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## Domestic in Nature

Emily Shepardson  
*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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## **Domestic in Nature**

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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Bachelor of Fine Art, Corcoran College of Art and Design, Washington, DC, 1985

Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia  
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## **Artist Statement**

I am a painter and a printmaker. My imagery consists of houses, barns, birds, trees, hands, and gloves. On the surface these items represent home, nature, and female identity. On another level they symbolize an inner world of dreams, wishes, and losses.

My paintings contain aspects of collage, they combine paint, paper, and low relief. I paint layers of transparent and opaque images and colors in order to achieve a dreamy and ethereal effect. In printmaking, I combine my imagery in layers by printing small plates and stencils next to and on top of one another until a dense, multifaceted image is achieved.

## **Domestic in Nature**

### **Introduction**

I have spoken to many artists about how they came to art and the common thread is that almost always they had access to lots of paper as a child. My mother had worked for a newspaper early in her career, and both of my parents worked in public relations later, so trips to the local newspaper were frequent. I remember tagging along with my dad on one such trip and seeing him lean into the giant rolling dumpster and pulling out a thick wad of fresh paper. The pressmen would cut down the end rolls of the newsprint for general use. So, in our house there was always a stack of paper on the messy counter next to the manual typewriter. Drawing was a constant pastime in our house. My brothers drew superheroes, monsters, cars, and bugs; while I perfected princesses, houses, and animals.

Our house was packed with art and antiques. There was never one perfect painting on a wall when there could be ten. Most items came from the Salvation Army and the Goodwill, some art came from art fairs and from artist friends. It was hard not to think creatively in such an environment. My parents encouraged my choice of art as a career, but I was always told I would never make a living from it.

Undaunted, I went off to art school after high school. Upon graduation, I didn't feel that the gallery scene was what I wanted to do, so I started a jewelry business with a friend. I liked the idea of making things, getting immediate feedback, and selling it all. After having my second child, I lost interest in spending my weekends selling jewelry away from my family. Eventually, I went back to school to become certified as an art

teacher. I worked as a substitute teacher, mostly in elementary schools before settling down to a full-time job teaching art to 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> graders in middle school.

While starting a new career kept me busy, I had that vague, irritated feeling I get when I am not making art. So, I started painting again. After years of working small with jewelry, my eyes needed a break and I longed to make things for myself instead of others. When I discovered Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program, I found a community of other artists with whom to work and exchange ideas. The MIS-IAR Program also forced me to make time for art, which can be hard with a full-time job and a family. The program has given me confidence in my work as an artist and a teacher and has allowed me to explore painting and printmaking in depth.

## **Aesthetics**

The imagery that I incorporate in my work, such as houses, barns, birds, trees, hands, and gloves are domestic in nature. Each item could just as easily have been embroidered into a quilt or painted onto china 150 years ago. And yet, each of these items has strong symbolic power that is relevant today. On the surface they stand for home, nature, and female identity. On another level, to me, they symbolize an inner world of dreams, wishes, and losses. During the course of my work in the MIS-IAR Program, I have been a caregiver to both of my parents in sickness and in death, and I am also the executor of their estates. So, the image of the house at times is a place of comfort, a place of isolation, and also an empty shell.

The more I work with these symbols, arranging or placing them in different

combinations, layering them, and working with them in different media, the more I manage to find new opportunities for meaning in them. There is always a background to anchor the image, a middle ground where most of the painting dwells, and often something in the top layer that is trying to leave the picture plane. Sometimes, but not always, that top layer involves an avian image, because wings are an efficient way of escape.

My color palette tends to be blues and greens, and generally chalky colors that I find comforting. Eyes tend to rest on what is soothing, and as the eye remains it will see more detail, or perhaps something that is not obvious in a quick glance. I want the viewer to be able to read his or her own story into my work so I use simplified familiar shapes that can be open to different interpretations.

## **Influences**

I am interested in twentieth-century art. Color and emotional weight are features in recent movements that affect my own approach and choices. In addition to fine art, music plays an important role in my creative process.

An early favorite painter of mine is Milton Avery (1886–1965). I admire his painting style, palette, and subject matter. He applied thick paint to his images of reduced, simple, flat forms. For instance, his painting *The Speedboat's Wake* (1959) is a stylized rendering of blue water, which is traversed by an arcing white line. The line is so plain and yet perfectly conveys the white ripple a racing speedboat leaves behind. This type of stylized and minimized shape is also what I want in my work. His signature palette of chalky, pale colors sets the quiet mood of the scene, inviting peace and

reflection in the same way that I try to use color. So, I have developed a palette of soft tints and tones that I turn to over and over again. Also, his frequent use of the shore and sea remind me of my childhood growing up on Long Island Sound, and waves lapping against my back yard. In addition to the seashore, birds were also a popular motif. He often painted gulls with jumbles of wings to show motion. This approach to suggesting motion is another aspect of his work that has influenced my own.

Another important artist is Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945). Kiefer's massive paintings smolder with weight and sadness. Whereas Avery represents the sweet and simple time of my childhood, Kiefer bears the weight of history I associate with adulthood. When I first encountered his work, I noticed the extreme textural surface literally dripped off the canvas. From his inspiration, I also used texture as a contrasting element to softer washes and flat shapes in both my paintings and prints. Kiefer's subject matter often deals with the weighty issues of German identity and the Holocaust. Whereas, my darker subject matter centers on illness and death, I am inspired by his use of trees, fields, and wings to represent dark, moody feelings.

Perhaps the largest influence on me is the paintings from my parents' home. These are items I lived with for years and some of them are now in my own home. Their house was packed with nineteenth and twentieth-century art; American and Japanese prints, watercolors, oil paintings, and drawings. Most of these paintings and prints were purchased from second hand stores; some were purchased from artists. *Saint Francis and the Woman Possessed by the Devil* (1961), by a family friend named Bernard "Bud" Riley (1911-1984), is my favorite. Riley himself was enamored with the drawings of the Italian Renaissance, and his approach was to draw or paint thin-lined



sepia-toned sketches, layering them on top and next to each other. He believed that a person or scene could not be portrayed by a single static image but was best captured from multiple viewpoints. In the case of this painting, it is used to show many scenes from the life of Saint Francis. My favorite part is a young St. Francis driving the devil from a woman in a red dress. As she thrashes from side-to-side, her torment is clear. Her dress is a bold contrast to the soft blues, greens, and yellows of the rest of the painting. The illusion of fluttering wings of a dove, superimposed over some of the characters in the picture, echo the sense of movement of birds that I am always trying to capture.

My final influence would be the music that I listen to when I work. Sometimes, it is a fragment of a lyric that captures my imagination. My sketchbook is full of thumbnail sketches trying to illustrate some poetic phrase. These can become launching points for my paintings and prints. Sometimes, it is the music itself that inspires me. For years, I have been trying to make a painting that evokes the same feeling I get when listening to the shimmering layers of Wilco's *I am Trying to Break Your Heart* (2001). I am not trying to illustrate the song but to replicate the mood. The song starts slowly with some keyboards, drums, and cymbals. There is a strange rhythmic background noise that could be a reengineered percussion piece or some found sound, along with a ringing alarm. The bass joins in and the instruments have a hesitating rhythm, the vocals eventually build the melody along with simple piano notes. The parts coalesce into a song and then, nearing the end, fall apart again ending in a pleading vocal. The structure of the song and the unusual percussion evoke a dark and mysterious mood. However, it is not only this type of mood that I am trying to capture but also the art of

making something that is a combination of shifting parts and a whole.

## **Painting**

My definition of painting includes elements of collage, such as bits of paper and scraps of other paintings. I layer these elements the same way I would layer paint. When I begin a painting, I have a general idea and mood in mind but I leave room for spontaneous decisions. I start with a particular idea or image and intuitively build from there.

In the painting *Thoughts of Flight* (Appendix, 1), I began with an image of a cloud. To realize the cloud, I used one of my sheets of homemade paper. I made these by ripping up old printed and plain papers and layering them with white tissue paper and glue until I had a large collaged sheet of papers. I made these in several different colors to use in my work. Then, I tore the white collaged paper up into cloud-like shapes and attached them to a sheet of rice paper that I painted blue. Next, I constructed a small house shape out of foam core and covered it in rice paper and painted it in another shade of blue. I added a 1" foam core tab to each side of the house. The tabs were cut at an angle so when attached to the support, the house would tilt out from the surface. Then, I cut up a sheet of blue, layered papers into rectangular forms and glued them to my house shape. I left space in between the cut out geometric shapes to reference mortar between bricks.

The angle of the house tilting away from the sky, suggested to me that a change or transition was needed. So, I modeled a small canary from paper clay to perch on the edge of the roof. Paper clay is a product that is lightweight and can be painted,

sanded, or carved when dry. The bird, its head twisted to one side, is painted in copper and blues. At the time I was working on this, my mother was very sick. The bird in this composition symbolizes her spirit ready to leave, holding on just long enough before pushing off the roof and heading to the clouds. Finally, I wrapped another rectangular piece of foam core in rice paper and painted a wing-like shape on a blue ground. This wing shape is painted in cold, silver tones and is positioned on the top part of the composition. The knife-like feathers are a reminder that death is painful for the people left behind.

My approach in *Fly Away Home* (Appendix, 2) was a little different. This time, I started with three panels and covered them in rice paper, one 24" x 12" rectangle, and two smaller ones measuring 8" x 9" each. On the largest, I painted a pattern of light green leaves on a dark green ground. On one of the smaller panels, which is predominantly blue, I painted birds flying upwards and fluttering their wings. On the last panel, I added a foam core house construction, wrapped it in rice paper, and painted it green. To give the painting some dimension, I added a border of foam core under the house so that it rises off the surface of the panel by  $\frac{3}{4}$ ". I added a window in the house by cutting two overlapping rectangles, which appears to be an inverted cross. Although unintentional, the cross shape does add a spiritual aspect to the piece. For textural interest, I filled the window shape with burgundy colored glass beads, and painted the area around the house a similar burgundy color.

Next, I assembled all three panels together. I used the largest panel, in portrait orientation, as the ground for the entire piece. I centered the panel depicting the house on the bottom half of the larger panel. Centered on the upper half is the panel

depicting the birds in flight. I then added a paper clay bird in flight on the bottom panel above the house. I was working on this painting when my mother's cancer returned. The falling green leaves symbolized the beginning of the end and the painted birds point to the future. The heavy bird anchored to its house represents me being weighed down by duty and responsibility.

In *Oak Tree/Spring* (Appendix, 3 and 3a) I altered my process from making constructions to working directly on the paper. I was inspired by the view of a tree trunk and branch from a pair of upstairs windows in my house. I started by sketching the branch in winter, dividing the image in the middle the same way the two windows divided the view. In the course of painting, it was suddenly springtime and the tree was dripping with pollen. I am very allergic to tree pollen and find the air thick and oppressive so I wanted to convey this in my painting. I began by painting in the greenish-yellow pollen, and I splattered the window area with green, gold, and white paint. The day I finished this painting was the day after my father died. I was feeling a little sad, a little reckless, and a little liberated. So, to express my emotions I scribbled black lines under the window view of the trees, marring my previously pristine paper. Then, I dragged a brush full of gesso through the scribbles to mute the marks. As a last step, I added a crow in the upper right-hand portion of the tree image. The addition of the bird seemed fitting because a murder of crows lived in the trees around my father's house, and they added an ominous soundtrack to my visits with him.

All three of these paintings have strong personal meaning to me, although to the viewer they may not appear to be more than pictures with birds in them. By not making my intentions obvious, the audience can make their own personal connections to the

work.

## Prints

During my coursework, I enjoyed the opportunity to re-explore printmaking. I previously made linoleum, wood block, intaglio, and lithographic prints but wanted to learn more. I had always thought of printing and plate making as a very carefully planned out process. However, the print *Dark Road Home* (Appendix, 4) provided a breakthrough moment for me. I had some older lithographic images that I was unhappy with. I liked parts of them but did not care for the whole image, so I decided to tear them down into smaller pieces. At the same time, I had made some small collagraph plates of various house shapes. Then, I printed one house shape on top of one of my lithograph scraps. The peak of the roof in my collagraph plate lined up with a triangular shape in the lithograph almost perfectly. The blue sky in the collagraph echoed the surrounding blue mass in the larger lithographic image. Best of all, a black shape that reads as a road in the lithograph, leads to the door of the house. This piece was important in my growth because I realized that I could plan carefully, but still have room for spontaneous decisions and surprising outcomes.

