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Transformation and Renewal

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Transformation and Renewal

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 art has a common thread of transformation and renewal. It is often my response to the many different changing cycles in life, whether seasonal, emotional, or the process of aging. In addition, the spiritual connections to my faith and family are embedded into many of the works which tell a story of my life and my ever searching soul. Revelations of myself over time and the transformation of thoughts are visually exposed. However, they are revealed with a keen eye and hand which are meant to reach out to the viewer, so they may be transformed and discover something unique within themselves.

My foundation in graphic design is clearly evident in my artwork. Fundamental design elements such as color, balance, movement, and texture are grounded into my sculptures and paintings. Similar imagery and design elements reappear throughout my work. Red, orange, copper, and gold recur in much of the work, often balanced with the cooler hues of blue and green. The emotionality of the warm palette reflects my Irish temperament and my identity as a redhead. My peaceful and calm nature can be seen in the cool colors. Sometimes, color is absent and only white is used which reflects periods where emotions are suspended and apprehension is present.
Transformation and Renewal

Introduction

I have always been a thinker. Some friends have accused me of being in another world and not listening to a word they are saying. In fourth grade I recall my teacher giving me a stamp on my paper of an ostrich with his head buried under the sand. I simply can’t help myself. When I am accessing my creativity, I don’t want any interruptions and I can tune the world out. Creating art has always given me an outlet to express my thoughts and ideas and allowed me to quietly reflect for hours. The past five years have been an interesting journey into the caverns of my soul. My true artistic self has been re-energized and fully expressed.

I enrolled in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts (MIS-IAR) Program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) after moving to Fairfax, Virginia from San Antonio, Texas. I began the MIS-IAR Program at age forty-one. There were so many changes going on in my life at this time. My oldest daughter was beginning high school, I was adjusting to a new part of the country, and I was going through the soul-searching realm of mid-life. The ambition and intensity of Northern Virginia culture influenced me to reach for higher goals and I found myself a student once again. While teaching art for Fairfax County, I heard from my colleagues about the interesting and flexible program VCU was offering to Fairfax County art teachers. I wanted to expand my artistic knowledge beyond my undergraduate studies in graphic design. So, I applied and was accepted to the MIS-IAR Program. I chose to focus on sculpture and painting because those were areas in which I needed more growth and proficiency. Each class that I took shook me inside and out. It was like emptying out
my laundry basket and finding its contents, old and familiar, yet in need of a refreshing spiritual lift. The development of conceptual ideas became a daily quest. These ideas would follow me into the night, in the shower, and while driving to school. Over the course of a semester, a sculpture or painting would be physically executed but the mental aspect of giving the piece meaning would never quit until the day of completion. A new, better understood self emerged as a result of creating mixed media works. The MIS-IAR Program has guided me through an artistic journey of transformation and renewal.

**My Aesthetics**

At first glance, the subject matter of the body of my work seems diverse. The paintings and sculptures are independent entities and are meant to stand alone. However, deeper thematic connections of transformation and renewal are embedded into the artworks. Transformation has meant not only the change in appearance of my artwork but also how I internalize change, examine it, and express it. The theme of renewal has meant experiencing a refreshing new beginning by using new media and stylistic approaches which has generated an uplifting spiritual cleansing of my artistic soul. In addressing these conceptual underpinnings, I typically use traditional and personal symbolic imagery based on psychological theories, spirituality, and my Irish heritage.

Metaphor and symbolism are devices that I use in my work to help visually translate my thoughts. I use metaphor as an analogy for an idea and symbols as objects that have specific meaning. Usually, when I create a piece of art I begin with a
sketch that is directly linked to my current thoughts. For example, my thoughts concerning spirituality may at times be sketched as beams of sunlight breaking out of the clouds. From these sketches, I make mixed media sculptures and paintings that have personal meaning. Using metaphor and symbolism helps me visually express and communicate my hidden thoughts and emotions.

