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Transcending *Terra Firma*

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

by

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Artist Statement

My landscapes depict the converging of sky, water, and land to symbolize transcendence, transformation, and life. I use an impressionistic style and manipulate the effects of light to capture a scene as it appears to me. Other times I re-arrange sky, land, and water into compositions that I visualize in my imagination.

The convergence of natural elements can be a wide open gate where the ocean meets the sky, or it can be the narrow meandering path of a long river that meets the sky at a distant horizon. I use the physicality of *terra firma*, the place I inhabit physically and spiritually, as I use my art to describe the signs of transcendence and transformation.

Transcending *Terra Firma*

An Artist First and A Teacher Second

I have always worked in ancillary jobs related to art and design and have been able to maintain a connection to art while taking care of my financial responsibilities. I kept the personal part of my art making protected from commercial pressures. Even though I had less and less time for my art after my undergraduate education, I continued to keep a sketchbook. After I married and had children, I needed to attend to my family to the point where I made very little art. I considered myself to be *an artist on hiatus*. When my youngest child was in school full time, I began substitute teaching for Fairfax County Public Schools. For two years, I substituted in many different elementary, middle, and high schools. My children are widely spaced in age, so this job meshed well with family life. However, I never intended to teach professionally. Teaching was quite far down on my list of professions in which I visualized myself. I am by nature an observer of life and avoid speaking in front of people, that is, until I found myself in front of a class of high school art students. A high school nearby needed a substitute to teach Art 1 and Art 2 for two weeks. It turned into a semester long engagement. As I looked back over the semester, I realized that I had found a way to combine two things that mean a great deal to me, all in one place. I loved art, I loved working with kids who want to make art. The school offered me a part-time teaching job the following fall, while I fulfilled all the education requirements necessary to earn a state teaching license. Twelve years later I am still teaching art at the same school.

Entering the MIS-IAR Program

As much as I love teaching art, the fact is that the needs of my students and the professional duties of teaching exert a heavy demand on my creative energy. A colleague suggested that I take an art class offered by Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) Off-Campus program at one of the area high schools in Fairfax county. It seemed unlikely that a four hour commitment, at the end of a long day of teaching, would have a positive impact. However, it did. The class was essentially a small community of artists who were, for the most part, also teachers of art, all working in the same medium. I attended for two semesters for my own enjoyment. It was during this time that I heard about the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program. I was interested because the program offered a way for me to make my own work in a supportive environment. It could also be a way for me to separate making art from teaching. I have been formally enrolled in this program for almost five years. Beyond being able to achieve my original goal, the MIS-IAR experience has enhanced the way I think and talk about the art I make.

My Aesthetics

I use light and its atmospheric effects in the environment as a metaphor to express truth about my existence. The effects of light cannot be reduced to just one state (bright, dark, sunny, overcast, foggy, or rainy) in the same way that the definition of life cannot be reduced to just one description. As a symbol, I identify the purest state of enlightened knowledge, the most intense revelation of life's ultimate good, with light.

In my paintings, I depict the dramatic effects of weather and light on water, on the terrain, and in the atmosphere. I work *en plein aire* as well as in my studio from photographs

taken on site. However, the paintings do not depict specific places but rather thoughts and ideas. In my paintings the light source is obscured or implied. I use this approach to metaphorically suggest elusive meanings that I attach to the phenomenon of life and the mystery of its source.

Unlike my paintings, wherein images are presented to the viewer through the objective mechanism of the camera, I use the concrete quality of photographic imagery to address, in a more direct way, the same themes as in my paintings. I use bridges, paths, and rivers symbolically to suggest the way transformation can be thought of as a journey. When I compose photos that place the viewer above the horizon, I want the viewer to feel the limitlessness of transcendent experience.

In my painting, I work with traditional methods and techniques. My work is process-oriented and the features of oil paint are well suited to my process. An essential part of the way I work requires that the paint remain wet for long periods of time. I paint slowly with deliberation and I require time to reconsider and change elements in the composition. For example, oil allows me time to push or drag the paint and to create the right balance between hard and soft edges and between tonal areas. The evolution of a painting becomes a selective process, deciding which changes to preserve and which to discard.

When I start a painting, I visualize in a general way how I want the painting to look at the end of the process, yet letting the process dictate the actual outcome. I use large brushes, disposable foam paint rollers, and rags in applying the paint freely to cover the canvas with a wash of paint thinned with odorless mineral spirits. When I began painting years ago, I often used my fingers to scrub, spread, and blend the paint. There were times I wanted a more direct sensation of controlling the paint. This is still an important way for me to work but now I wear cotton gloves or use rags to avoid having the paint absorbed through my skin. Sometimes, the

painting develops just as I envisioned it in my head. More often there ensues a test of wills but the process is always an interaction between me and the work. It is a struggle to find the balance each time. So, as the painting develops, I document the adjustments that I make with digital photographs and use them as a tool to assess the effectiveness of major changes. Each time I begin to paint, I consider the most recent photographs before commencing.

After I apply the underpainting, I use a rag to rub out areas that are intended to be the lightest values. Then, I apply successive layers of paint, establishing the darkest values. I continue and paint the middle values wet-on-wet. I use alkyd resin mediums, such as Liquin or Galkyd, because the qualities of these formulations are well matched to the consistency of paint. The gel formulations suspend the paint in the medium to the degree I require in order to avoid a dragging sensation when applying paint over a large area. I like the way alkyd gel mediums begin with a thick consistency and thin down to a syrupy consistency the more that they are worked. Alkyds also dry quickly. If I spend a full afternoon working, the initial applications are often dry enough in an hour and a half to scumble successive layers without cross-contaminating the colors, thereby creating a woven texture of paint. This allows layers of colors to be seen side-by-side, emphasizing my use of simultaneous color contrast. Once I have enough paint on the canvas, I use the opposite end of the brush and work back into the wet paint with *sgraffito* techniques, applying lighter and heavier contour lines according to the form. Under those circumstances, if I do not apply the paint directly from the tube, I add a wax medium to add body and to preserve and enhance the dimensional form of the paint.

When I work with digital photography, I manipulate a collection of images in Photoshop using different adjustment layers and filters. I can use various tools to manipulate the imagery for dramatic atmospheric effect or redistribute detail evenly or exaggerate the contrast within the

photo. Often I make corrections to the hue and saturation. I prefer naturalistic color and use the tools in Photoshop to maintain a natural effect.

My Influences

The paintings of George Innes (1825-1894) have been influential to my work. He was an American landscape painter from the New England area. Inness was inspired by the philosophy of Transcendentalism which cast a wide influence across literature, religion, social philosophy, and the visual arts. Transcendentalism was primarily a philosophical movement that focused on an intuitive way of sensing truth as opposed to a scientific way of knowing. Inness took this philosophy and imbued a sense of the spiritual into his paintings.

As he matured, Inness moved from an academic depiction of the landscape toward a numinous, mystical vision that projects a sense of stillness, even melancholy. He continued late in his life to paint *en plein aire*, but within his studio he reworked the various elements for dramatic effect. With flexibility he created compositions by reducing specific details into form and color, rearranging them in ways that suited the idea or emotion that he wished to communicate. I share an aesthetic with his philosophic outlook and methods. I work in a similar way, using memories of a place and incorporating an intuitive response that points to a truth.

In a late painting, *A Woodland Scene* (1891), the depicted natural forms are not distinct. Portraying the shape of the leaf canopy and the tree trunks are more important than painting each leaf and chunk of bark in detail. He placed a figure in the middle ground and situated the viewpoint as within and part of nature. His use of color created the feeling of an autumn sunset on the small figure, the tree trunks, and the pasture in the background. In my work, I try to mimic the way Inness used dull, dark, cool colors against bright, light, warm colors to create

strong value contrasts for dramatic effect.

Another artist who has influenced my work is James Mallord William Turner (1775-1851). It has been instructive to trace the evolution of his painting style. I observed in his later paintings how Turner shifted from specific depiction of details in the landscape to large gestural indications and this emboldened me to depart along a new path in my own painting. I visited the National Gallery and the Tate Museum, both in London, to see his landscape paintings. I was able to see his paintings up close and observed the thin washes of paint and the patchy islands of color that he applied with a palette knife. I saw paintings of his that had been cut during restoration, revealing the different levels of paint and medium built up between the canvas support and the surface of the painting. In my efforts to duplicate the luminosity of his skies, I used the modern equivalent of *megilp* which was a glazing medium that he used. I also used impasto technique to suggest a metaphorical contrast of the ethereal and the real. In his mature paintings, Turner eliminated almost all identifiable objects. Light became the sole subject. When I paint skies, I strive to imitate the way he portrayed the color of light diffused under different atmospheric conditions, such as haze, mist, and storms.

Finally, the last artist who has inspired my work is Mark Rothko (1903-1970). When I cross underground from the main galleries to the East Wing of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, I take the first left, go down the hall, and spend time looking at Rothko's *Untitled* (1953). After reading a short excerpt from Robert Rosenblum's book, *Modern Painting and Northern Romantic Tradition* (1975), on the connection of Rothko's work to Romantic landscapes, I began to understand what it was about his paintings that intrigued me. Rosenblum described how a person viewing a Rothko could be considered a surrogate for the small figures present in Romantic landscapes. Therefore, this person becomes a part of the painting, entering

into it as a participant in a similar way that one exists in and experiences the landscape in which we actually live. I saw this as a new way to think about being *in* landscape rather than above it and yet be able to feel the same kind of awe or enchantment that I had been trying to paint by placing the viewer outside and above the landscape. Rothko's work will always be vulnerable to criticism, not undeservedly so, for the large colorful rectangles require a high level of engagement. From a strictly formalist point of view, I take away from his work his successful use of color harmonies. However on another level, his work inspired me to approach the idea of painting landscape in a different way. I placed the viewer within the composition and minimized recognizable form as a different way to express how we can recognize and understand some of our existence, but not fully so.

When I paint landscapes that stress minimal shapes and simplified form it is a natural extension of all the qualities of Innes, Turner, and Rothko. In my work, as inspired by these artists, form has devolved from detailed and distinct to simplified and atmospheric. Color has increasingly taken precedence in order to create a feeling of place. I am indebted to Innes' intuitive response to landscape, Turner's methods of depicting light, and Rothko's simplified form.

My Work

When I began painting *Shenandoah Calvary* (Appendix, 1), I wanted to develop a method for painting the sky. My first attempts ended up looking flat no matter what kind of blue or how much white I added to it. At some point, I realized that what I was trying to paint was not blue, and not *up* there but was the air all around me. So, I began to work with the principles of atmospheric perspective as I painted the mountains of the background using white tinted with

cerulean blue and raw umber. Yet, this still did not solve the puzzle of how atmosphere affects light or how to depict it. So, I added bright warm touches of color that would be expected by a late afternoon sun shining on the mountains. Everything flowed from that, hence the duller, darker, tones of violet of the receding road on the left, and the lighter, brighter tones of the field in the middle distance. The trees were added to reinforce the juxtaposition of light and dark. Likewise, the number of trees I added was part of the compositional choices, one tree being not enough, two being overly static, and four or more needlessly complicated. The title *Shenandoah Calvary* came to me after the painting was finished. The grouping of trees in the foreground brought to mind the three wooden crosses on Calvary, and pointed to another sacrifice and redemption, the Civil War, fought in and around the Shenandoah Mountains.

Behold the Natural Gates (Appendix, 2) was conceived with a specific viewpoint in mind. We often admonish ourselves to *keep things in perspective*. Indeed this saying is an indispensable tool for managing overwhelming events. Even so, people usually acknowledge the sentiment and then shrug it off without engaging the transforming effect of perspective. Get far enough away and one can see with a new eye and perhaps overcome a fear, reconcile a sorrow, regain gratitude for life, and experience the deepest things that restore a person. I wanted to paint this experience. I felt confident at this point that I would be able to use my painting skills to be successful in this effort.

During this time, I had developed different methods for depicting atmospheric effects of light. I laid down a wash of cool yellow as a foundation for successive layers of glazes in cool tones. I punctuated the limitless feel of the sky by applying opaque tones of white with an impasto technique to signify clouds. Situating the horizon below eye level, and low in the picture plane, placed the viewer above and outside of the landscape. A river bound by

meandering banks receding to the horizon solved the problem of how to create visual interest in what necessarily is a narrow space. To give the viewer a clue as to the scale of the image, I placed the sun at eye level. As in *Shenandoah Calvary*, the light source dictated color and shadow. I named the painting long after I finished it. The title, *Behold the Natural Gates*, comes from the song *For Beginners* (2009) by M. Ward, which reads:

*When you're absolute beginners
It's a panoramic view
From her majesty Mt. Zion
And the Kingdom is for you.*

*On a bookshelf in Caledonia
Sits a map of passageways
Best to stumble upon Mt. Zion
To Behold the Natural Gates* (Ward, 2009)

Mt. Zion is a holy place in Judeo Christian tradition. Interestingly, it is also the name of a National Park in Utah known for remarkable canyons and mountainous rock formations. Ward's lyrics tell the listener that regardless of maps and directions, it is best to find your own way to the mountain where you can behold the natural gates to the kingdom of heaven. He is singing about the same experience that I try to describe when I paint a landscape from an elevated viewpoint. The lyrics describe the experience of seeing the world in a new way, as a beginner, spread out in front of you and presented as an elusive prize.

Apparition (Appendix, 3), I feel, is the most successful painting to come from my experimentation in paint applications. Feeling inhibited by using only brushes, I turned to alternatives tools and methods. Small sponge rollers allowed me to apply wide swaths of even and sheer color on the canvas. Applying sheer layers of different shades and intensities of color let me create an ethereal illusion of depth without relying on tricks of perspective. At the same time, I began to enlist the textural qualities of the canvas by scumbling layers of color. However,

in using the new methods, the gains I made in depicting atmospheric light came at the expense of detail, yet I let these new qualities lead me in this direction with *Apparition*. Placing the horizon low on the picture plane and keeping it at the viewer's eye level returns the viewer to a place within the composition, on a beach with nothing but sand, water, and sky. A yellow hazy square hangs suspended overhead in the upper half of the composition with a smaller indistinct version of itself reflected in the sand. With this simple combination of indistinct shape and atmospheric color, I could paint the tension that exists between being here on this earth, yet knowing of the place *up there* that awaits one who can transcend the obstacles.

I chose to write about these three paintings because, in hindsight, they describe succinctly a clear visual sequence of the way my painting style and intellectual approach to painting has evolved during the time I have been enrolled in this graduate program.

My primary media focus has been painting but digital photography has been an indispensable and logical extension of two-dimensional media. I have used this media to find other ways of expressing my vision in landscape art. I have never studied traditional dark room techniques and a camera has been, for me, simply a tool that I have used in the past to augment my sketchbook and as a reference for evaluating the progress of a painting. As I was already heavily invested in oil painting, a notoriously messy medium, the clean and streamlined methods made possible by digital cameras and Adobe Photoshop piqued my interest. For me the appeal of photography is to be able to capture a visual experience and hold it. Each time I look at these photographs I remember clearly the moment and the way I felt, whereas the feeling and tone of a visual experience changes with time as memory distills some details and disperses others.

The three photographs I am writing about were all taken within a forty minute period as a fog was developing late on an overcast November afternoon. The area is in and around the

village of Czesky Krumlov in the northeast part of the Czech Republic. The village and the castle that overlooks it are a UNESCO World Heritage site. It has become a popular destination in the travel industry and is normally full of visitors. At this time of day, there were more people heading home and to hostels than there were setting out in my direction. This, along with the isolation of not being able to speak or understand the language, enhanced my visual sensitivity and response to images. The saint on the bridge, the small figure on the island, and the pollarded trees echo the characteristics of Romantic landscape imagery. The circumstances of this particular afternoon presented a rich opportunity to work with imagery that represents the same themes I try to paint.

In the photo *View from a Bridge* (Appendix, 4) there is a meandering river, a cottage type structure, and a small figure standing in a park-like setting on an island. As a painting, much of the detail would need to be edited to keep the composition from being too crowded, and to avoid becoming too close to a parody of a Romantic landscape. As a photograph, the complex detail, the deeply saturated colors, and the moody atmosphere succeed. They are believable. Instead of being distracted by the detail, the photograph remains visually engaging.

The palace and its gardens sit on a bluff above the village of Czesky Krumlov. Spanning a ravine between the palace and the gardens is a bridge upon which stands a life size statue of a saint. It is from this location I shot *Portrait of Transcendence* (Appendix, 5). The statue stands gazing upward and gesturing to the town below. The photograph captured the tension created in the contrast between his gesture and his gaze. The power of this image derives from the iconic image of the intercessor between God and mankind. This photograph differs from my other work because the ideas I use in my art are embodied here within a person, and the landscape is secondary. The statue of this saint, a symbol of human transcendence, stands in a place above

the horizon, his gesture connecting him to humankind, and his gaze to his God. This is one of few instances when I felt that a photograph communicated what I wanted to say more deeply and thoroughly than a painting.

In *Pollarded Trees* (Appendix, 6), I chose to indulge my personal aesthetic regarding what constitutes a beautiful landscape. Again, I have chosen to portray the basic landscape elements of the trees, the path, the soft atmosphere, and the mystery of the horizon. With this photo it is not necessary to go beyond saying, *I found beauty, in this place, at this moment*, which would distract from the still mystery of the image. I feel that sometimes it is enough, just by virtue of being beautiful, to be able to call something Art.

Conclusion

The common thread in all of my creative work is the way I use painting and digital photography to point out a way to find a meaning that raises our motivations above the necessities and the ambition *to have*. I am one of the fortunate who has found a way in my profession, as an art teacher, to make a living that enhances my opportunities to satisfy the ambition I have to create art. Now that I have completed the MIS-IAR Program, I am looking forward to returning to my studio, getting out my canvasses, paints, and photos, and getting back to chasing the images I see in my visions and capturing them in my art.

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Appendix

List of Images

- Figure 1. *Shenandoah Calvary*, oil on canvas, 18"x30", 2007.
- Figure 2. *Behold the Natural Gates*, oil on canvas, 12"x9", 2007.
- Figure 3. *Apparition*, oil on canvas, 12"x9", 2008.
- Figure 4. *View from a Bridge*, digital photo, 13"x19", 2008.
- Figure 5. *Portrait of Transcendence*, digital photo, 18"x13", 2008.
- Figure 6. *Pollarded Trees*, digital photo, 16"x13", 2008.



Figure 1. *Shenandoah Calvary*, oil on canvas, 18"x30", 2007.

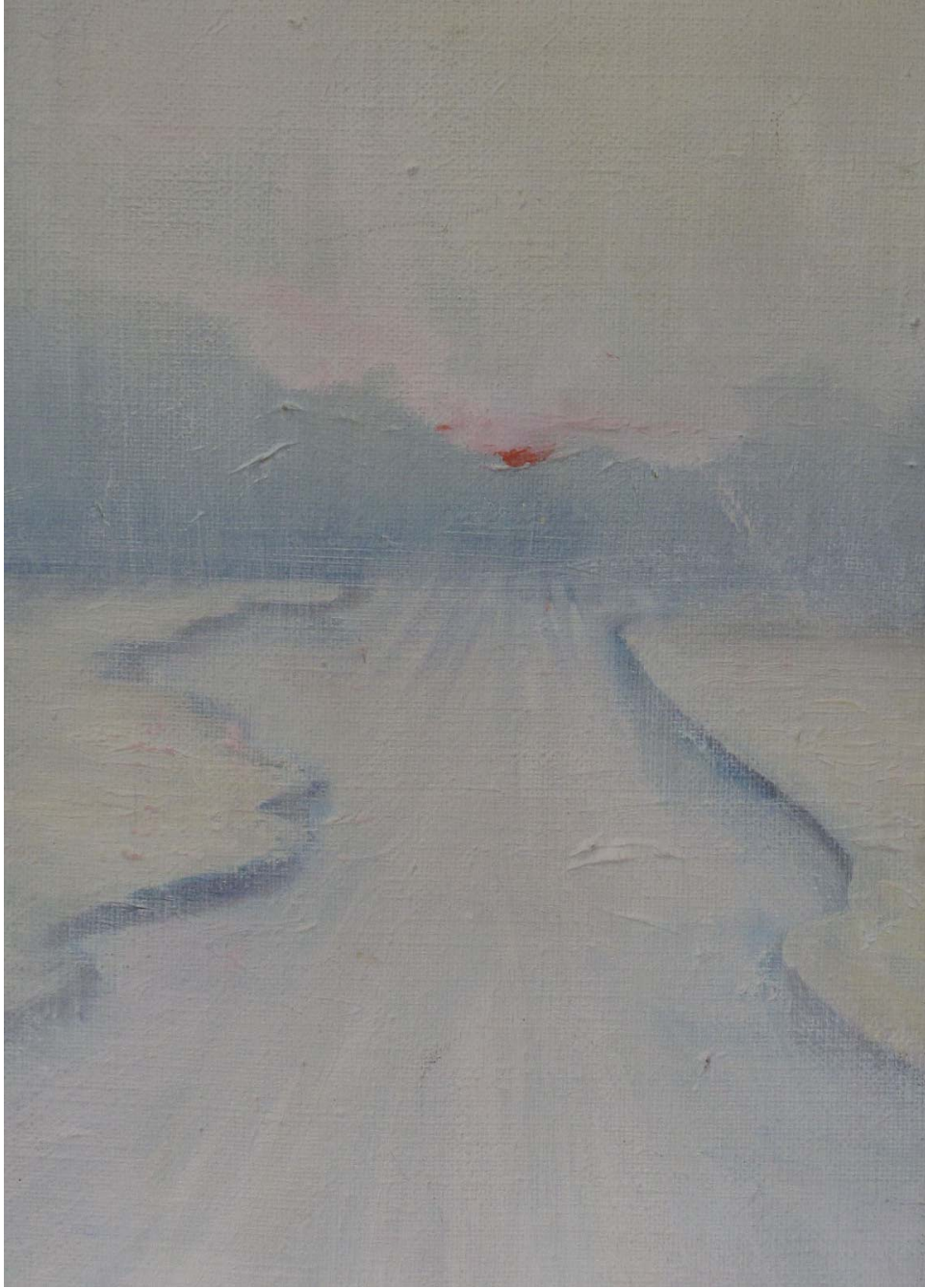


Figure 2. *Behold the Natural Gates*, oil on canvas, 12" x 9", 2007.

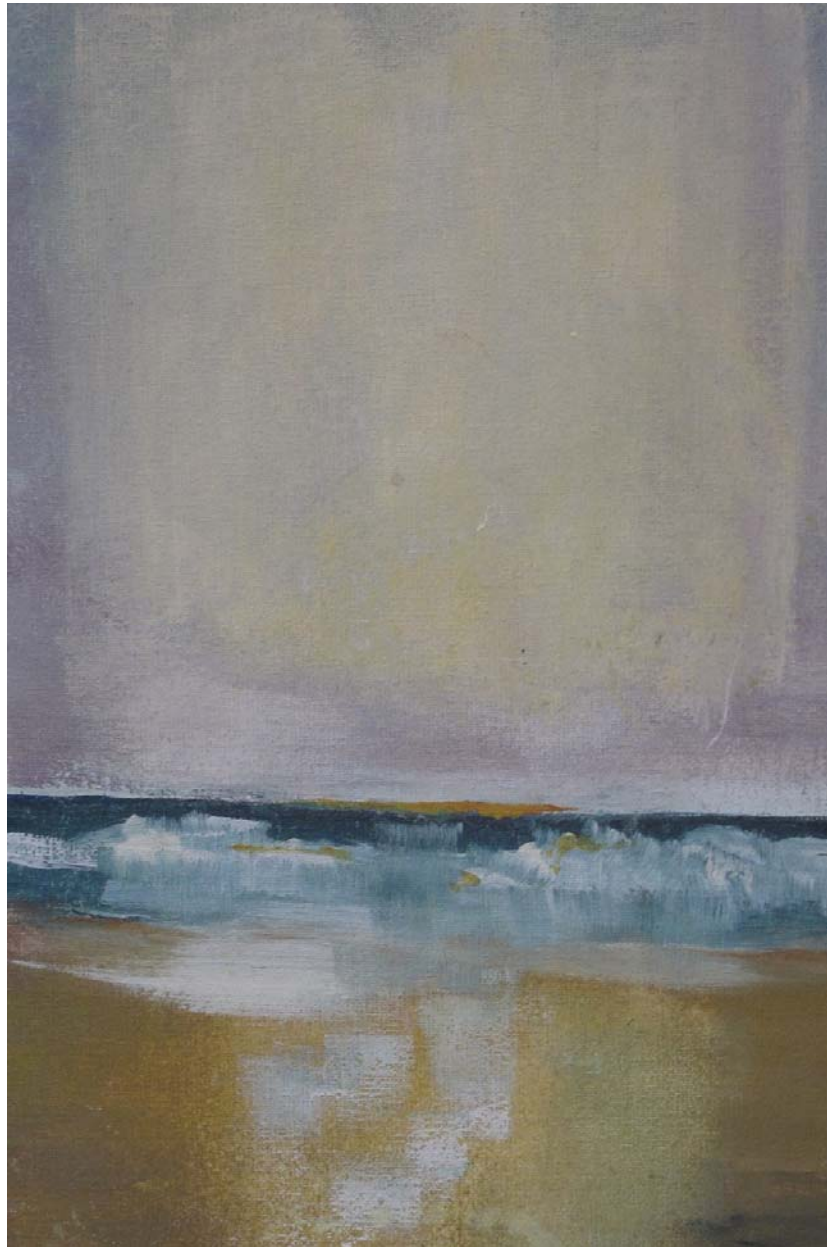


Figure 3. *Apparition*, oil on canvas, 12" x 9", 2008.



Figure 4. *View from a Bridge*, digital photo, 13"x19", 2008.



Figure 5. *Portrait of Transcendence*, digital photo, 18" x 13", 2008.



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Figure 6. *Pollarded Trees*, digital photo, 16" x 13", 2008.

Kimberly Hedden Compton

Education:

- 2011 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA.
- 1976 Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting, Washington University, St. Louis, MO.

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- 2000-2002 Graduate Studies in Education, University of Virginia Off-Campus Program, Falls Church, VA.
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