My Artistic Journey

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My Artistic Journey

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 is focused on mixed media and printmaking. Through these media I address current world events, such as global warming and recycling. I also make works that deal with personal emotions.

In making my work I use charcoal pencil, paint, newspaper, found stamping materials, and old books. I overlap these materials and blend them together to create an overall cohesive appearance. I present generalized objects that may not appear to be completely finished. This appearance serves as an analogy of the instability of our world’s environment and my personal life.
My Artistic Journey

Introduction

I have always been drawn to the arts. This attraction started with music in elementary school and continued into high school where I was first introduced to the visual arts. One high school teacher in particular encouraged me. She was open to letting her students explore many types of media and gave constructive criticism. Her class was the beginning of my journey into drawing and painting. I discovered an outlet that took me away from any stress I might be experiencing, and learned that art could be a way for me to express my ideas. I decided that art was something I would like to pursue as a career. Creating art and appreciating my art teachers was what caused me to want to show up to school. So, I trained to also be a teacher.

As an undergraduate, I learned a great deal of important techniques in the painting, drawing, and design classes. However, it wasn’t until I began teaching elementary school that I realized that there is more to art than just technique. I wanted to have a better understanding of other ways to use art materials. That is when I decided I would enroll in Virginia Commonwealth University’s (VCU) Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts (MIS-IAR) Program. I immediately learned from VCU’s professors that art should have an underlying meaning and that there isn’t one right way to paint, draw, or create any kind of art. The MIS-IAR classes have opened my eyes to being a more flexible teacher and have helped me gain knowledge in viewing, appreciating, and creating art.
My Aesthetics

I use oil paint, drawing materials, and mixed media in my work on board, canvas, and drawing supports. My subject and object matter relates to my life experiences. My imagery is developed using a four-tone value scale wash. Then, I variously layer oil paint, acrylics, cloth, tissue paper, and other found objects. On top of these materials I often add a final layer of fabric paint, Sharpie marker, and other drawing tools to emphasize slight detail and texture.

My current artwork includes my recent life experiences. The emotional roller coaster of a recent, unexpected divorce has played a significant role in the colors and found objects placed in my artwork. For example, a combination of blue and thick, dark red paint is symbolic of the sadness and anger I felt during this time. Wedding cards and notes were attached to my artwork to confirm my once existent marriage. Even candles from my wedding reception were melted down and used in my work. Examining my life through my art has helped me release tension and anxiety I have experienced through divorce. In expressing my feelings, I hope to reach out to other people who have experienced the same thing.

Polar bears, cities, and landscapes make up some of my imagery concerning my response to the environment. Polar bears have been chosen due to the deep passion I have for animals. As many are aware, polar bears are endangered due to global warming. It deeply saddens me to think that mankind may have caused this endangerment to happen. So, when handling these pieces I try to use recycled materials as a way of referencing mankind’s overuse of disposable materials. I also show the evidence of mankind by depicting human footprints in the work. I depict cities and landscapes to symbolically relay emotional journeys I have gone through. Materials for these are chosen based on textures and colors that I remember from a particular
location or time in my life. For instance, actual grains of sand were used in one piece to indicate a beach, brilliant yellow fabric paint was used to show the bright lights of a city, and the cool and relaxing colors of a smoothly textured cloth were used to show the calmness of another location.

**Art Influences**

I have great appreciation for all art but tend to be drawn to the contemporary, abstract, and surreal movements. One artist who has inspired me is Jasper Johns (1930-). His use of a reduced palette and thick, layered media is what drew me to his work. In *Flag* (1954-1955) Johns used newspaper and found materials as a base support then added thick, encaustic wax on top to create an image of an American flag. His palette consisted of only red, white, and blue in this piece. I have used a similar approach in my own work. I sometimes begin by using newspaper as the foundational support, along with various mementos such as cards and notes to symbolize emotion in the piece. These found materials are added to the surfaces of the layers of paint. Johns also uses symbols in his art, such as flags, letters, maps, targets, and numbers along with found material. Painting thickly allows me to create a specific texture and helps me incorporate text into the piece. Like Johns, I use a reduced palette and focus on either neutral or analogous colored paint.

