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The Raddled Vessel

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

The wearing effects of being overworked and in somewhat poor health are reflected in my paintings, ceramic work, and mixed media pieces. I use old and dilapidated materials such as window frames, instrument cases, and wood to symbolically address my physical and emotional states. I reuse items from the past that show a sense of fatigue, tattered edges, and deterioration. Like these objects I felt run down, old, and at times, useless. However, I am comforted by the idea that old objects can, with some care, regain new life. I have discovered I seek my own rejuvenation through my creativity.

As a means of releasing anger and frustration toward my fading health, I create assemblages of wilted flowers, encaustic hourglass forms, and mixed media teapots. I also create clay vessels that appear to be deteriorating and encapsulate objects in encaustic medium. Items that belonged to my relatives serve as a metaphor for my genetic illnesses. Searching for answers, living in the present, and maintaining hope are things I carry with me on my artistic journey to find a sense of self worth and to overcome disease.

The Raddled Vessel

Introduction

While in high school, I was encouraged to pursue elementary or special education to ensure that I would gain employment upon graduating college. Despite having taken art throughout my high school years, I chose the elementary education path. I remembered helping my mother (also an elementary teacher) put up bulletin boards, come up with projects for her class, and decorate according to the seasons. As a graduating senior in high school, I figured I would still be able to incorporate art into a regular education classroom as I had remembered from when I was in school. I was sadly mistaken. My first teaching job was in Virginia as a third grade teacher and the Standards of Learning (SOL) curriculum made it virtually impossible to get the children to think creatively. There seemed to only be enough time for them to select A, B, C, or D on tests. Later, as a fourth grade teacher, my classroom tools were six 3-ring binders filled with worksheets, eighty-five standardized tests, and zero time for creativity. I decided it was time for a career change.

I was becoming so numb with my job that I chose to complete my Art Endorsement coursework and transferred into the world of art education. It was during my first year as a middle school art teacher that I realized how in love I was with this new career path and that I only wanted to learn more. I began researching master's degree programs in art on the Internet and stumbled upon the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program offered by Virginia Commonwealth University. Soon, I applied and upon acceptance to the program, I began building on my knowledge base and was able to push myself with my own art making. I entered the MIS-IAR Program with the intentions of focusing on photography and ceramics. However, after several courses I decided upon painting and crafts (mixed media and

ceramics). As I worked on my degree, I became dissatisfied with my teaching position. Thirty-eight minute classes stifled me and I found it difficult to teach conceptually while also introducing technique. It was then that I decided to move to the high school level as a ceramics teacher.

Aesthetics

I create mixed media pieces that focus on bringing new life to old objects. I use old window frames, instrument cases, and photos in a process that enables me to archive family owned objects in my artwork. My family provides a big support system to me, which makes their objects an important and meaningful foundation for my work. This process is physical, textural, and structural. I combine these old objects to form containers, journal pages, sculpture, and articles of clothing that reference my life.

Constant struggles with my health are the conceptual base for my artwork. I have had bouts with infertility, thyroid disease, a blood clotting disorder, and depression. Dealing with these illnesses is the underlying content of my work. For example, to express my sadness with infertility I use a stylized disfigured womb. To address my hypothyroidism I use an hourglass to express how my medication had no healing power and I felt time was running out. A number of my health issues are genetic which is why I choose to use family owned objects to express my frustrations. For example, red cloth (from my mother's quilting scraps) lining the inside of a violin case represents my family bloodline, genetic clotting disorder, and fertility issues.

In my ceramic work, I emphasize infertility and battling thyroid disease by creating abstract vessels resembling a woman with a diseased exterior. People are often surprised to learn of my diseases because they think I appear very healthy. So, I also address the juxtaposition of

how I feel internally versus how I look externally by creating pieces that have different interiors and exteriors. To create different surfaces, I explore various glazing techniques, mason stains, image transfers, and organic forms which all heightened my passion for ceramics. I also use image transfers in my ceramics, which allow me to make use of my personal photographs.

In my encaustic painting, I laboriously add layers of wax on firm clay boards encasing my feelings and emotions, literally and symbolically. To represent my emotions, I use organic and geometric lines of varying lengths, color, and thickness. This exploration of abstract mark making reflects my fight between analytical and creative thinking and how I feel myself crossing over from one to the other. Using these approaches allows me to accurately portray myself from my own point of view.

Throughout my time in the MIS-IAR Program, I have been able to achieve rejuvenation not only with my health but also with my art making. I have been able to work through issues with the support of my family. All of my work experiences have benefited me as an artist and as an art instructor. I have been able to share many new techniques and approaches with my students, which has helped their work evolve.

Influences

In recent years, I have dealt with health issues that I referenced in much of my artwork. Early on, I used an appropriation process to seek and cull imagery from the Internet in order to find artists that were battling the same personal challenges. This process exposed me to several artists who were also using their artwork as a means to express the breakdown of the human body.

My mixed media work is self-referencing but it also reflects on place, time, and my upbringing in a Victorian era town where little has changed since the oil boom of the 1920s. After viewing an exhibit of Ruth Knowles Scarlott's (1922-2010) mixed media work, I became intrigued with her use of paper and collage used as a means to express her feelings. I was drawn to her use of earth tones, which imbued an elegant simplicity in her pieces. She also physically built up and manipulated the surface of her work to create texture, which in turn veiled underlying layers of family artifacts and text. In Scarlott's *Letter's From My Father* (2009), she used her father's military medals and artifacts as elements in the composition. Like Scarlott, I too utilized family objects in my work, which I sought to be interpreted on several levels. It was for this reason that I began adapting paper making techniques and incorporating text in my mixed media work. Through the use of these techniques, I was able to achieve multiple physical and conceptual layers.

Another significant artist for me was Felix Gonzalez (1910-1962). Having been known for his quiet, minimal installations and sculptures, Gonzalez also used found objects in his art. This was what initially attracted me to his work. As I learned more about him, I was intrigued that the individual materials of his work lacked interest and aesthetic power, but their specific placement suddenly charged them with intense emotion. Gonzalez invested his imagery with multiple avenues of interpretation, such as sad or soothing. Achieving this in my own artwork became more important to me than ever. I began incorporating stylized features in my ceramic work as well as veiling concepts in layers of encaustic wax. I addressed my expression for the human body and emotion without making it completely obvious or overly obscure to the viewer. I would rather have my work strike them as alternately sad or soothing much like Gonzalez'. In Felix Gonzalez' *Untitled (right billboard)* (1991-93), he enlarged objects to such a degree that

the images are grainy to the point of abstraction coalescing as an image only when viewed from some distance. I began obsessing over this idea, which in turn led to my experimentation with oil and encaustic wax. I rendered an enlarged X-ray image onto two clay boards while encasing that image in wax, which created a hazy, obscuring effect. I also created a ceramic vessel, which had potential to lack aesthetic power, and generated tension by twisting coils and compressing them onto one another. Literally and symbolically I enclosed the form trapping what was inside. By giving the piece a chrome-like finish and displaying it on a pedestal, it suddenly gained a strong sense of emotion and reflected multiple readings.

Abstract Expressionist Franz Jozef Kline (1910-1962) was considered an action painter because of his spontaneous and gestural style. He focused less on figures and imagery and more on abstract brush strokes he placed on the canvas. Despite his many drafts and sketches, he still made spontaneous work. In Kline's work, *High Street* (1950), he used only black and white on the canvas. He emphasized that the interpretation of his paintings were solely up to the viewer. Kline believed the importance of his work was found in the act of painting rather than the content or the history behind it. I found this approach to be interesting and it provided me with a sense of relief when tackling such personal subject matter. I loved the idea of expressing my emotion through highly-textured strokes of paint and allowing my viewers to make their own judgments. I found this experience of outpouring my emotion through paint to be liberating. It is because of Kline's influence that my most recent artwork took a monochromatic abstract turn.

Scarlott and Gonzalez' use of everyday objects was a commonality relating to my artwork. Like these artists, I was preserving family items and using found objects while expressing meaning and messages to my viewers. After coming across the work of Kline, I explored the two-dimensional surface. I experimented with texture and watched each stroke I

made on my canvas. I was very interested in exploring a new format to see if I could achieve a sculptural appearance on a flat surface, yet broaden my conceptual base. I sought to bring dynamics to my work much like that of Scarlott, Gonzalez, and Kline. I was no longer looking to make my conceptual base obvious but rather to make my artwork multifaceted.

Artworks and Processes

Initially, I created mixed media collages because the found objects I selected had personal meaning and reflected my supportive family. In the mixed media piece *Finding Harmony* (Appendix, 1), I sought to create a metaphorical journey of personal and professional harmony by way of referencing my brother's struggles to make it in the music industry. The foundation of this piece is a record player previously owned by my brother whom has been a huge support system for me. Atop the record player are family owned objects such as a violin case, family photo, and house key, all of which represent a sense of home. The photo is located inside the lower left corner of the violin case. I mounted it with a polymer medium on top of red fabric lining, symbolic of our family bloodline. The violin case houses comfort items including a house key, indicating that my siblings and I are always welcome home. The case and its components have been elevated on the turntable to signify their importance and to ensure that they are able to revolve when the record player is turned on. Next, a broken cymbal was altered to create an appropriated ancient stringed instrument called a kithara. Guitar strings were used as the strings for the kithara with a violin neck connecting the strings and the cymbal. I chose to incorporate a kithara as a symbol for the professional musicians in my family. A road map, license plate, and additional photos of my brother's time in Hollywood, California are also attached with polymer medium. Bundled sticks representing a family tree hold these additional

photos together. The photos and sticks were constructed in a circular configuration wrapping around the top of the piece. When plugged in, the case and kithara revolve similar to how my brother's life continues to revolve around music, and my life continues to revolve despite my numerous health conditions. The case remains open so that the music inside can be released, or so that shelter from overwhelming disorders can be sought.

Following my mixed media work, I began creating ceramic pieces as my health was declining. My work began taking a different turn. In the piece *Hollow* (Appendix, 2), I created stylized female figures while using a muted color palette. I sculpted the pieces from dark brown stoneware with exposed grog (lightly colored bits of fired clay) while the surface remained unglazed and rustic. The female figures were stippled in areas that my body was now failing, such as the area of the neck containing the thyroid gland and the brain containing depressive thoughts. I placed a small amount of reflective glaze in these stippled marks to attract the viewer to these problem areas. I also created deep, gaping, hollow cavities in the abdomens of these figures. The cavities remain dark and empty, embodying my own personal turmoil with my infertility.

In a second ceramic piece, titled *Raddled* (Appendix, 3), I created a highly stylized human torso with a textured exterior. By twisting and compressing hand-rolled clay coils, I was able to render tension much like I was experiencing in my own life. This textured exterior represents a diseased self but now I wanted to bring the disease from inside to the outside. I chose to close off the opening of the vessel trapping what is inside. I was experiencing this same kind of enclosed feeling when dealing with my arising depression. I brushed a chrome-like glaze on this piece to metaphorically reflect multiple meanings, such as flashy or tense and harsh. The physical release of tension I had when creating this piece was therapeutic

At the same time I was producing ceramics, I was also investigating the possibilities with encaustic. The majority of my early work using this media emphasized the use of organic and geometric lines in varying length, color, and thickness. In the first piece, *Running Out of Time* (Appendix, 4), I wanted there to be a level of obscurity while still being recognizable to the viewer. It is for this reason that I used a recognizable object, an hourglass shape, to reference place and time. In blue, I created tapering lines that lead from the outer edges of the clayboard to the hourglass form in a star-like pattern. I used oil paint to fill in these lines, applied a layer of encaustic, and then scraped the surface smooth again. I created these markings using a cool neutral color palette. It was through this process of line making that I referenced my urgency in wanting answers regarding impending health issues. This dark point in my life seemed to stand still in time, much like the hourglass in my painting.

In my next encaustic piece, I continued this path of mark making with lines, with the intention of veiling meaning even further. I began experimenting with multiple layers of wax as well as incorporating objects into the wax surface. As a result, my next piece titled *Befallen* (Appendix, 5) came about. This piece is a reflection of my own realization that as I dealt with brain fog, or feelings of mental confusion or lack of mental clarity, associated with hypothyroidism. I was seeing my thoughts convert from less analytical to more creative. I started this piece by covering a clay board with encaustic and scraping it smooth. I then made multiple, organic pastel line transfers and Xerox transfers onto the wax by burnishing them with a spoon. These colored transfers were only made on the left side of the clay board. The right side encases multiple black geometric lines. Some of these lines were transfers, some were drawn directly onto the encaustic using pastel, and some were drawn on tracing paper that was

physically embedded into the wax. These thick layers were intended to create a sense of visual intrigue.

Veiling layers and the use of black lines were incorporated in my final piece titled *Bicornate* (Appendix, 6). This piece focuses again on infertility through an abstraction of a bicornate, or heart-shaped, uterine malformation where two “horns” form at the upper part of the uterus. My goal was to create an image with high contrast using only black and white oil paint and encaustic. My influences drove me to depict an enlarged black and white bicornate uterus that appeared hazy due to layers of encaustic. This X-ray-like depiction becomes obscure up close because it is split between two clay boards and is covered in thick media. From afar, the image becomes more readable while still remaining ambiguous.

By leaving so much of the interpretation to the viewer, this depiction of such personal subject matter became simpler. I began this piece by drawing a high-contrast image from a grid onto clay board. Next, I used oil paint to fill in the image adding highlights that barely stood out to the viewer. Once the oil paint was dry, I covered the image in a thin layer of encaustic to create the haze seen on its surface. I then scraped down some of the media to highlight certain areas, and to thin out areas of excess.

From collage and assemblage to ceramics and encaustic painting, I have been happy with the evolution of my work. I feel that I have grown as an artist not only through technique but also through media that was new to me. I can detect growth in my artwork on a readable, technical, and conceptual level. I have tackled the fear of my work being overly obscure which in turn became liberating to me.

Conclusion

Strong conceptual work, an increased knowledge of media, and boosted excitement for creating art are all things that I attribute to the MIS-IAR Program. I have gained self-confidence in my own art making while also being inspired by my peers, other teachers, and professional artists, some of which my professors have exposed me to. My students have also benefited from my enrollment in this program in a number of ways. They are thinking conceptually about their work as well as being exposed to new media such as encaustic. I find myself exuding confidence as I move forward in my own art making. I feel very fortunate to have been given this gift, being an artist, as a means of expressing who I am in sickness and in health.

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Appendix

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- Figure 2. *Hollow*, stoneware, approximately 13" X 4" X 2" each, 2011.
- Figure 3. *Raddled*, stoneware, 21" X 16" X 8", 2011.
- Figure 4. *Running out of Time*, encaustic, 18" X 24" X 1", 2011.
- Figure 5. *Befallen*, encaustic, 18" X 24" X 1", 2012.
- Figure 6. *Bicornate*, oil and encaustic on two panels, 18" X 36" X 1 ½", 2012.



Figure 1. *Finding Harmony*, mixed media, 42" X 18" X 20", 2008.



Figure 2. *Hollow*, stoneware, approximately 13" X 4" X 2" each, 2011.



Figure 3. *Raddled*, stoneware, 21" X 16" X 8", 2011.



Figure 4. *Running out of Time*, encaustic, 18" X 24" X 1", 2011.

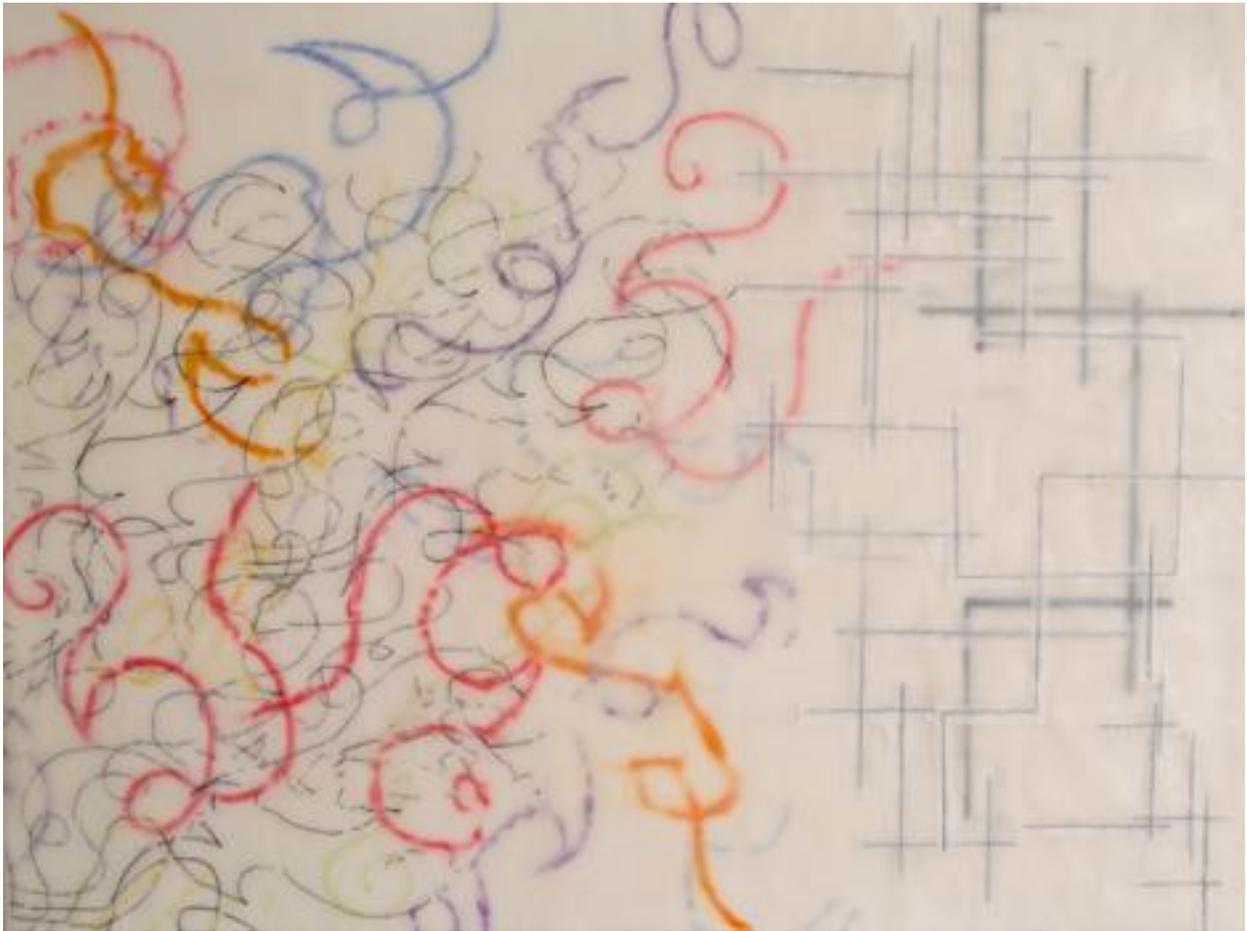


Figure 5. *Befallen*, encaustic, 18" X 24" X 1", 2012.



Figure 6. *Bicornate*, oil and encaustic on two panels, 18" X 36" X 1 ½", 2012.

Stacey L. Grieff

EDUCATION

- 2013 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia. Emphasis in Mixed Media and Painting.
- 2001 Bachelor of Science in Education, Cum Laude, Clarion University of Pennsylvania, Clarion, Pennsylvania.

CERTIFICATION

- 2005 Endorsement in Art Education K-12, Tidewater Community College, Portsmouth, Virginia.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- 2011-Present Ceramics Teacher, Great Bridge High School, Chesapeake Public Schools, Chesapeake, Virginia.
- 2006-2011 Art Teacher, Greenbrier Middle School, Chesapeake Public Schools, Chesapeake, Virginia.
- 2006-2008 Summer Program Art Teacher, Deep Creek, Grassfield, and Chitham Elementary, Chesapeake, Virginia.
- 2003-2006 Fourth Grade Teacher, Sparrow Road Intermediate School, Chesapeake Public Schools, Chesapeake, Virginia.
- 2001-2003 Third Grade Teacher, Seaford Elementary School, York County Public Schools, Yorktown, Virginia.

HONORS

- 2009-2011 Who's Who Among American College Students Nomination
- 2008 Teacher of the Year, Greenbrier Middle School, Chesapeake, Virginia.

ORGANIZATIONS

- 2001-Present National Education Association
- 2001-Present Virginia Education Association
- 2011-Present Virginia Art Education Association

EXHIBITIONS

2013 *The Raddled Vessel*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia at Oak Grove Church, Chesapeake, Virginia.

EXHIBITIONS CONTINUED

2009-Present *Faculty Show*, Annual, Old Dominion University Tri-Art Center, Portsmouth, Virginia.

2009 *Once is Not Enough*, Virginia Beach SPCA, Virginia Beach, Virginia.

2005 *Nine Volt Magazine*, Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia.

2004 *MTV Dew Circuit Breakout*, Times Square Jumbo-tron Screen New York, New York and www.mtv.com, (Accessed On December 4th, 2004), New York, New York.

2003 *Student Show*, Tidewater Community College Visual Arts Center, Portsmouth, Virginia.