Creating mixed media sculptures opened up many new and different ways to solve my conceptual ideas that involved female sensuality, motherhood, parental love, and marriage. I combined ceramic vessels with fabric, clothing, feathers, and other found objects. In a few of my pieces, I created vessels on the pottery wheel and then secured them with wire and ribbon directly to fabric or to a chicken wire infrastructure. By combining ceramic vessels with fabric and other found objects, I am able to express metaphorically a concept that involves multiple levels of inquiry. Using my media in this way I hope to convey my message with both direct symbolism and indirect mystery.

The wheel thrown vessels are either free-form and fluid or the form is carefully controlled. The fabric adds a soft, textural quality and creates movement and unity when placed alongside the glazed and painted vessels. The found objects add contrast and unexpected drama to the piece.

This sculptural mixed media approach influenced my second concentration, painting. Instead of seeing the canvas as a flat plane, I built up the surface with more texture and at times included found objects. My painting techniques range from precise, crisp realism to an expressionistic style. My fascination with color, metaphor, symbolism, psychology, and nature appear in many of my pieces. Sometimes, they all work side-by-side within a single artwork that is a multifaceted culmination of these
interests. At other times, such as in my landscape paintings, only my keen interest in color and nature are apparent. These depictions of nature reflect my spiritual connection to the miracle of nature’s forms and changing seasons.

Influences

Growing up first generation Irish American, I was surrounded by images of Irish culture. The Irish are very ethnocentric and this pride of heritage has influenced my artwork. I often use Celtic and religious iconography in my pieces. The Celtic knot, rosary beads, and other references to Irish Catholicism are important symbolic elements in my visual vocabulary. They represent not only family history but a spiritual way of viewing life. My inherited kinship to the landscape and a spiritual connection to birds, bees, butterflies, serpents, seashells, and water are included in many of the pieces. As I investigated my use of particular imagery I began to study psychology. The writings on symbols as archetypes by Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), the Swiss psychiatrist and founder of analytical psychology, influenced my use of circles and spirals. I became interested in his writings about the healing power of the mandala and how creating them becomes an expression of the unconscious self. Circles appear in both natural and symbolic forms. For instance, in my paintings I chose to depict circular images of the nautilus shell, Celtic trinity knot, curvature of a serpent, ripples in water, and the brick pattern in a garden patio. These images based on a circular archetype become a source of meditation and a way to explore my inner psyche.

To support my use and interest in psychology, I also found myself looking to the writings of the Viennese psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), known for his
theories of the unconscious mind and the mechanism of psychological repression. I became interested in the Oedipal and Electra Complexes. These theories, coined by Freud and Jung, examine a child’s awakened sexual strivings toward one’s opposite sex parent and their desire to be a replacement for their affections. As I studied these theories, they prompted my conceptual development of a mixed media sculpture that revolves around a father figure.

My artistic style and choice of subject matter was also influenced by the artists Rene Magritte (1898-1967), Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986), and David Hockney (b. 1937). Many of Rene Magritte’s surreal paintings revolve around the depiction of ordinary objects in unfamiliar spaces. He combined these elements in order to create a more poetic image. For example, in his painting *La Therapeute* (1941), Magritte painted a birdcage in place of a man’s torso. This image of a rib cage being replaced by a birdcage is a poetic and humorous play on words. Also, his paintings of faceless men in black overcoats and bowler hats have a mysterious quality that appeals to me. These images inspired me to create mixed media sculptural pieces where I placed my clay vessels in unusual places. In one of the pieces, I placed a series of clay vessels inside a man’s wool overcoat. The human body is often seen as a vessel and by exchanging it with clay vessels I hoped to create the visual poetry that Magritte was known for.

I have always felt a close kinship with the artist Georgia O’Keeffe. She and I experienced life in similar parts of the country. We both lived in New York and then traveled westward where we became art teachers in Texas. Her close affiliation to nature represented in her paintings of flowers, rocks, shells, animal bones, and landscapes appeal to my own interests in this natural subject. Her paintings of crisply
painted contoured forms, subtle tonal variations of color, and simple and elegant compositions inspired me to achieve a similar aesthetic in some of my own work.

My expressive use of color and loose brush work in my plein-air landscapes are reminiscent of the East Yorkshire landscapes of David Hockney. He painted these landscapes plein-air and interpreted the colors in response to his emotions. He painted ordinarily muted green landscapes in vibrant high key colors. He said, “Artists thought the optical projection of nature was verisimilitude, which is what they were aiming for,” Hockney says “but in the 21st century, I know that is not verisimilitude. Once you know that, when you go out to paint, you’ve got something else to do. I do not think the world looks like photographs. I think it looks a lot more glorious than that.” (Muchnic, 11 February 2007) I agree with his belief that the experience of painting outdoors adds to the perceptions of its beauty and should be more than a mere photographic replica.

Colors and Emotions

Color has always been a dominant element in my life and artwork. I express my emotional state not only with images and concepts but with specific colors. My range of palettes tends to be extreme. They are either bold and high-saturated complementary colors or drained of color with a pale combination of soft whites. I associate these color choices with my uneven temperament. At times, I can be very outgoing and expressive and at other times, I am looking inward and am quiet and contemplative. Therefore, the development of my symbolic and subjective color system aids in my understanding of my own range of emotions.

As an example, in the mixed media painting Breaking Boundaries (Appendix, 1)
I use a high-saturated complementary palette of green and red combined with high-contrast photographs of reflective water in dark blue-green and white. To create this piece, I digitally merged a photograph of the reflective, rippled water of a swimming pool with a photograph of yellow-green, sunlit leaves. I glued this manipulated photograph down on a canvas painted red. Directly below this photograph I placed another photograph, identical in size, of one lone swimmer in a reflective pool of water. I cut and glued on some large green leaves and painted the swimming pool lanes and the water’s rippled edges on to the red-painted margins of the canvas. I then added a rectangular piece of red Mylar to the center of the painting because of its semi-transparent and reflective nature. I also added the Mylar as a way to heighten the contrast between the water and the yellow-green leaves. By using complementary colors, I find that it energizes the painting and expresses the bold side of my personality.

The maximum intensity of my emotional use of color can be seen in the painting Summer’s Passion (Appendix, 2). I painted this garden landscape outdoors in the middle of a hot day in July. I was feeling very free and alive. I gave myself the freedom to change and re-interpret all the colors that were in front of me. I painted the trees lavender with golden yellow branches and painted the sky red. In the center I painted a bright orange bench. The circular patio bricks were painted green with red accents. The park was alive not only with trees and plants but with people strolling and sitting on benches. As I was painting I could overhear lively conversations around me. Two lovers were singing to one another and several older gentlemen talked passionately about politics. All of this affected my emotional state and thus directly
influenced my color choices. For example, the color orange seems to express a wild and untamed side of myself, the part of me that likes to stand out in a crowd. As an outdoor painter I was doing just that. I was performing my skills in front of an audience at the park. This added to the excitement of the moment and thus brought out colors that were vivid.

In contrast to my colorful artwork, two sculptural pieces are predominantly white and were created in the wintertime. The first mixed media sculpture, *White Wedding Solstice* (Appendix, 3), contains multiple wheel thrown vessels. I glazed these small, bottomless vessels white and painted the rims in silver. I attached these ceramics with wire to a large sphere made of chicken wire. In the empty spaces in between the vessels, I stuffed small gathered pieces of white silk and pieces of soft white fiberfill. I then pierced the spherical sculpture with two white-painted arrows. The smooth ceramic vessels, the shiny silk, and soft fiberfill create a varied surface texture. I used the varied textures as metaphors for the soft and silky feminine side of my personality. I intended this sculpture to represent my perceptions of a marital relationship. One that young women naively believe they are entering in to. It is white, pure, and innocent. The pierced arrows represent the destruction of those immature notions.

My second white mixed media sculpture is called *Empty Nest* (Appendix, 4). It is comprised of two wheel thrown vessels that I combined while in the leather hard stage of drying. I then altered the form by creating a huge open fissure through one side which revealed a glimpse of the interior. The organic form resembles a nest. I placed an all white butterfly, representing my daughter, on top that I made from feathers. I then attached a cream colored strip of lace from the base of the butterfly through the center
of the tear and into the interior of the vessel. This strip of lace is a metaphor for the umbilical cord, still attached to the child. The only color present is a colorful fabric lined interior space. The absence of color represents the apprehension I was feeling while trying to let my oldest daughter graduate from high school and leave my protective nest. The colorful interior space represents all of her wonderful, colorful childhood memories.

**Metaphor and Symbolism**

I use metaphor and symbolism in my artwork to express my conceptual ideas and to form a visual response to my inner psyche. Two of my sculptures and mixed media pieces come to mind when I think of metaphor and symbolism. The first, _Sacrifice of Sensuality_ (Appendix, 5), is comprised of a series of wheel thrown bottomless vessels. I purposely knocked these pieces off center in order to create folds in the clay. After being fired in a kiln I painted them copper and gold. Then, I hung them from a draped gold cloth. Next, I hung both the vessels and cloth on a white silk clothes hanger. This whole image resembles the dress of a goddess and symbolizes the sensual nature of a woman. The folds from the cloth and the folds from the vessels create rhythmic waves along the surface. The drapery cascades on to the floor where I placed dried roses at its base. The roses are symbolic of sacrificial offerings, such as those placed upon the feet of a saint’s statue. My titles often lend clues to the meaning of a piece by hinting at the symbolism. This title refers to the many sacrifices a woman has to make in her life in order to conform to societal demands.

The second mixed media sculpture, _Father Figure_ (Appendix, 6), is the masculine counterpart of the previous sculpture. The idea of replacing a man’s figure
with ceramic vessels was inspired by Rene Magritte’s surrealistic painting, *La Therapeute* (1941). To reference this idea of image exchange, I suspended four wheel thrown vessels inside a man’s dark gray wool overcoat. I hung the coat on a simple wooden hanger taken from my father’s closet. The vessels were attached vertically to a black silk ribbon that also hung on the coat hanger. Each vessel has an opening slightly smaller than the one above it, with the top one in the shape of an open heart. They are glazed red on the outside with a turquoise interior. Each vessel was then filled with copper-painted corn flakes. Although the sculpture has a masculine component, these vessels are symbolic of the stages a woman goes through when finding love, always searching for the perfect replacement of her father. As the vessels open up wider, a crack is formed which symbolizes the power and force that love has upon our lives. The wholesome, copper-covered cornflakes are beautiful, unattainable, and un-edible, which is symbolic of this quest for an unattainable ideal. The coat and vessels are hung on a cross-shaped coat hook and rosary beads are revealed from the coat pocket. This piece is symbolic of my Irish Catholic father as a protector and first love in my life.

Metaphor and symbolism is also evident in many of my paintings. The painting *Lost Floridian Soul* (Appendix, 7) was created after celebrating Lent and Easter in Florida. It contains symbolic images of the tropical area and environment. In the center I painted a naturalistic nautilus shell. Then, I painted palm fronds which appear to be growing out from behind the shell. A red, graphic Celtic arrow divides the image vertically and pierces the shell. I placed four peacock feathers symmetrically on both sides of the arrow head. Two of the feathers are painted *trompe l’oeil* and the other two
are actual feathers that I glued onto the canvas. These objects are depicted floating in
a cloudy, blue sky with beams of soft, yellow light radiating from the center. The
nautilus shell, the palm fronds, and the peacock feathers are all traditional Christian
symbols of transformation and renewal. These symbols celebrate and represent my
Christian faith being renewed. In opposition, the red Celtic arrow represents the loss of
this renewed spirituality. It reflects a sudden change in my religious faith that occurred
after returning home from this refreshing Florida retreat. The peacock feathers painted
in the manner of trompe l’oeil indicates a “false reality”. The viewer does not know
which of the feathers are real or painted. I used this device as a way of questioning the
presence of God as being real or an illusion.