Andy Warhol’s (1928-1987) work has also inspired me through his use of repeated images in various colors. His work focused on familiar mass-produced images, such as photos of celebrities and commercial advertisements. Warhol’s subject matter stands out to me because of its simplistic, repeated imagery and graphic visual appeal. These images are familiar to the general public so the viewer can relate to the image. I too try to grab the viewer’s attention by using simplified lines, repeated images, and graphic elements in my own artwork. For instance,
in Warhol’s *Marilyn Monroe* (1967) silkscreen prints he repeatedly used the same image. Each of the nine images is realized in different colors. In his selection of Marilyn Monroe’s image, he only focuses on facial features that are vital in order to recognize her. This approach to repeating images with limited detail is one that I use.

Having an undergraduate minor in psychology, and a general curiosity of how the mind works, drew my interest to the Surrealist movement. Surrealism was a prominent philosophy in the 1920’s and 1930’s in Europe. Artists involved believed that the subconscious imagination was necessary when making artwork. This attention placed on the subconscious stemmed from how Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the renowned Viennese psychoanalyst, believed that the human mind operated from unconscious thoughts and dreams.

One of the leading Surrealists was Salvador Dalí (1904-1989). His work incorporated symbols that pointed to the underlying meaning of thoughts and dreams. For example, in *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) Dali used melting clocks to possibly suggest that time is not fixed. He often depicted ants in his work to which he attached meanings of death and strong sexual desire. His use of arbitrary colors helped to show a dream-like state. I am intrigued by Dali’s ability to create images that make viewers think about the underlying message of his artwork. I also incorporate personalized symbols in my work. A few examples of my symbols include a mysterious face that represents the past relationship I was in along with my unknown future, and a rusted wire fence that represents the long time I spent in a failed relationship.

**On Masonite Board**

Working on board tends to be my comfort area and strength when creating art. Board is affordable, sturdy, and can be cut to any size needed. When using board I initially paint two to
three layers of gesso on the wood surface. I then paint a neutral colored oil wash, such as burnt umber, to get rid of the white color left from the gesso.

When working from photographs, the next step of the process is to grid off the wood panel so that I can proportionally transfer what I use from the photo. This preliminary drawing is made using vine charcoal. A four-tone gray scale is then mixed using oil paint. Each area of the composition is painted based on the values of light to dark. A watered down mixture of Liquin and oil paint is next used to paint in the first layer of the colors. After this has dried an additional thicker layer of paint is applied. Depending on the piece I may add cloth, fabric paint, and other materials to the painted surface.

*Polar Bear* (Appendix, 1) is one painting in a series on masonite. I started the preliminary drawing by using a charcoal pencil and thin layer of white paint. Thick paint and expressive brushstrokes were applied as a second layer to indicate fur. The last element that I applied was a section of newspaper to the background. Part of the print on the newspaper is readable and was from a recent article about President Barack Obama’s concerns on global warming and what can be done to help preserve the environment around us. Stamped footprints were placed across the polar bear to symbolize the affect humans are having on our environment.

Next, I decided to continue working in a series because this was a way for me to capture feelings with a certain subject in multiple ways. In *My Journey Series* I used the same process as in *Polar Bear*. However, I added beads, sand, fabric glue, cloth, toothpicks, tissue paper, maps, and paint in these works. The series depicts the significant moves I have made in my life to present day. For example, the first piece in *My Journey* (Appendix, 2) is a depiction of hills that are surrounded by water which represent my hometown. Quiet, peaceful, and small is the environment I remember. Nearby lakes surround the town where many people spent their
summers. In this piece, I used a variety of materials that create textures and correspond with what is unique about the location. For example, smooth cloth represents the calmness of a lake, while fabric paint gives an indication of waves. A map has also been collaged into the background to indicate where the image is located. In a later image from *My Journey* (Appendix, 3) I depicted Virginia Beach, Virginia. I designed this piece to be bright in color to indicate the new, yet exciting path I will embrace for years to come. Sand was used in this piece as an element of the beach, while toothpicks were used to represent a fence that separates the beach from the boardwalk. I used cloth and fabric paint to create buildings and surface details. I also collaged a map to once again reference the image’s location.

