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## Obsessions Of My Affections

Deborah FitzGerald

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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## **Obsessions of My Affections**

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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Bachelor of Science in Art Education, Arkansas State University, Jonesboro, AR, 1988

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December, 2011

## Table of Contents

Artist Statement.....	iii
Journey To VCU .....	1
Following My Heart’s Desire .....	2
Falling Into Place While Finding A Voice .....	4
Painting: New Ideas Come To The Surface .....	7
Expanding Body Of Work.....	9
Conclusion.....	12
Bibliography .....	13
Appendix .....	14
List of Figures.....	14
Images.....	15
Resume.....	25

## **Artist Statement**

I am an ardent artist. I am always creating, even in my sleep. The ideas, images, and visions awake me from my dreams. I have been creating in various media since I was a very small child. The materials beckoned that child to play, as a grown up I can't resist it. I am driven to play, explore, and experience with my all emotions and senses.

My work has revolved around the exploration of objects or obsessions of my affections. They give an insight to how I feel about love and being in love. They depict objects I want to have around me and can't seem to live without. Many of the works are presented literally while others are a symbolic representation of my inner thoughts and desires.

## **Obsessions of My Affections**

### **Journey To VCU**

Born in northern California and transplanted to the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas was just the beginning of my living in a continuous state of flux and change. I moved several more times as my family ties were altered as well. During this time, I realized that art was my one constant I could always count on during the changes. While most girls my age were getting married out of high school, I had other changes in mind that included leaving home and pursuing art as a career. I was determined to become a working artist.

I began college in Jonesboro, Arkansas. It was an affirmation that I was headed in the right direction because I received the Freshman Art Award as a promising young artist. However, the timing was off a bit as wedding bells rang in my sophomore year followed by a son the next spring. As a young wife and mother, where and how to complete my degree changed a few times due to a series of rotations for my husband's military duty. I finished my undergraduate degree in art education while in Berlin, Germany.

Eventually, I returned stateside and was hired by Fairfax County Public Schools in Northern Virginia as an art instructor. As I worked in the classroom with the students, I desired to make my own work and pursue more education. So, I took a drawing and painting class from the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts (MIS-IAR) Program offered by Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). I was uncertain where to begin but by the end of the class I was able to find a subject that would be intriguing enough to hold my interest for research and art

works. These works would show my fascination with human relationships.

After the drawing class, I was ready to listen to my muse but not ready to commit to the degree program. It would take a couple of more classes for me to realize that I needed to complete what I had started. Finally, I entered the program by declaring focus areas in painting and crafts.

### **Following my heart's desire**

My subject matter centers on love and relationship changes a couple goes through in their connection to each other. I wondered how and why people came together and stayed or drifted apart as they grew and aged. I wanted to visually translate these changes in my work. I began to think of relationships as organic, living, breathing, moving, and evolving. I decided to use these terms as a metaphorical and poetic device in my lyrical abstractions.

Love touches all of us. It is an emotional power that crosses all lines of culture and countries. It is the constant enduring connection of hearts that has been in existence from the beginning of time. This consuming emotion and all its complicated facets has fascinated me. Trying to understand and connect what heart, head, and soul have experienced, learned, or witnessed has been a passionate and continuous theme in my artwork.

I visually address the emotional connections of relationships as we grow and change within a relationship. Though words cannot always express what I am feeling at times, I can intuitively translate my feelings with media using elements of color, repetition, texture, space, balance, and unity. I create works in an intuitive, automatic

style using colors that merge and meld into each other communicating the passion of love.

My painting palette consists of analogous and complementary colors. They are applied in multiple layers to give a sense of light and atmospheric depth in each work. I work spontaneously in regards to marks and color choices. Typically, I begin with light color washes using my hands, rags, and old brushes to apply, manipulate, and remove the wash. I look and find my focal point of my work, the light. This light is both the depicted sense of light in the work as well as the figurative spark of interest. I see this spark or light as the purest part of a relationship, the connection of the couple. It is a connection that can either grow stronger or fade away, as indicated in my various abstractions.

When I begin a new work, I start with a color I associate with an emotion but most times it is a color I am instinctively attracted to at the time. I use acrylic paints, acrylic matte medium, and Folkart Floating Medium with water to create a color wash. The float medium allows the paint to float, or suspend, on the surface of the canvas a longer time for manipulations. I spread this onto the canvas as quickly as possible. Some areas will have more pigment added for more intensity while other areas will be wiped away to create lighter areas. I use sprayed, spattered, and dripped water in areas and allow them to set for a few minutes. Then, I blot these areas with rags to soak up excess water and paint. It is at this time I find the focal point and begin developing the conceptual thrust of the painting.

When working with the crafts, I will sometimes begin with a theme I have painted and translate it into a wearable sculpture. Relying on symbolism through the

meaning of shape, color, and stones, I have created pieces of jewelry that speak about love. I have used both traditional silversmith techniques and the new material, Precious Metal Clay (PMC). I often use a heart as the symbol for love and manipulate it to tell a story. I also use found materials and images that denote love. My process during bookmaking is similar to my approach to jewelry which is often inspired by a painting. Sometimes, the material I have selected will trigger the direction a piece will take. In craft media, like the paintings, the subject is love.

### **Falling Into Place While Finding A Voice**

As an art teacher, I understood the importance of knowing the past in order to change the future, or to remake tradition. While I retained a lot of art historical information in summary form from my early training, I knew that I needed to learn aspects of historical movements in more depth. Abstractions intrigued me and I decided to make a study of early movements that led to abstraction. I started my quest to truly understand modernism better for myself. It was important that I learned how and why artists were unique in their approach to creating art. I wanted to understand their evolutions in order to create abstract works about emotional relationships.

My introduction to Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) began my fascination with abstraction that resulted in organized planning. Digging deeper into his ideas helped me learn how he went from representational works to abstraction, and why it was so freeing for him to reduce his painting to just line, color, and space. Mondrian's early paintings were of still life and landscapes influenced by nineteenth-century



Impressionism. Later, he experimented with early twentieth-century movements of Cubism and Symbolism. Through the study of Cubism, he began to reduce forms to faceted elements that were rearranged to depict multiple views. His study of Symbolism allowed him insight in using color and form as a means to freely express spiritual ideas. Ultimately, these movements helped him to reduce his works to geometric shapes and primary colors, thereby creating simplified abstract works. He labeled his approach Neo-Plasticism which reflected his idea that all subject matter should be abstract and not visibly reference the natural world of objects. Instead, his works used only the elements of art to portray the concepts of the natural world. Horizontal lines symbolized nature and feminine qualities. The vertical lines symbolized spiritual and masculine qualities. These elements, along with blocks of primary color, created compositions that addressed the balance of space and aspects of color harmony. It also allowed for limitless possibilities in compositional arrangements.

Revisiting this evolution in his body of work gave me the opportunity to develop a process that was equally full of possibilities for my own ideas. Looking into the how and why artists transform their ideas and concepts moved me to change the way I had been creating my works. I began to use some of Mondrian's ideas and visual allusions. I experimented with incorporating forms that were symbolic for masculine and feminine qualities. I reduced my palette to black charcoal with a small amount of red pastel on white paper. I realized how developing a logical system for abstract ideas could lead to an endless variety of imagery. I took this approach to my body of work. This was a simple way for me to transition from my early representational work

to a symbolic dialog about what we all search for in life, love and acceptance.

Another artist who was a catalyst for change in my approach was Marsden Hartley (1877-1943). His works are filled with symbolism, color, and pattern woven together in an abstracted narrative. He created a passionate series of memorial still life paintings titled *War Motif* (1914-1915) to honor not only his closest friend, who was a German officer, but also a generation of brave young men who fought for their country. His works portrayed the men as strong and patriotic by using military medals, flags, and regimental patches as symbolic pictorial elements. By studying his work I learned to use the elements of form, color, and repetition to tell symbolic stories about human relationships and emotions.

As a way of helping me establish a process, I decided to use familiar and descriptive metaphors when referring to emotions. For instance, over time relationships can *weather* difficult times or can be very *stormy*. Mature couples are stated to be the *fall* of their lives as they *harvest* their rewards of companionship, while *spring* and *winter* denotes the new and old of relationships. So in the manner of Hartley's symbols, I used these metaphors in developing a symbolic vocabulary.

My final catalytic influence along this journey was digging deeper into the works of the twentieth-century lyrical abstractionists. Lyrical abstraction painters moved away from minimal and geometric coldness towards works that were more sensual and romantic. These works were about the gestural qualities of the process of painting as an event. A prominent aspect of lyrical painting was the emphasis on the physical and sensual application of the paint onto the surfaces, where the fingerprints or handprints of the artist could still be seen in places on the painting. These paintings were intended

to reveal personal inner feelings as a direct result of the process of making the art. Artists worked using gestural, intuitive, and spontaneous movements when applying paint.

### **Painting: New Ideas Come To The Surface**

I have always been a planner, organized and prepared to carry out the mission to the letter. I thought that was how all artists, like Mondrian and Hartley, worked. So, that is what I had always done, come up with a theme, researched, sketched, drew, and made studies in preparation for a final work. While this works well for most of what I do, there are certain paintings that just can't be planned. They can only be created in the passion of the moment. The lyrical painters showed me that was valid and yet another way to paint.

*Emergence* (Appendix, 1) was my first inspired, spontaneous painting approached in a whole new way. Here, I chose to focus on just the experience of the painting process itself. Starting with alizarin crimson and yellow ochre washes, I experimented by applying the washes. I worked the washes by adding a float medium. This allowed me time to manipulate the wash further with my hands, paper towels, plastic bags, and cloth rags. I rubbed, splashed, and blotted water in a physical and intuitive manner. To my delight, this activity left a textured and light area where the water had been placed. I continued to use this technique in subsequent layers of paint, building up an area with many textures and values just with my hands, rags, and bags. During this entire process of discovery and experimentation, I had not looked at the image itself. When I finally stepped back to see the entire work, I realized that my

energy and excitement had been recorded on the canvas, like something was brewing or growing to the point of bursting open. I related this imagery to the beginning of a relationship where the tension is building physically between a couple.

*Blissful Commitment* (Appendix, 2) is about the union of two people. The couple is committed to a trusting, loyal, and secure unity of love for eternity. I started this painting by mixing flow medium, water, and ultramarine blue laid in quickly with a wide brush. I used rags and plastic bags to texturize the wash then lifted areas with rags to reveal the white of the canvas underneath. I further layered deep blue hues from the outer edges inward adding to the sense of atmospheric depth. Then, I added crimson highlights in a few places to intensify and energize the surface, which helped me relay my idea of tranquil eternity. Next, I developed the white areas that appear to rise from the indigo blue space. I wanted this illusionistic space to reflect a sense of excitement as a way for me to express the abstract idea of loyal commitment.

*Trust Renewal* (Appendix, 3) addresses my thoughts on the healing process of the bruised heart by symbolizing how we find our way back from the sea of darkness by a renewal of our trust in love. The painting began with light washes of the float medium and Prussian blue diluted with lots of water. Slinging this solution by hand across the canvas surface created the central focal point in the work of a light blue splash pushing its way through the painting. A layer of raw umber washes over the blue surrounding this area and represents the muck that has kept the heart from healing.

*A Balanced Harmony* (Appendix, 4) began as the lightest yellow cadmium wash I

could apply. Next, I started to remove some of the pigment with water, rags, and my hands. The more I manipulated the surface, the more *light* I seemed to suggest. Then, I used burnt sienna and burnt umber to counter balance the yellow lightness. The dark hues were applied using the same techniques of moving the paint around and lifting areas. Finally, stepping back to look at the entire canvas as a whole I suddenly realized what it was I felt so strongly about in this work. The piece was about my own marriage. Yellow represents me, as my husband calls me the light of his life. The brown represents my husband, as he grounds me in my life. We balance each other.

### **Expanding Body Of Work**

Adding crafts to my list of media expanded my body of work. I began this exploration with Precious Metal Clay (PMC) silver to create unique pieces of jewelry. Precious Metal Clay is a material that is 99% silver and 1% natural binder. It can be manipulated similar to earthen clay. The natural binder burns away during the firing process to leave the silver intact.

My first jewelry set, *Pearls of Wisdom* (Appendix, 5), is about honoring my mother and grandmother. The set is a multi-strand, crocheted, silver wire, and pearl necklace and bracelet with PMC cone end caps. I crocheted multiple strands of 24-gauge silver wire along with pearls from my mother's and grandmother's old jewelry. I created the two sets of cone end caps by rolling a thin slab of the PMC and molded them over cake decorator tips, one large set for the necklace and one small set for the bracelet. I added texture to the end caps by pin pricking the entire surface. After the firing, I polished them and ran the strands through the openings and attached the hook

and eye clasps. In this piece, I couldn't think of a better way to honor them than with a piece of work that tied the three of us together in a single moment in time. Both of them were very supportive as they taught me to crochet and sew. The set reminds me of them each time I see or wear it.

*Endless Devotion* (Appendix, 6 and 7) was created with a silver clay frame surrounding a handmade Sculpey pendant using an image transfer technique. The inspiration for the image was the love of the mother cat for her offspring. To represent this, I depicted a Siamese mother cat so devoted to her kittens that she nursed them a very long time. Being a mother myself, I understood the endless devotion we give to our children, and age does not matter in what we do to care and love for our children.

The two previous pieces dealt with unending love, a love that is unconditional. But what of a heart that is broken, how can it be mended? This is the question I asked myself when making my necklace, *Mending a Broken Heart* (Appendix, 8 and 9). We have all watched our children hurt and our hearts break because we can't fix their pain. The heart of one of my children was so broken that I was unsure if it would ever heal and love again. To address this sorrow, I created a piece of jewelry to represent of the emptiness felt using four open chambers. The shape was cut out of 20- gauge silver to create the heart. Then, I drilled a hole into four areas cutting the chambers out with a jeweler's coping saw. I wire-stitched red coral stones into the piece to symbolize chunks of the heart left from the broken relationship. They are raw, red, bleeding, and needing repair and mending. The black hematite stones represent the negative thoughts left from the relationship. The stones are various sizes from large to small to symbolize how the bad thoughts get smaller with time. There is one gleaming fresh-

water pearl in the heart that symbolizes what was learned from the relationship, both the good and the bad. This pearl is the beginning of new hope and new love, waiting to try again. The work was created using traditional metalsmithing techniques for the pendant, and wire wrapping to create the strands that it is suspended on.

*Your Flowery Words Are Meaningless* (Appendix, 10) is a piece of bookart that I created from an old encyclopedia. The challenge to me was to alter the book using only the paper from the book. I started tearing out pages in the center to create something that would be three-dimensional and would emerge from the book. Experimenting with different ways to manipulate paper, I started by making very thin long tubes and cutting some papers to resemble snowflakes. Soon, I found groupings of these snowflakes looked like flowers in a garden growing from the center of the opened book. Thinking on my theme and the connection of the old information contained in the book made me think of how words are sometimes used to impress or conceal information with others. The information in the encyclopedia was out dated or maybe even false. Now, I associated the text in the book as the words that couples sometimes tell each other that are meaningless, these could be harmless white lies to protect feelings, fibs to keep a secret for a surprise, or words that are said to veil their real thoughts. There are times in our lives when we used *flowery* words to reveal or conceal our true feelings and then there are times when we have heard the *fluffed up* information given to us. Either way, it is up to us to decide if the words are of substance or not.

All my life, in both my personal and creative worlds, I thought that I needed to be in control. Planning was my way to control my surroundings. The truth is we can

really only control so much and what we do control may be of no substance. By learning to let go of control, I was able to gain so much more knowledge of substance that it seeped into everything I did. This new way of life, to be in the moment, was freeing in many ways. The most influential was the fact that now I was able to release all my creative passions onto the canvas and sing from my heart.

Now every work I begin, whether paint or craft, I listen to my heart and find a new way to create what my head and heart are seeing. It is the inner voice of my muse that is now guiding what is on the canvas, book, or jewelry creation. By learning to let go of my conscious thoughts, I am now free to hear this inner voice and follow the path of creating love, showing love, and sharing love with others.

## **Conclusion**

During this journey of discovery, to become the artist I knew was, I needed to grow strong enough to let go of who I thought others wanted me to be. I am an ardent artist. I can say this without hesitation. I needed to go through many changes in my life in order to become this artist.

The MIS-IAR Program has given me the freedom to find my visual voice and learn how to use it. I will be able to continue to grow and share my art with those around me while still exploring the emotions of love that so profoundly touch each of our lives.



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## Appendix

### List of Figures

- Figure 1. *Emergence*, acrylic on canvas, 26- $\frac{1}{4}$ "x 52- $\frac{1}{4}$ ", 2008.
- Figure 2. *Blissful Commitment*, acrylic on canvas, 16- $\frac{1}{2}$  x 51- $\frac{1}{2}$ ", 2008.
- Figure 3. *Trust Renewal*, acrylic on canvas, 28"x 52- $\frac{3}{4}$ ", 2010.
- Figure 4. *A Balanced Harmony*, acrylic on canvas, 50- $\frac{1}{4}$ "x 50- $\frac{3}{4}$ ", 2010.
- Figure 5. *Pearls of Wisdom*, silver clay, vintage pearls, silver filler and spacer beads, crocheted silver wire. As pictured: Pendant necklace (12" length), bracelet (6- $\frac{1}{2}$ " length), and earrings (1- $\frac{1}{4}$ " length), 2007.
- Figure 6. *Endless Devotion*, silver clay, freshwater pearls, image transfer on pearl Sculpey, silver wire. As pictured: Necklace with pendant (12" length), Pendant (3- $\frac{1}{2}$ "x2- $\frac{1}{4}$ "x 3/8") and Earrings (1- $\frac{1}{4}$ " length), 2007.
- Figure 7. *Endless Devotion* (pendant detail), silver clay, freshwater pearls, image transfer on pearl Sculpey, silver wire. Pendant (3- $\frac{1}{2}$ "x 2- $\frac{1}{4}$ "x3/8"), 2007.
- Figure 8. *Mending a Broken Heart*, pierce-cut silver plate, silver wire, silver chain, black hematite stones, red coral nugget beads, freshwater pearl. As pictured: Necklace with pendant (12- $\frac{1}{2}$ " length), 2009.
- Figure 9. *Mending a Broken Heart* (pendant detail), pierce-cut silver plate, silver wire, silver chain, black hematite stones, red coral nugget beads, freshwater pearl. As pictured: Pendant (3- $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 2- $\frac{1}{2}$ " x  $\frac{1}{4}$ "), 2009.
- Figure 10. *Your Flowery Words Are Meaningless*, Altered Encyclopedia, (14- $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 13" x 18- $\frac{1}{2}$ "), 2009.

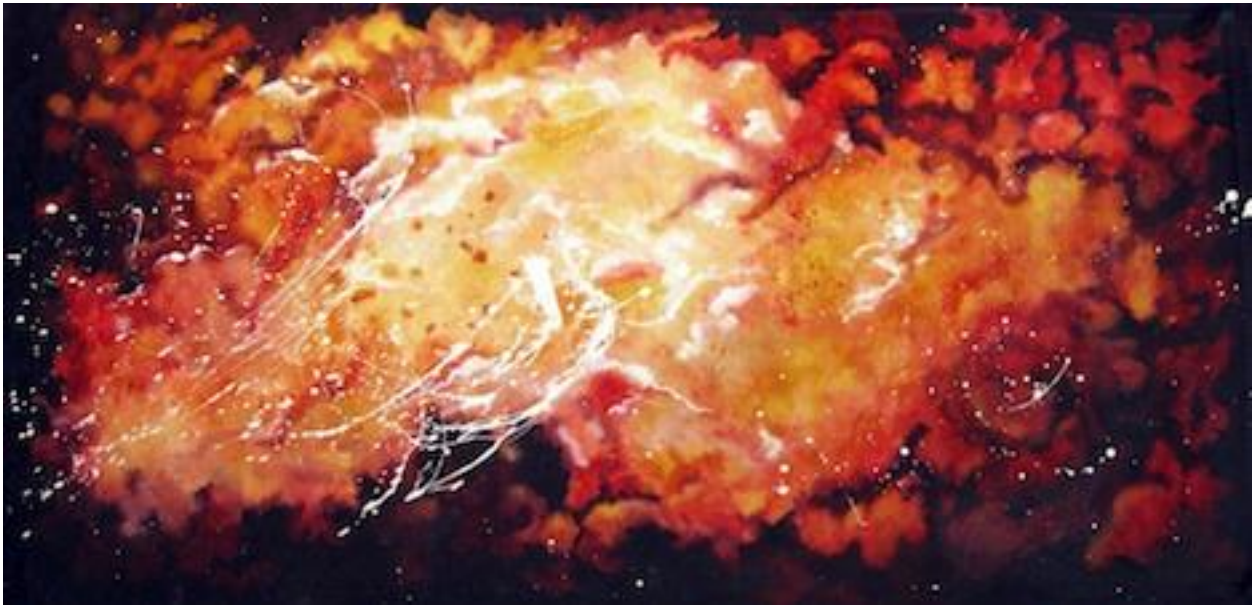


Figure 1. *Emergence*, acrylic on canvas, 26- $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 52- $\frac{1}{4}$ ", 2008.

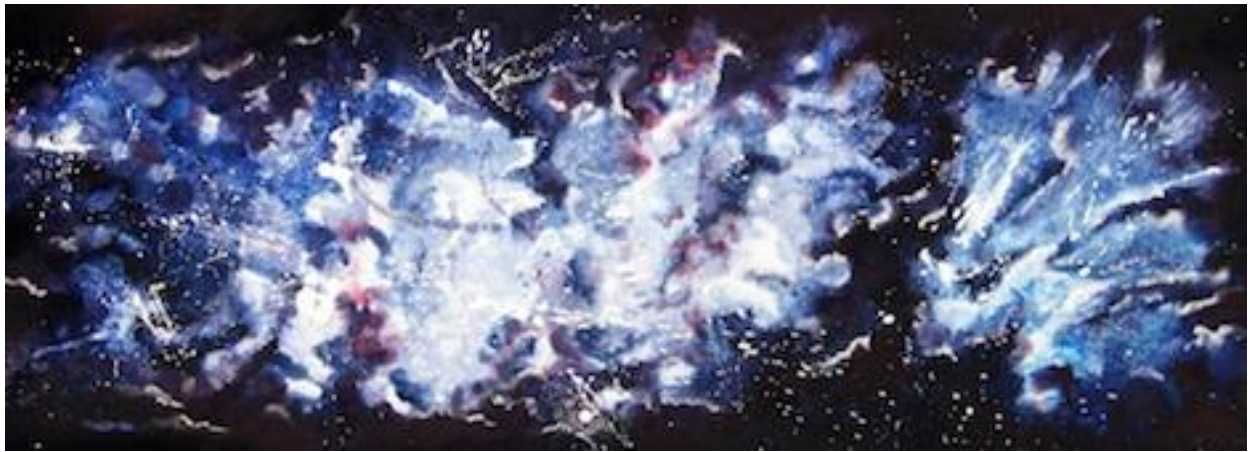


Figure 2. *Blissful Commitment*, acrylic on canvas 16- $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 51- $\frac{1}{2}$ ", 2008.



Figure 3. *Trust Renewal*, acrylic on canvas, 28" x 52-<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>", 2010.



Figure 4. *A Balanced Harmony*, acrylic on canvas, 50- $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 50- $\frac{3}{4}$ ", 2010.



Figure 5. *Pearls of Wisdom*, silver clay, vintage pearls, silver filler and spacer beads, crocheted silver wire. As pictured: Pendant necklace (12" length), bracelet (6-1/2" length), and earrings (1-1/4" length), 2007.



Figure 6. *Endless Devotion*, silver clay, Fresh-water pearls, image transfer on pearl Sculpey, silver wire. As pictured: Necklace with pendant, (12" length), Pendant (3-1/2"x 2-1/4" x 3/8") and Earrings (1-1/4" length), 2007.





Figure 7. *Endless Devotion*, (pendant detail), silver clay, fresh-water pearls, image transfer on pearl Sculpey, silver wire. Pendant (3-1/2"x 2-1/4" x 3/8"), 2007.

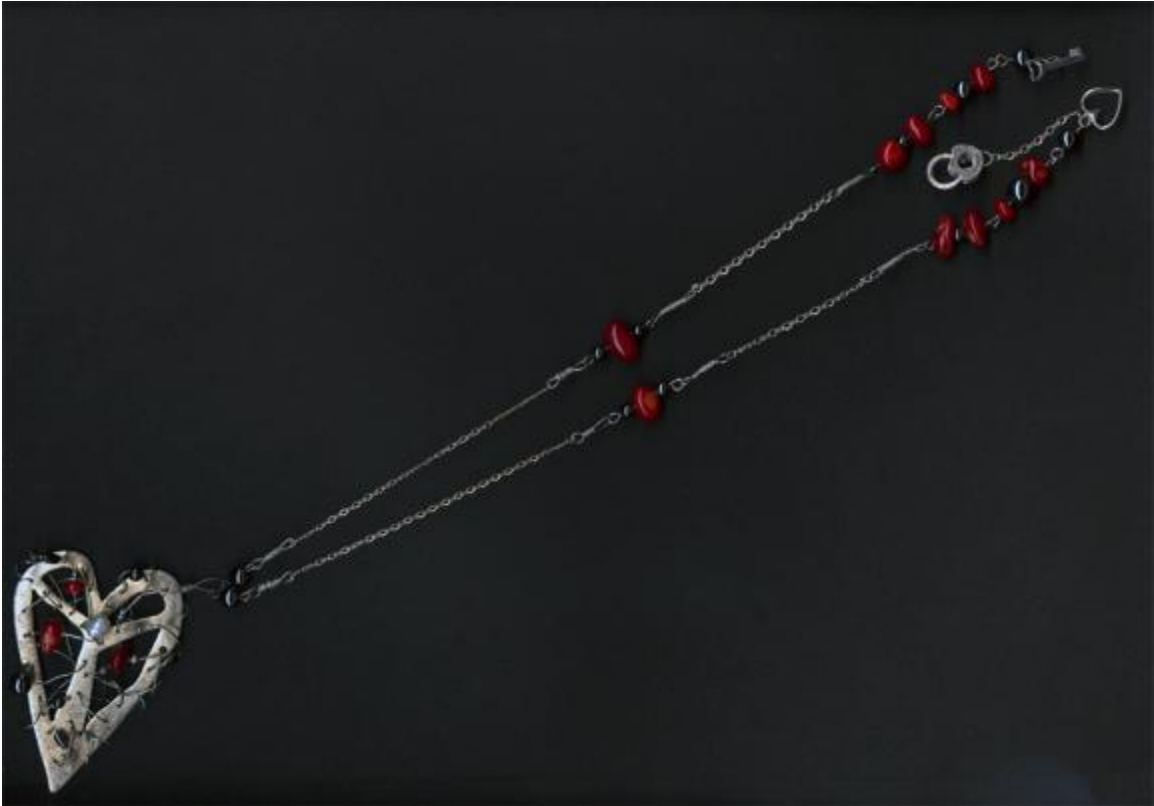


Figure 8. *Mending a Broken Heart*, pierce-cut silver plate, silver wire, silver chain, black hematite stones, red coral nugget beads, freshwater pearl.  
As pictured: Necklace with pendant (12-1/2" Length), 2009.



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Figure 10. *Your Flowery Words Are Meaningless*, Altered Encyclopedia, (14- $\frac{1}{2}$ "x13"x18- $\frac{1}{2}$ " ), 2009.

## Deborah L. FitzGerald

### Education

- 2011 Master of Interdisciplinary Study in Interdisciplinary Arts  
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA  
Concentration in Painting and Crafts
- 1988 Bachelor of Science in Art Education,  
Arkansas State University, Jonesboro, AR  
Concentration in Art Education and Drawing and Painting

### Grants and Awards

- 2004 Toshiba America Foundation Science and Math Improvement Grant Award
- 1977 Freshman Art Award, Arkansas State University, Jonesboro, AR

### Career Highlight

- 2005-Pres Art Teacher, Lake Braddock Secondary, Burke, VA

### Exhibition Highlights

- 2011 *Obsessions of My Affections*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA at The Sundry, Vienna, VA
- 2011 *Cell Block*, The Sundry, Vie
- 2011 *Paint the City*, Stacy C. Sherwood Community Center, Fairfax, VA
- 2011 *Artomatic Takes Flight*, Reagan National Airport, Arlington, VA
- 2010 *Baby Canvases*, The Sundry, Vienna, VA
- 2010 *F\*@K The Machine*, The Sundry, Vienna, VA
- 2010 *Artist Teacher Exhibition*, Fairfax County Public Schools, Ernst Community Cultural Center, Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale, VA.  
Juror: Dr. Renee Sandell

## **Exhibition Highlights (continued):**

- 2009      *Artist Teacher Exhibition*, Fairfax County Public Schools, Ernst Community Cultural Center, Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale, VA  
Juror: Kurt Godwin
- 2008      *Artist Teacher Exhibition*, Fairfax County Public Schools, Ernst Community Cultural Center, Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale, VA  
Juror: J.J. McCracken
- 2009      *Artomatic*, Capitol Riverfront, Washington, DC

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Monahan, Frank. *Stanley & Norman: Big Belly Basset Brothers*. Illustrated by Deborah FitzGerald. Burke, VA: Rocket Science Productions, 2011.

## **Related Experience**

- 2008      Workshop Presenter, Virginia Art Education Association, Professional Development, Chantilly, VA
- 1993-Pres      Commissioned portrait artist