Faith and Family

My Catholic faith and Celtic family upbringing are recurring themes in my work.
In my metaphorical self portrait painting, Celtic Geisha (Appendix, 8), a large trinity knot
made of rope was glued down to the center of the canvas and then painted gold and
silver. The trinity knot consists of a triquetra, a three-fold triangular symbol that appears
in the ancient illuminated manuscript The Book of Kells (circa 800). This knot with a
circle around it represents the Holy Trinity which symbolizes the Father, Son, and Holy
Spirit. The significance of its size and central placement serves as a spiritual guide for
my life choices. A green and gold-textured serpent’s tail wraps around the symbol
signifying the temptations of this world. On the bottom left corner, I painted a sunlit
profile of a woman with long flowing orange-copper hair that sweeps out across the
bottom of the canvas. The serpent’s tail is intertwined in the strands of her wild,
untamed mane. A yellow, glowing halo is placed behind her head. An actual yellow Japanese paper fan is glued down onto the halo and a shimmering, gold earring is placed on her earlobe. A spiritual light is radiated onto her face from an unknown light source. This woman represents both saint and geisha, two sides of myself. One side is spiritual and pious and the other is free-spirited and flirtatious. On the top left, I painted a mountain lion prowling on a cliff under a moonlit sky. The mountain lion is a visual representation for “Moynihan”, my maiden name. The Latin phrase under my Moynihan family crest is *Felis Demulcta Mitis* which means *as meek as a lick of a cat*. I chose to paint a wild and powerful cat, more threatening than meek. The entire piece and its combination of opposing elements illustrates the balance between my spiritual ideals and earthly human desires.

My second painting that revolves around my Irish Catholic faith and family is called *Celtic Roots* (Appendix, 9). This landscape painting is a triptych of a mystical section of a forest. The central tree’s exposed and intertwined roots are painted an orange-copper color, and their shape and form are similar to the strands of hair in *Celtic Geisha*. The painting was executed plein-air in a quiet, shaded area of a park. A gentle, flowing river was beside me and although not included in the painting its trickling sound added to my perception of the magical quality of the scene. On the bottom of the painting, I painted the small river rocks in muted tones of tans and browns and the larger rocks in light reflected blues. The greens in the foliage range from a deep dark green to a brighter, sunlit yellow-green. In the center panel, I included a male and female cardinal performing a dance together in mid-flight. These birds represent my own families personal symbol for our deceased Irish parents who visit their children
from time to time as cardinals.

Looking back upon the body of my work, I see the common vein of transformation and renewal expressed in many of the artworks. My growth and exploration with new media has expanded my knowledge base and improved my skill level. I have learned how to tap into my psyche and find metaphors and symbols that reveal my current thoughts and feelings. Deep connections to my Celtic culture and family are expressed in many pieces and have revealed the importance they play in my life. Finally, the spiritual and earthly sides of my personality have been exposed, creating a better understanding of my beliefs and an acceptance of my human traits.

**Conclusion**

The MIS-IAR Program has helped me transform from a graphic artist into a painter and sculptor. I approach my artwork not only with a new found knowledge of a variety of media and techniques but conceptually I look inward and this unveils truth and knowledge of myself. Presently, I am sharing my new refined skills in ceramics, sculpture, and painting with my students at Lake Braddock Secondary. Pursuing this MIS-IAR degree has given me confidence and as a result I have become a more competent and enthusiastic teacher. In the future, I plan on taking more classes because I have experienced the true benefits of becoming a lifelong learner. I have discovered that I become transformed by new experiences in art. This renews my spirit as an artist and brings life and happiness into my teaching.
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1987  *Student Exhibition*, University Gallery, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida