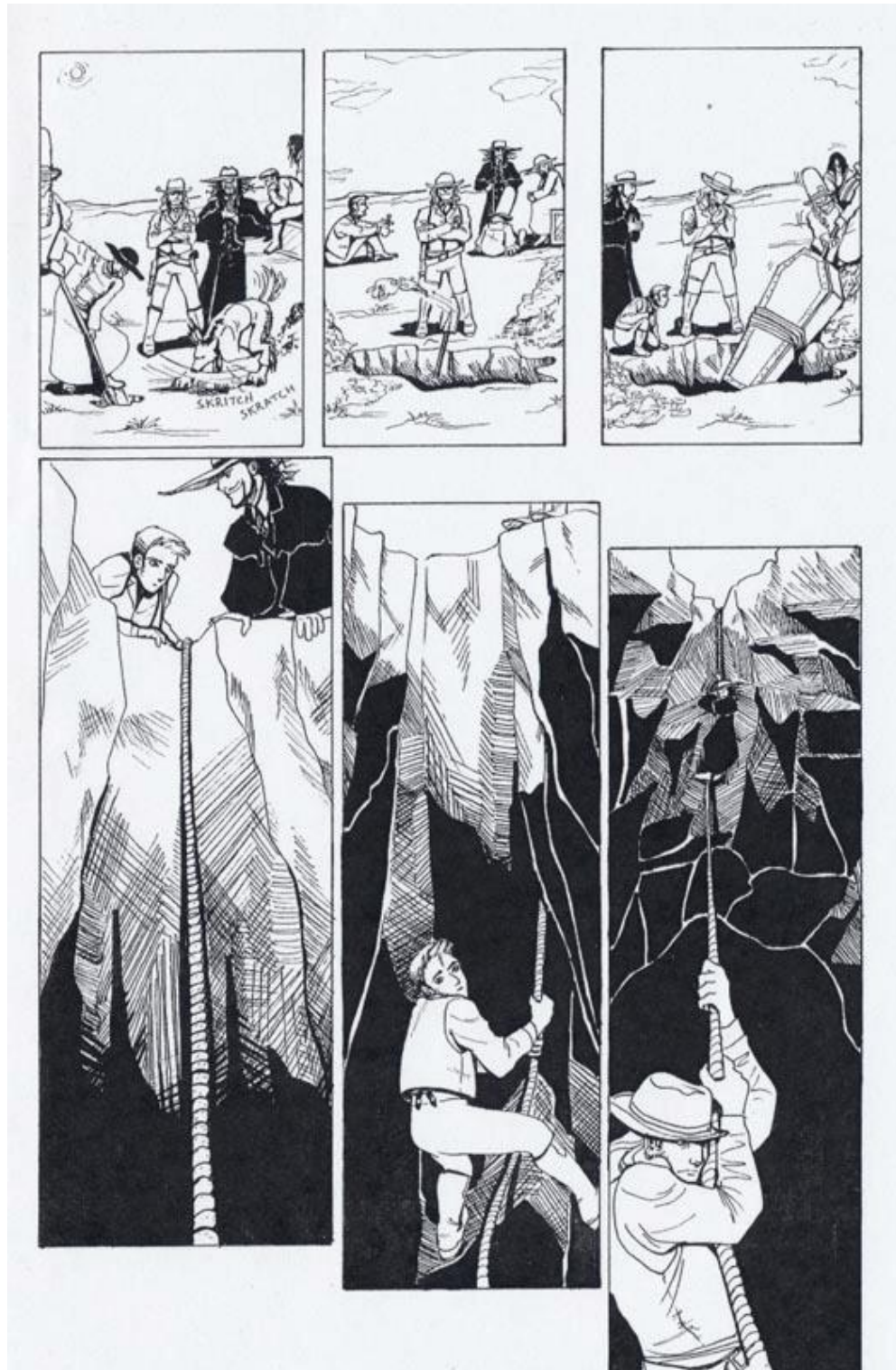


Figure 8. *Loot* (Page 16), technical pen, 7 1/2''x5'', 2008.



Figure 9. *Egglantine* (closed view), mixed media book, 6"x6"x 1/2", 2010.

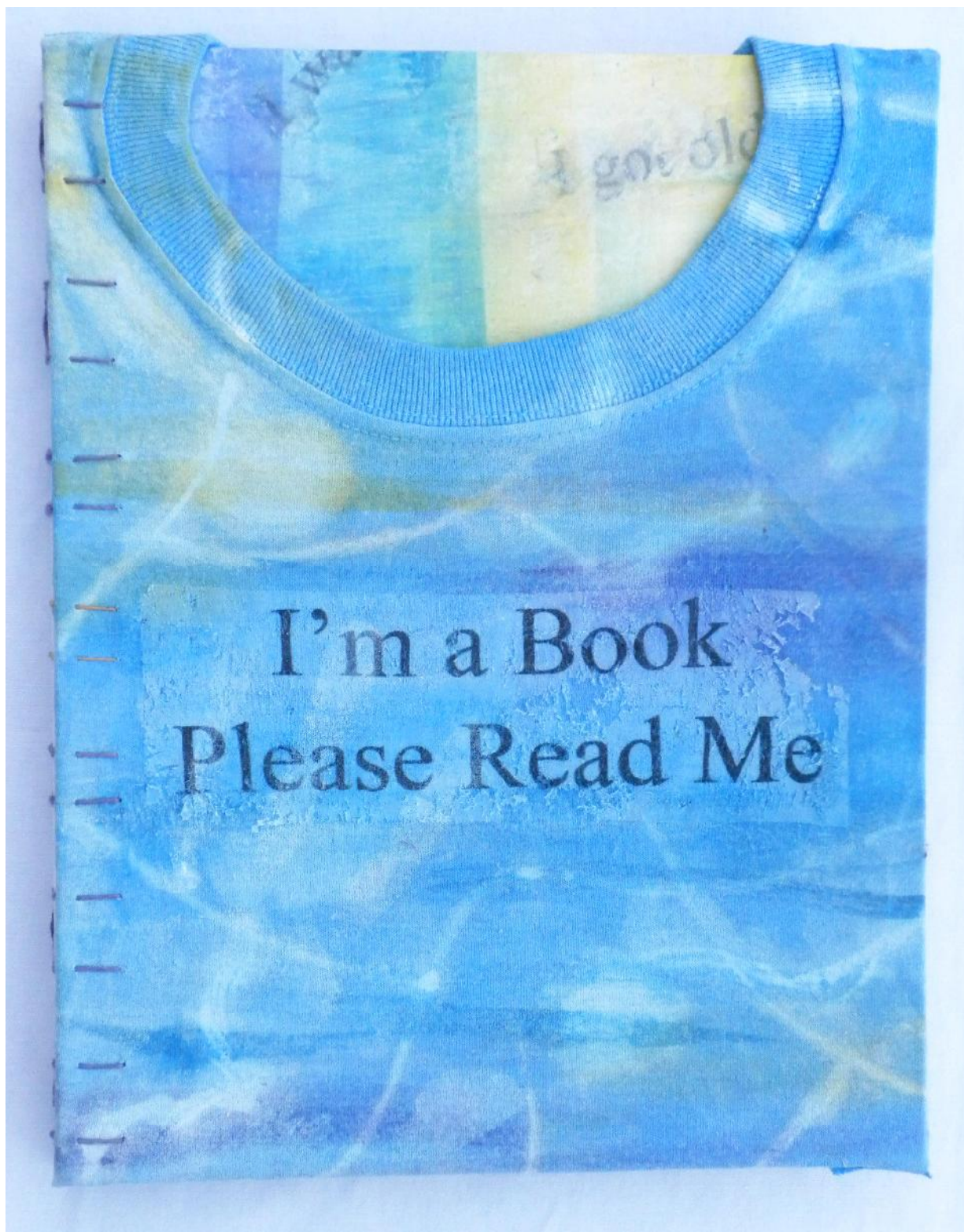


Figure 10. *I'm a Book, Please Read Me* (closed view), mixed media book, 13"x9"x 1", 2010.



Figure 11. *I'm a Book, Please Read Me* (open view), mixed media book, 13"x18"x ½", 2010.

Cynthia Mirabile

EDUCATION:

- 2011 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia. Emphasis in Crafts and Paper Arts.
- 2000 Bachelor of Arts, Mary Washington College, Fredericksburg, Virginia. Fine Arts, Emphasis in Painting and Sculpture.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE:

- 2000-Current Art Resource Teacher, Cub Run Elementary School, Fairfax County Public Schools, Centreville, Virginia.

EXHIBITIONS:

- 2011 *I'm a Book, Please Read Me*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia at Verizon Gallery, Ernst Community Cultural Center, Annandale, Virginia.
- 2009 *Artist Teacher Exhibition*, Verizon Gallery, Ernst Community Cultural Center, Annandale, Virginia. Juror: Kurt Godwin
- 2008 *Artist Teacher Exhibition*, Verizon Gallery, Ernst Community Cultural Center, Annandale, Virginia. Juror: Ginna Cullen