My next series, *Self-Exploration*, was created with materials such as wax, ribbon, and acrylic paint. The feeling I wanted to portray to the viewer in these works was emotion. Loneliness, anger, and frustration were all feelings that I experienced at the time. These pieces allowed me to release stress that I had built up from a personal trying time. For example, in *Self-Exploration* (Appendix, 4), cards and notes that were once precious to me were ripped and then added to the piece. I took candles, that I saved from my wedding reception, and melted them down and applied the wax to the surface to symbolize the loss of love. Finally, I used yardsticks to encompass and frame the outside edges of the art. These yardsticks symbolize the measurement of time.

**On Canvas**

While working on canvas, I use a similar process as when working on masonite board. I first cover the white surface with a burnt umber or neutral colored oil paint and mineral spirit wash and wait for it to dry. After this initial layer dries, I create a grid using vine charcoal and
begin transferring and referencing imagery from a photograph. A four-tone gray value scale made from a mix of oil paint and Liquin is then applied. This helps me decipher which areas are going to stand out from or recede into the background of the painting. A third layer of transparent paint is then applied to indicate a direction in color development. Lastly, several layers of thick paint are applied.

I took a somewhat different approach when creating the four part *Holiday Rituals Series*. I used a pencil to first draw a quick sketch of where I wanted everything to be laid out on each picture plane. I then applied fabric and paper to each individual piece to symbolize a particular holiday. Then, I painted in details with watered down acrylic paint and added fabric paint, beads, and sewed into the surface of the canvas to give the pieces more texture and detail.

*Holiday Rituals* (Appendix, 5 and 6) are intended to be visually ironic. In these pieces, I painted a large cliché Christmas tree and a bright orange clock counting down time, respectively. Both of these images represent popular American holidays. Too many only think of giving to the needy on December the 25th, and millions pledge to change on January 1st of each year. These holidays have become commercialized and make millions of dollars. In these pieces, I ask if this is the only time of year that we should behave in specific ways. To emphasize my thoughts on this, and as another framing device, I have written questions on the edge of each canvas about these holidays (Appendix, 7).

**On Paper**

Recently, I have gained an appreciation for printmaking. Experimenting with color and imagery is my focus when dealing with this media. *Watching You* (Appendix, 8) and *Twisted Wire* (Appendix, 9 and 10) both are from series of repeated images, made in a range of colors.
Watching You is an image of my ex-husband’s face. I purposely only created part of the face to depict mystery and curiosity. This same depiction holds true to the kind of behavior my ex often exhibited. Twisted Wire is a series that shows a rusty wire that makes up a guardrail fence. This wire represents the uncertainty and nervousness I have felt in the past year. By using different colors in each piece, I allow the viewer to experience a different feeling with each image.

My printmaking process varies depending on the materials and tools I have available. I used the dry point technique when creating my Watching You and Twisted Wire Series. In these series, I initially used Plexiglas as a surface and etched in with an X-acto knife. I then rubbed ink into the etched areas and wiped away the excess. For contrast, I painted ink on to the area around the image.

Regardless of the media I use in my artwork, I now look at what I want the meaning of each of my pieces to have and pay particular attention to the layout and process I am using. By using these strategies, my artwork has become more aesthetically pleasing and more thought provoking.

Conclusion

Since I have been enrolled in VCU’s MIS-IAR Program, I have gained a greater understanding of who I am as an artist, and a more in depth grasp of how to use certain art materials. This experience is also improving my teaching strategies. Prior to entering this program, I created art based on specific techniques that I learned in undergraduate school and did not venture into trying non-traditional approaches. This limited my creativity and excitement for making art. Now that I have attended graduate level classes, I have a greater understanding of
the multiple purposes of art. Currently, I design my own process, choose the materials that fit the project, and incorporate meaning into my pieces. This new way of thinking is now reflected in my classroom. I now leave most projects open-ended with many options available to students. I also use my own artwork along with well-known art to give students examples of processes and styles of creation.
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