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## Circumpunct

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# **Circumpunct**

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

I experimented with different imagery until I found a symbol that reflected my interpretation of my subconscious. This symbol is referred to as a *circumpunct*, or a circle with a dot in the middle. The dot in the middle is called *a void*. The circumpunct acts as emotional restraint, while the void acts as a challenge that is on the horizon. Process and meditation are what allow me to create from this subconscious labyrinth. By hand, I either paint or sculpt circumpuncts. By creating these circumpuncts and their voids, I have transformed a subconscious emotion into something visual. I started incorporating this symbol in my sculptures and then it started appearing in my paintings. I used it intuitively in every piece I made. Even when I tried to make something new, I would end up using it.

# Circumpunct

## Introduction

After I completed my undergraduate degree at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), I worked as an art teacher in Loudoun County, Virginia. After a year of teaching, I wanted to broaden my education in order to become a more well-rounded artist and educator. At that point, I decided it would be a good idea to pursue a master's degree in the fine arts. As a full time teacher, I quickly discovered there were limited options for acquiring a master's degree. Realizing it would be challenging to acquire a degree and maintain my full time job, I began investigating alternative options to reach my goal. A co-worker of mine suggested looking into the VCU Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts (MIS-IAR) Program. So, I researched it and learned I could take courses towards a degree but still maintain my teaching position. I decided to apply and was accepted into the program.

Previously, I earned my Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) in Photography and Art Education. With my passions for fine arts and the personal desire to encourage younger generations to appreciate fine arts, I became an art educator. For my master's degree, I wanted to focus more on the studio disciplines of painting and sculpture. At first, I was unsure about what I was getting into. I know now that it was the best decision I have ever made.

## Aesthetics

As I began my coursework, I experimented with different imagery. I found myself making mythical ceramic creatures that I ornamented with a lot of dot patterns, such as *Homeeprooet* (Appendix, 1). These surface patterns were reminiscent of ones I had observed in Aboriginal dream paintings. To emphasize the design elements, the coloring of these mythical

animals was always contrasting in color to the patterns I created on their bodies.

I was unclear as to why I was fascinated by creating these intricate designs on these creatures. This same feeling came across while painting, where I started creating paintings of sphere-like shapes in non-naturalistically colored backgrounds. With these paintings I became obsessed with the repetitive motion of painting the sphere, and creating a sphere that not only looked three-dimensional but looked like it was extremely soft to the touch. I then carried this feeling of softness into my ceramic replications of spheres, as in *The Couple* (Appendix, 2). When creating these ceramic forms, I used black copper oxide as a surface stain which helps to emphasize their visual softness.

Originally, I just enjoyed painting circles. It was a calming, repetitive, meditative, and self-reflecting activity. Like walking a labyrinth to answer an internal question, I go into deep thought when painting, sculpting, or carving with a circular motif. At first, this whole process was intuitive, but now I am consciously aware of how and why I'm placing or molding my imagery in a particular way. The repetitive motion and act of creating these patterns is emotionally cathartic as well as aesthetically motivated.

The circular motif has become a symbolic interpretation of my thoughts and emotions. I present the circular form as a circumpunct which is an ancient symbol represented as a circle with a dot, or void, in the center. This symbol is often associated with a universal divine consciousness that we all share. However, I feel that this form is a representation of my inner self. I paint these symbols in different sizes, and I rotate the irregular dot in the center in different directions, expressing my changing emotion and state of being.

I soon became curious and investigated the circumpunct. I found that this geometric symbol has been used for a millennia and has commonly been described as the *circle with the dot*

*in the middle, circled dot, point in the circle, and Monad.* The term “circumpunct” was coined by the contemporary fiction author Dan Brown (b.1964). However, the symbol was used by the Babylonians, Egyptians, Chippewa Indians, European Alchemists, and Freemasons. The Babylonians used this symbol in reference to their god, Mitra. It symbolized the creative spark of divine consciousness within people, linking everyone to the creative mind of a universal god, thus making each person a co-creator of the universe. The Egyptians used this symbol to indicate the sun or the sun god, Ra. As for the Chippewa Indians, this was a symbol they used to express the spirit. It also is a recognizable symbol from alchemical texts, in which it represents gold. My interest in the historical meaning lies with the Freemasons who believed this symbol meant emotional restraint. This circular symbol is one of the simplest and most used throughout history to express the subconscious. It is also the perfect symbol to express a symbolic interpretation of God, the perfect interpretation of the Divine, and the Created.

Each circumpunct has a dot or void in the center. I use this void as a symbolic vacuum; I paint my voids to resemble a vortex. A vortex is a spinning, often turbulent, flow of fluid. The vortex’s energy is greatest at the center and decreases progressively with distance from the center. I angle the vortices in different directions within each circumpunct. Vortices are often associated with fluids which are also associated with weather extremes. This led me to further research this symbol and its associations.

Vortices are tied to the symbolic meaning of air and tornadoes. I found that in dream symbolism, air and tornadoes indicate that an important relationship or challenge is on the horizon. Even in children’s literature there is a connection to vortices taking characters to another dimension. In Lewis Carroll’s books: *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1872), Alice is transported by a vortex, rabbit hole, and mirror into Wonderland

where she encounters many characters and challenges. Another story series where a vortex plays a prominent role is in Frank L. Baum's books *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), *Ozma of Oz* (1907), *Dorothy and the Wizard in Oz* (1908), and *The Road to Oz* (1909). In this series Dorothy is swept up by a cyclone, thrown overboard by a fierce storm in a poultry crate off a steamboat, and an earthquake starts and opens a crevice beneath Dorothy that sends her hurtling into the bowels of the earth. Dorothy is transported to Oz where she also encounters characters and challenges.

Both main characters, Alice and Dorothy, have many obstacles to overcome in order to return home. However, in each book they wake up in the end, as if it was all just a dream. The dreams these characters had indicated that one must understand the consequences of various actions and choices. The challenges these dreaming characters had to face are challenges that they have to learn from, so they know how to handle them when they awaken.

Dreaming about vortices can also mean that one is dealing with destruction and an uncontrollable force in one's life. I found this symbolism and its emotional implications to be well suited to my imagery. Vortices became an image that contrasts in meaning and design to the circumpuncts. I used these vortices as a formal device in my work and a way for me to embed personal meaning in my abstractions.

## **Influences**

Artists I have studied and been influenced by are Friedensreich Hundertwasser (1928-2000), Gustav Klimt (1862 –1918), and various anonymous Aboriginal artists. These artists have used symbols and patterns to create pieces that viewers can interpret in many different ways. In his work, Hundertwasser used vibrant colors and depicted ornamental designs of



spirals and circles. With regards to my color palette, I looked at how he used bright contrasting colors in his patterns making his paintings seem as if they had a sense of movement. In my own paintings, I create the same vibrating movement with my color choices and patterns.

I have also examined many of Klimt's decorative patterning. He also used spirals and circles in his paintings. However, Klimt was mostly inspired by the decorative styles of the Egyptians, Minoan, Classical Greek, and Byzantine cultures. In these cultures you find decorative symbols that have been transferred from one culture to another. They can be either decorative ornamentation or part of a symbolic story about the internal spirit of creativity. Klimt used circular and spiral symbols to convey personal psychological ideas and freedom from traditional art movements. I also used patterning in a decorative fashion, as well as, an element to create a sense of movement in the picture's composition.

When observing the works of Aboriginal dream painting, the viewer is meant to see a conceptual map depicting how the landscape is seen and understood through an abstract pictorial language. Aboriginal people believe that life as we know it can be tracked through what they call Dreamtime, or the Era of Creation. In this dream state, their Great Ancestors were undertaking a great journey. Upon awakening, they record their journey with symbolic interpretations. In the same manner as Aboriginal art, I have created a symbolic map of my subconscious mind. There are times that I have had dreams about paintings that I later create. I spend the whole next day experimenting with the ideas in my sketchbook and then reinterpreting them onto canvas.

In addition to visual artists, Carl Jung's (1875-1961) writings have been influential to me. Carl Jung was a Swiss psychologist, an influential thinker, and the founder of analytical psychology. Even though he was not the first to analyze dreams, he is considered to be one of

the biggest pioneers of dream analysis. In his theories, Jung divided the psyche into three parts: the ego, the personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious. Jung considers the ego to be the conscious mind. Then, there is the personal unconscious which is everything that is not presently conscious but can be eventually realized. Finally, there is the collective unconscious. In the collective unconscious, one gains a psychic inheritance, a collective reservoir of information as a collected species, or an inherent knowledge that one is born with.

Out of the three parts of the psyche I'm drawn more to the collective unconscious. Jung describes the contents of the collective unconscious as archetypes. Archetypes are unlearned tendencies to experience and respond to things in a universal way. These archetypes are used as an organizing principle of the unconscious mind. By studying Jung's archetypes, my paintings and sculptures are closely connected to self through my dominant use of the circumpunct.

### **Sculpture and Mixed Media**

Continuing an extension of this creative concept of self, and now working with my hands, I created a reinterpretation of Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night* (1889) using book pages from Stephen King's *Needful Things* (1991). In *Reinterpreted Starry Night* (Appendix, 3), I had used Van Gogh's painting because it is one of the most well known in art history. As for choosing a book, I thought that the title of this King novel reflected my idea that art is something that we need in our lives. The process involved taking random pages from the King novel and shellacking them to give them an antique finish. The shellack also made the paper stronger and more stable to stand on edge. I then cut these pages into strips of varying widths. Next, I curled these strips into spirals, curves, and tear drop shapes to mimic the linear elements in the original painting. The strips were glued on edge in the location of the matching linear feature. This

particular application of paper to a surface is called, *quilling*. Again, in this image there is a circular shape in the sky as well as in the land.

Another sculptural piece I created was based on the history of a *penny rug*. In the late 1800's during the American Civil War, women would recycle old clothing and cut pieces of clothing to the size of a penny. They would take these coin-like shapes and sew them together using a blanket stitch and make rugs and mats. These were not rugs you would put on the floor. Instead, you would decorate beds and tables with them. I took the idea and created my own penny rug tapestry called *Fallen* (Appendix, 4 and 5). I created penny-sized pieces of felt and clustered them in rows at the top of a larger piece of felt. In the middle and bottom sections of the composition, I scattered the felt pennies to imply that they were falling. On the bottom row of pennies, I sewed actual pennies into the fabric to weigh the tapestry down. This piece is made out of six different colored pieces of felt and four different colors of embroidery thread. Each circular felt penny was hand-cut and sewn together with a blanket stitch. The colors are contrasting to make each color of felt and thread visually stand out.

My next work was inspired by a chapter in Michael S. Schneider's *A Beginner's Guide to Constructing the Universe: The Mathematical Archetypes of Nature, Arts, and Science* (1994). Chapter three of this book is entitled *Three-Part Harmony* and is about the number three and its symbolic and structural interpretations. I partially chose chapter three as inspiration because when performing physical actions I have an obsessive tendency to do things in threes, such as flicking a light switch on and off, checking if I locked a door, and clicking the automatic car lock three times before I realize it is locked. I was further inspired when Schneider wrote:

Without realizing it we "perceive polarity" whenever we count "one, two, three." Counting is retelling of the original creation myth in the purest archetypal terms. Primitive tribes often count "one, two, many." The Sumerians counted "man, woman, many." But giving separate numbers names to quantities past two for purpose of counting is so

deceptively simple that we take the idea of a sequence for granted. Yet our ability to name numbers in an ongoing progression reflects a major leap of consciousness. It gives us the ability to transcend polar bounds and realize the unlimited. (Schneider, 39)

I like counting and reminding myself of a ritual that I have to do. This repetitive activity creates clarity for my mind. *Cycle of Life* (Appendix, 6) is a piece that embeds this idea of a trinity in the presentation of archetypal elements. I created this sculptural piece with a combination of mixed media including wood blocks, digital images of cities, and colorized micrograph images of bone cells in each of three stages: osteoblasts (bone buds), osteocytes (bone cells), and osteoclasts (breaking bones). I used these three types of bone cells to emphasize the skeletal structure of a building. Even though the architectural structure starts out strong, with age and time it will weaken and turn into ruins just as our bone cells grow and die. Here, the circular theme is carried out as representing the circle of life.

The next mixed media sculpture also references circumpuncts and the number three. In *Three Part Psyche* (Appendix, 7), the three spherical forms are created from Styrofoam and wall spackle. I used these materials to make my structures light and solid. Then, I finished each form with a different surface material. The largest (on the left) is covered in blue shellacked paper and quilled with curly-cued magenta paper strips. The middle form is covered in colored buttons on the outside and white buttons on the inside. The smallest (on the right) is wrapped with red fuzzy yarn on the outside and orange fuzzy yarn on the inside. In covering each one in a different material, I have given each of the circumpuncts and each part of the psyche a different character.

## **Paintings**

In my paintings, I concentrated on spherical forms and placed these into abstracted

environments. I considered these circumpuncts to represent futuristic cities. For instance, in *Serenity* (Appendix, 8), each circumpunct is a self-contained unit that I envisioned to contain houses, a community of people, and things. The landscape is not representational, nor is it naturalistic in terms of colors. Here, the circumpuncts represent not just myself but a community of selves. In developing this abstract environment, I chose my colors intuitively. Then, I chose a complementary or contrasting color to paint the circumpuncts.

Next, I created paintings with texture. The first was called *Circumpunct and Self* (Appendix, 9). To start this painting, I glued down varying sized wooden circles onto the canvas in a random but rhythmic pattern. I layered small wooden circles on top of larger ones. I considered these wooden circles to be circumpuncts. Then, I painted myself in a graphic, silk screen-like style. This simplification of the imagery, in teal and purple, allowed the circumpuncts to remain uncluttered with detail. In the next step, I painted edges of some of the circles with complementary colors to emphasize the circumpuncts. By creating this texture on my self-portrait, I wanted to emphasize the connection to myself. The circumpuncts are a part of me.

In the next group of paintings, I painted the illusion of texture instead of adhering a texture to the actual canvas. Like Hundertwasser and Klimt, I started to fill my painting with a variety of patterns that imply activity and sense of movement. In *City of Zora* (Appendix, 10) there is dense patterning and a variety of larger yellow and blue circumpuncts. These larger circumpuncts are the subject of the work and are separated from the patterned chaos that surrounds them. This use of varied patterning allows me to convey personal ideas about myself and my environment. When creating these patterned paintings, I often go into a comforting meditative state.

In *Oceanus and Thetys* (Appendix, 11), I created a different type of patterning and landscape around the circumpuncts. This painting's city is being enveloped by huge waves. In Greek mythology Oceanus and Thetys were both gods of the water. They would control the water on the earth and the rising and lowering of the tides. I depicted waves wiping out the city to symbolize a time of change. I increased the scale of the patterning on the building because I wanted the viewer to feel closer to the action and have a more intimate view of the destruction at hand. Again, the circumpuncts reflect my subconscious, and they are present in the change around them. In this painting, there is less dense patterning coupled with calming areas of wave-like forms. This represents the chaos in my life as a smaller background entity.

The idea for my next painting, *Melted* (Appendix, 12), came to me in a dream. In this dream I was at my gallery opening. All of my artwork was there along with this new piece composed of circumpuncts, patterning, and dripped paint. Being completely inspired by this dream, I tested out the idea in my sketchbook. I experimented with thinning the paint enough to drip but still remain opaque. After mastering this technique, I transferred the process to several canvases and dripped paint of a contrasting color on a colored surface. When the dripped paint dried, I turned the canvas on its side and used the drip pattern as if it was a shelf to hold my painted circumpuncts. I filled the space in between the drips with patterns. This approach, which was partly inspired by a dream and partly intuitive, opened a new way of developing my paintings. Now, I use my vocabulary of patterns and circumpuncts in a variety of two-dimensional and three-dimensional media to express personal ideas, dreams, and emotions in abstracted compositions.

## **Conclusion**

Symbols have been used in the history of art to give the viewer clues and hints behind a hidden story being told. In my work I have used the circumpunct. This symbol has known many different names but the meaning stays the same. Throughout my work my inner ego is expressing its self. Even though life has changed around me, I am the same. In Italo Calvino's book, *Invisible Cities* (1972), there are many descriptions of cities. These descriptions are detailed in a conversation between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo. By the end of the book, the reader realizes that these cities are not different cities but the same city changing over time. Just like my inner subconscious, the ego never changes but the world around me will. In my works the images have come to me in dreams, and other times they have been intuitive compositional elements in my work. I started out not knowing why I was painting these forms and using them as a meditative release. I now believe that every human is born with knowledge of some symbols. These symbols make up a language and have meanings that help us through our conscious and subconscious lives. Therefore, I find meanings in the everyday doodles that I create while talking on the phone, as well as, using specific symbols to tell my story about internal turmoil.

My abstractions are about happiness, chaos, destruction, and a new beginning. They are about the cycle of life and the everyday process of growing older. Everyone has a story and this is how my story and my subconscious are revealed.

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# Appendix

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Figure 1. *Homeeproet*, ceramic, 3"x 4" x2", 2007.



**Figure 2. *The Couple*, ceramic, 5"x4.5"x5" (on right), 4"x4"x3.5" (on left), 2008.**



**Figure 3.** *Reinterpreted Starry Night*, mixed media, 23"x 35" x3", 2008.





Figure 4. *Fallen*, felt and embroidery thread, 36.5"x 36"x 0.8", 2009-2011.



**Figure 5. *Fallen* (Detail), felt and embroidery thread, 36.5"x 36"x 0.8", 2009-2011.**





Figure 6. *Cycle of Life*, mixed media, 19"x 25"x 3", 2010.



**Figure 7. *Three Part Psyche*, mixed media, 9" diameter (on left), 8" diameter (center), 5" diameter (on right), 2009.**





Figure 8. *Serenity*, acrylic on canvas, 24"x 30", 2009.



Figure 9. *Circumpunct and Self*, acrylic on canvas, 14"x 11", 2010.





**Figure 10.** *City of Zora*, acrylic on canvas, 24"x 36", 2010.



Figure 11. *Oceanus and Thetys*, oil on canvas, 36"x 49"x 2", 2010.





Figure 12. *Melted*, oil on canvas, 30"x 24", 2011.

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- 2003            Honorable Mention for Fruit Negative Photography, International Photography Awards (IPA) Contest, Los Angeles, California

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- 2011            *Circumpunct*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, at Verizon Gallery, Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale Campus, Annandale, Virginia

### **EXHIBITIONS (continued):**

- 2010      *LCPS (Loudoun County Public Schools) Art Educators Exhibit on Campus, George Washington University, Ashburn, Virginia*
- 2008      *LCPS Art Educators Exhibit on Campus, George Washington University, Ashburn, Virginia*
- 2003      *Futility, Bachelor of Fine Arts Show, Visual Arts Studio, Richmond, Virginia*
- 2002      *Group Show, Museum Corporate and Frame, Richmond, Virginia*
- 2003      *PFO Show, Shockhoe Bottom Arts Center, Richmond, Virginia*
- 2003      *214 Group Show, Shockhoe Bottom Arts Center, Richmond, Virginia*
- 2001      *PFO Show, Pollak Building, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia*