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Light Affect

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Artist Statement

My faith is an important factor in my art making. I believe the ability to create is endowed by an original Creator. My work continues this initial creative legacy while confronting viewers with a storyline of beauty, truth, justice, and redemption.

I am a realist oil painter devoted to portraiture and figurative work. Human form, gesture, and facial expression provide inexhaustible subject matter. I depict narratives from antiquity to the present day. Some of my paintings contain spiritual elements based on biblical writings presented in a contemporary context. I work from photos that I take of family, friends, and strangers from all walks of life. I often digitally reorganize the imagery to create the most effective composition in telling a story. Extreme contrast of light and dark is a crucial component of my current work. With it, I explore the dichotomy of revelation versus concealment.

I also create pottery intentionally rooted in utilitarian traditions. I work with wheel-thrown and hand-built stoneware and I decorate it with a basic glaze palette. I appreciate how handmade ceramics add an organic, creative touch to everyday objects, as opposed to the inorganic and impersonal nature of mass produced ware. Furthermore, each unique vessel is a manifestation of the endowed gift of creativity interconnecting Creator, artist, and consumer.

Light Affect

Introduction

I have always loved creating art and I used a wide variety of media throughout my high school and undergraduate studies. My strongest interests emerged in drawing and functional ceramics. However, upon becoming an art educator seven years ago, I focused on teaching a variety of media without devoting time to become proficient in any area. I decided that narrowing my field of interest and studying at the graduate level would be necessary for my artistic development.

I enrolled in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program and began painting. I had very little prior experience with oil painting but I was very interested in the possibilities it offered. I began studying old master painters and was drawn to sixteenth-century figurative narratives and portraiture. I wanted to begin there so I could have a broader knowledge of historical breakthroughs and the evolution of painting conventions. Subsequently, I've been intrigued by the many contemporary figurative painters who have appropriated, in style and subject, elements of the great paintings of the past. In a similar way, I have developed an artistic voice that fits in the greater dialogue of painting, past and present. My painting articulates messages I had not attempted before enrolling in the MIS-IAR Program.

Along with painting, I also focused on ceramics, continuing to develop my previous skills in functional pottery. I was able to achieve my goal to produce each element in a dinnerware set according to my own decorative style. Furthermore, I was challenged to create new forms by altering wheel-thrown bowls and cups. Two trips to Malawi, Africa, during the time of my

ceramics focus, brought me into contact with several Malawian potters. Befriending one of them, an elderly widow named Nesleya Jordan, inspired me to create functional pottery and somehow connect to a vein of artisans who span thousands and thousands of years and cover the far reaches of the globe, yet are united in creative purpose.

Aesthetics

Art for me is an expression of faith. The capacity to create is a gift from a creative giver. As well-known novelist Madeleine L'Engle (1918-2007) said, "To paint a picture or to write a story or to compose a song is an incarnational activity. The artist is a servant who is willing to be a birth giver." (L'Engle, 18). Artists have the ability, the duty even, to bring order from chaos or, in other words, to create what otherwise could not exist independently. Art is a manifestation of the relationship between creator and creation. When I create paintings or functional pottery, I mimic that Great Cause, or Creator, who set the universe in motion.

My art is an investigation of truth. Historical stories from current events to those from antiquity pique my interest, as do biblical allegories. In some of my work, I explore biblical events where people are confronted by something supernaturally greater than themselves but couched in everyday, even non-religious, circumstances. I am intrigued by characters and stories that directly involve revelation from God to human being. These types of encounters are so powerfully dramatic that not only do they drastically influence the participant, but they have often considerably shaped history and culture. My solution is not to create apologetics for absolute truth but to propose judicious questions through my images concerning the possibility of mankind experiencing the supernatural.

An underlying theme in my work is *universalism*, referring to God's loving interest in

and subsequent broad revelation to people of all nations, races, classes, and religions. This is a trend found throughout the Bible, and especially in the history recorded by Luke. A thematic word picture in Luke's history is the idea of God *raising valleys* which speaks of uplifting the humble, the meek, and the God-respecting. On the other hand, he *lowers the mountains*, which shows resistance to the proud and self-righteous. Most of the stories envelop the theme of challenging oppressive social barriers and show that there is no person outside the parameters of God's revelation.

My compositions focus intimately on the human response to revelation, communicated in gesture or emotional facial expression, encouraging viewers to relate to the human experience. I offer realism that puts less emphasis on idealism and religiosity and more on psychological complexities and the raw physicality of a story. I employ high contrasting lights and darks representing the contrast between revelation and the dark unknown. Subjects are painted in a contemporary context with a variety of ages and races. I strip my paintings of superfluous details, including highly religious symbolism, opting to focus on the experience of the individuals.

My ceramic work is functional pottery. Innovations in my pottery concern design elements that encourage a unique, non-commercial experience for the user, fostering a dialogue between maker and consumer. I make forms that are refined yet contain well-stated gestures. My pots are decorated in a traditional manner. The philosophical ideas and aesthetic decisions I employ with my pottery correspond to those concerning my painting in a broad sense. Namely, creating forms out of clay mimics divine creation. In addition, the functional objects become accoutrements in the lives of ordinary people.

Influences

Among the many painters who have inspired my work, Michelangelo Merisi de Caravaggio (1573-1610) is the forbearer of the most influential concepts. First, Caravaggio's choice of subject matter and the harsh, realistic manner with which he depicts it exemplifies the theme of universalism. For example, in his paintings *The Conversion of St. Paul* (1601) and *The Calling of St. Matthew* (1599-1600), he abolished religious idealism and instead chose to offer an unadulterated view of historical events. Both paintings show the raw state of two men as their lives are completely interrupted by God's providence, as if to say no one is unqualified to receive a deep spiritual calling. Painted in grand scale, he depicted Paul immobilized in the dirt beneath the unsightly backside of a horse, forgoing any embellishment and hyper-religious symbolism. Another unlikely candidate is chosen in Matthew as he is beckoned while in the act of greedy accounting.

Both of these paintings employ the second concept I appropriate from Caravaggio, which is his use of *chiaroscuro*. As he calls for Matthew, Christ's face is surprisingly not completely illuminated. However his pointed finger, which references Michelangelo Buonarroti's *Creation of Adam* (1508-1512), is highlighted. This pointed finger leads the viewer's eye to the coin counting *sinner* Matthew. Hence, the intense, focused light serves as a device to attract the viewer's attention through the composition. It also creates contrast that dramatically highlights the sincerity of the subject's response. This *chiaroscuro* serves to involve the viewer as participants in the scene. In setting up my compositions, I mimic Caravaggio's use of intense theatrical lighting. This approach allows me to heighten the drama of the piece and highlight the key gestures and expressions to the exclusion of unnecessary details.

A third aspect of Caravaggio's art that I appropriate in my work is using models in

contemporary apparel in a contemporary setting. Likewise, Kehinde Wiley (1977-) is a figurative artist who also recreates historic portraits and scenes using models in contemporary apparel. By recreating historical scenes in a present-day context, the viewer can more easily identify with the characters involved. Wiley takes it a bit further, casting young, urban, black men in the powerful positions of paintings depicting the likes of Napoleon and other rulers and powerful elites. The subject typically cast in a negative light is automatically recast in a positive one. This adds a complexity to the image. It causes the viewer to question status, bias, and social rank. Kehinde's works re-contextualize the experience of contemporary black men. My work also involves re-contextualization of images, encouraging the viewer to think of how the story would unfold today and to consider what their reaction would be if they were in a similar situation.

Concerning my functional pottery making, I fashion my ideas from the celebrated authority in the field, Warren Mackenzie (1924-). Mackenzie's work stands as an argument that utilitarian pottery is a valid fine art in itself even though much work in ceramics explores conceptual, sculptural, and experimental aspects. I appreciate a more basic decorative style where the décor of the object does not overwhelm the design of its form. My Malawian friends also produce pottery for purely functional purposes with very minimal surface decoration. Their work is influential because of the organic simplicity of the pots as well as the vital purpose they serve.

Paintings

I began oil painting in the MIS-IAR Program with limited experience with the medium. My first work was a copy of a Rembrandt Van Rijn (1606-1669) self-portrait. Because of how

ambitious the task was, most of my education came through the many mistakes I made. Yet, I was still drawn to the style of *indirect* painting that old masters like Rembrandt employed. Indirect paintings are constructed with dark shadows produced by multiple glazes in contrast to the impasto of fleshy highlights. Contemporary painter, Vincent Desiderio (1955-), explained it as “Putting light in in one place, knocking it down in another. Scumble and glaze. Scumble, which is to say light over dark-and glaze, dark over light.” (Weschler, 20). My next paintings were executed in a similar indirect style. Three of them are allegorical figurative paintings based on a biblical passage written by the Jewish King David, which reads:

¹You have searched me, LORD,
and you know me.

²You know when I sit and when I
rise;
you perceive my thoughts
from afar.

³You discern my going out and
my lying down;
you are familiar with all my
ways.

¹¹If I say, “Surely the darkness will
hide me
and the light become night
around me,”

¹²even the darkness will not be
dark to you;
the night will shine like the
day,
for darkness is as light to you.

¹³For you created my inmost
being;
you knit me together in my
mother’s womb.

¹⁴I praise you because I am
fearfully and wonderfully
made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.

¹⁵My frame was not hidden from

you
when I was made in the
secret place.
When I was woven together in
the depths of the earth.

(Life in the Spirit Study Bible. Psa. 139.1-3, 11-15)

Searched and Known: Rising (Appendix, 1) is a self-portrait, in which I emerge from a dark, non-descript background. Light bursts onto the right side of my body illuminating the path in front of me as one who is *rising*. The chiaroscuro lends itself to the message of the allegory. The portrait is based on a picture taken during my twenties which were marked by major life changes and decisions. Specifically, I had taken on a new career, moved several states away, and was navigating the ebb and flow of deep relationships. In a time of such upheaval, consistent empathy and validation were hard to come by leading to a sort of existential grappling. The passage from The Book of Psalms and the self-portrait examine the intimate knowledge God has of people and how it substantiates our existence, no matter how dark or undefined life may seem.

Searched and Known: Sitting (Appendix, 2) is another allegorical piece based on the same passage. The work is intentionally cropped so the hands of the sitter do all the communicating. Once again, the illumination of the hands, and the partial figure set against a dark background posits the understanding that people are known intimately by the Creator and a subsequent peaceful rest is implied.

A third allegorical painting is based on a portion of the same poem. In the greater context of the poem, David suggests that there is nowhere people can go to escape God's knowledge and concern. And in this verse, even the most fragile, dependent baby is watched over. No detail of human formation is too miniscule for God to overlook, as illustrated in *Searched and Known: Knit Together* (Appendix, 3). In this portrait of my newborn nephew surrounded by darkness, a

whirling light radiates soft, pacific illumination on the sleeping boy. It is based on an actual photograph with an exposure time of three seconds, which recorded the path of a flashlight above his head. The painting is unique to the rest of my body of work in that the illumination takes on form as a visual manifestation of divinity.

Another group of figure paintings are contemporary enactments of biblical narratives recorded by the historian Luke. Because extreme contrasts of light and dark are a signature of the style I've appropriated in my work, I decided to depict stories in which light could be symbolic for revelation, similarly to its application in *Searched and Known: Knit Together*. For *Annunciation* (Appendix, 4), I paint Mary, the mother of Jesus, at the moment she receives the revelation that she is with child. Mary is isolated against a dark background. Her body twists towards the light that captivates her attention. A tidy purple bedspread symbolic of both virginity and royalty, in addition to her hand that lightly rests on her stomach, are the only emblematic ties to the storyline. No other religious imagery is included. Rather, emphasis is placed on Mary's isolated responsiveness to the mystery of divine revelation.

The art world has certainly blossomed far beyond the medium of oil painting. However, I find that it is very engaging as an artist and observer. I craft a snapshot in a story, a pause in the action of a particular narrative. Viewers can visually process an image, engage in the action, and form connections at their own pace, which is a luxury less prevalent in our frantic culture. My work links the traditional art form and stories from antiquity with themes relevant to present-day society.

Ceramics

My focus in ceramics is wheel-thrown, functional pottery. My principle achievement

was the creation of each element of a dinnerware set including mugs, tumblers, plates, and bowls. *Pair of Cups* (Appendix, 5) embodies my technical ability to create duplicate vessels each containing a unique gesture swirling up the side wall. A visual dialogue is created between the two cups, enlivened by the different interior colors. While I like the simple economy of forms, I add elements like the swirling gesture to breathe life into the vessel, setting it apart from commercially manufactured products. I leave my mark in the vessels with fingerprints absent of glaze.

Green Rimmed Bowl (Appendix, 6) is yet another example of how the simplicity of the form (which is first dictated by the vessel's function) serves as a base to add design elements that supplement the form, without overwhelming it. I manually manipulated the foot of the bowl with a rib tool and knife, creating the double rib effect and hollowed out recess, which occurs three times. Color is introduced on the rim, a sort of highlight of the clean perfection of the circle. The green is repeated three times in a fingerprint-sized space on the side. I find that repeating simple elements provide enough interest in a piece without overwhelming the form.

Aside from the creation of straightforward functional pieces, I was also encouraged to experiment with altering wheel-thrown objects. *Blue Bowl* (Appendix, 7) represents the culmination of my investigation in adding on major structures to wheel-thrown pieces. Almost characteristic of a tablecloth or skirt, the clay on the sides communicate an illusionary weightlessness. The functionality of the bowl is still preserved while the overall look is enhanced.

While I never actively sought to merge my painting and ceramic work, I deepened my knowledge and experience within each field. Still, I made a connection between the two in my broader aesthetic outlook. Refining my functional pottery skills will be a lifelong endeavor.

Conclusion

My experience in the MIS-IAR Program has been beneficial to me as an artist. The variety of classes and professors challenged me to define my intent and to shape my message. I learned how to incorporate tools from different media and processes to enhance my work. For instance, though not a focus area, the training I received in digital photography helped enhance my paintings especially in the areas of composition and color. I was also challenged to decide when interdisciplinary art making processes do not overlap. For instance, my major focus areas of painting and ceramics began and ended separately. I think this was an important decision for me because I had so much to explore within each respective art field. I am very excited to be at the place I am with each medium. I am grateful for each of my professors for the input they have had in my development. In addition to honing my technical skills, I've also developed a more complete aesthetic and message in my artwork.

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Appendix

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- Figure 4. *Annunciation*, oil on canvas, 66"x48", 2010.
- Figure 5. *Pair of Cups*, stoneware and glaze, 6"x3.5"x3.5" (each), 2010.
- Figure 6. *Green Rimmed Bowl*, stoneware and glaze, 4"x6"x6", 2009.
- Figure 7. *Blue Bowl*, stoneware and glaze, 4"x 14"x14", 2010.



Figure 1. *Searched and Known: Rising*, oil on canvas, 20"x16", 2009.



Figure 2. *Searched and Known: Sitting*, oil on canvas, 20"x16", 2010.



Figure 3. *Searched and Known: Knit Together*, oil on canvas, 20"x24", 2011.



Figure 4. *Annunciation*, oil on canvas, 66"x48", 2010.



Figure 5. *Pair of Cups*, stoneware and glaze, 6"x3.5"x3.5" (each), 2010.



Figure 6. *Green Rimmed Bowl*, stoneware and glaze, 4"x6"x6", 2009.



Figure 7. *Blue Bowl*, stoneware and glaze, 4”x 14”x14”, 2010.

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