This set in motion a productive period of printing for me. For my print, *Green Raven* (Appendix, 5), I placed a sheet of clear Plexiglas over a previously prepared etching plate. I used the etching as a guide and painted in a raven in flight, a rectangular blue sky, and a rectangular brown landscape with inks. I took this Plexiglas plate and printed this monoprint onto a larger scrap of an old lithograph that was full of linear marks. Then, I inked up the original etching plate of the bird and carefully

registered and printed it on top of my monoprint. Printing on top of another print allowed me to give more detail to the centralized raven. The raven appears to be flying into the chaotic black lines that come in from the edges of the left side of the lithograph. The lines work with the wings to suggest air currents and give the picture a sense of movement and energy.

My next print came about because of my discovery of acetate stencils. This technique added to my experimentation and an even more spontaneous approach. The image in *Shadow Touch* (Appendix, 6) came from my sketchbook. It was a doodle of a person's hand on another's back. In my sketch, the hand appeared to be a negative shape. When making this print, I cut a hand image out of acetate with a craft knife, saving the positive and negative pieces. I applied violet and brown ink to a large Plexiglas plate. On this, I placed my positive and negative stencils and ran it through the press. Once a stencil has gone through the press, there is still ink on the reverse side. So, I flipped the acetate stencils over, moving them to another area of the plate and ran them through the press again. The ink from the underside of the stencil left a porous quality resulting in a unique visual texture.

Other unexpected results came about when I applied the ink directly to the circle and spiral stencils that I cut from acetate. Applying the ink to the stencil instead of the plate resulted in a smoother printed surface. Every time I ran a plate through the press, I would print the *ghost* (the remaining ink) on another sheet of paper, or I would move or flip over stencils. I used both the positive and the negative stencils, to build up the imagery and textures on multiple editions. This process allowed me to work quickly and achieve a wide range of results.

The multiplicity of printmaking offered a lot of room to take chances because there is more than one copy of an image. It was easy to take a risk with an image when it was possible to print it again. I made individual plates of each of my core images, in many variations. This allowed me the flexibility to combine and layer them by printing the plates together and in different combinations.

### **Combined Focus Areas**

The color palette and imagery of houses, birds, and hands from my paintings carried over to my prints. Both the paintings and the prints were made from smaller sets of imagery to make complete compositions. I combined multiple surfaces and textures in my painting, which then informed the way I layered color, texture, and line in my prints. After realizing the similarities in my approaches, I decided to combine my painting and printmaking.

One of the first prints that I also painted into began as a collagraph of leaves in a stream, entitled *Watched it Float Away* (Appendix, 7). This title derives from a line from the song *Via Chicago* by Wilco. The line reads: *I printed my name on the back of a leaf and watched it float away.* (Tweedy, 1999) I printed the collagraph on a larger sheet of paper. Then, I painted in some shadows and definition to the leaves and the rocks that line the bank of the stream. One of these stones was cut off at the edge of the original collagraph plate, so I drew in the rest of it on the larger sheet of paper. Once I had pushed the image out of the square picture plane, it seemed logical to extend more of the picture outside of the conventional geometric shape. I used thin, acrylic paint to paint the leaves and water extending right up to the front edge and bottom corners

of the paper.

I had another print that I had overworked with multiple layers of media. I began by gluing it, a little off center and to the right, to a larger piece of watercolor paper. This image, *Heartland* (Appendix, 8), started with the same etching plate I had used in *Green Raven*. This time, I printed the raven twice and added two other birds using smaller collagraphic plates. Using acrylic paint, I painted out the original landscape and replaced it with tones of blue and turquoise. I also painted out one of the smaller birds. On the paper below the print, I used one of my acetate stencils to add a picket fence, then, I painted in more detail. This was an important step in my process to merge my print and paint techniques. The acetate stencil was made for printmaking but worked equally well as a tool for painting. A splash of orange along the edge of the original print emphasizes the edge. Even though the ground color flows smoothly from print to painting, the orange flare of color doesn't let the viewer forget that these images are at the same time separate pieces and are shifting parts of a whole.

In another example, *Flyover* (Appendix, 9), I began by gluing a map of the United States sideways onto my paper. I painted out and emphasized various sections of the map. Next, I attached a collagraph of a city skyline made from glove shapes to the surface. This collagraph was printed on top of another old lithograph, which had many black lines in it. In order to incorporate these lines into the overall picture, I drew a close-up view of a pigeon in the foreground under the collagraph. I sketched in the pigeon in multiple views. This approach was influenced by the art of Bud Riley and his tendency to draw multiple views in one image. I completed the picture by adding two small squares of paper to the upper left and lower right areas of the painting. These



added squares echo the windows in the buildings.

The original idea of the city made from glove shapes evolved from a series of drawings I had made. These were based on an artifact I had seen of a Victorian glove with a tourist map of London printed on it. I have always liked using hands in my art, and gloves add another layer of concealment as well as sexiness. Then, I began to experiment with the glove shape itself. One glove standing on its end was not that far from looking like the Chrysler building, once a few windows were added to it. And so, this led to an entire city of glove shapes. The map collaged onto the paper underneath works as a textural element to the image as a whole. The map anchors the picture and gives it a sense of place.

Combining my two focus areas was a natural evolution for me. Both painting and printmaking allowed me to build my individual pieces using a variety of approaches and techniques. This method also gave me the option of editing and refining images as I constructed them. This flexibility appealed to me and worked with my desire to both plan and leave room for spontaneity.

## **Conclusion**

The MIS-IAR Program has helped me by giving me time to focus on my own work. Over the course of the Program, I have slowly built up a vocabulary of images that have personal meaning to me. Yet, through interaction with my peers and through critiques in my classes, I have found that others also find connections to my work. In addition, positive feedback from my instructors has given me the confidence to continue developing my work and adding to my visual vocabulary.

Evening classes in the MIS-IAR Program have been a welcome respite from days that can be overwhelming. Sitting down to work on a painting or print brings me back to why I wanted to be an art educator in the first place. There is also nothing like the confidence earned from working out problems on my own and then being able to carry that over to helping my students. I even have them make their own sketchbooks to draw and paint in. Lastly, I introduce every grade level of students to printmaking because of my passion for it.

I am grateful that I chose Virginia Commonwealth University when I decided to pursue a master's degree. I don't think any other program would have given me the opportunity to develop my creativity in the way that MIS-IAR Program has. I have every intention of continuing to make art and to teach for as long as I can.

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Wilco, *I Am Trying To Break Your Heart* by Jeff Tweedy. "Yankee Hotel Foxtrot", Nonesuch Records, 2002.

Wilco, *Via Chicago* by Jeff Tweedy. "Summerteeth", Reprise Records, 1999.

## Appendix

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Figure 1. *Thoughts of Flight*, acrylic paint, paper clay, wire, found paper, and ink on rice paper over foam core board, 17"x14"x 2", 2009.





Figure 2. *Fly Away Home*, acrylic paint, paper clay, and glass beads on rice paper over foam core board, 25"x12"x1", 2009.



Figure 3. *Oak Tree/Spring*, acrylic, colored pencil, and conte crayon on paper, 26"x30", 2012.





Figure 3a. *Oak Tree/Spring*, acrylic, colored pencil, and conte crayon on paper, 26"x30", 2012.





Figure 4. *Dark Road Home*, monotype on paper, 8"x12", 2011.



Figure 5. *Green Raven*, monotype on paper, 11"x15", 2011.





Figure 6. *Shadow Touch*, monoprint on paper, 16"x13", 2011.





Figure 7. *Watched it Float Away*, collagraph print, acrylic paint, and colored pencil on paper, 11.5"x12.5", 2012.



Figure 8. *Heartland*, monotype and acrylic paint on paper, 14"x19", 2012.



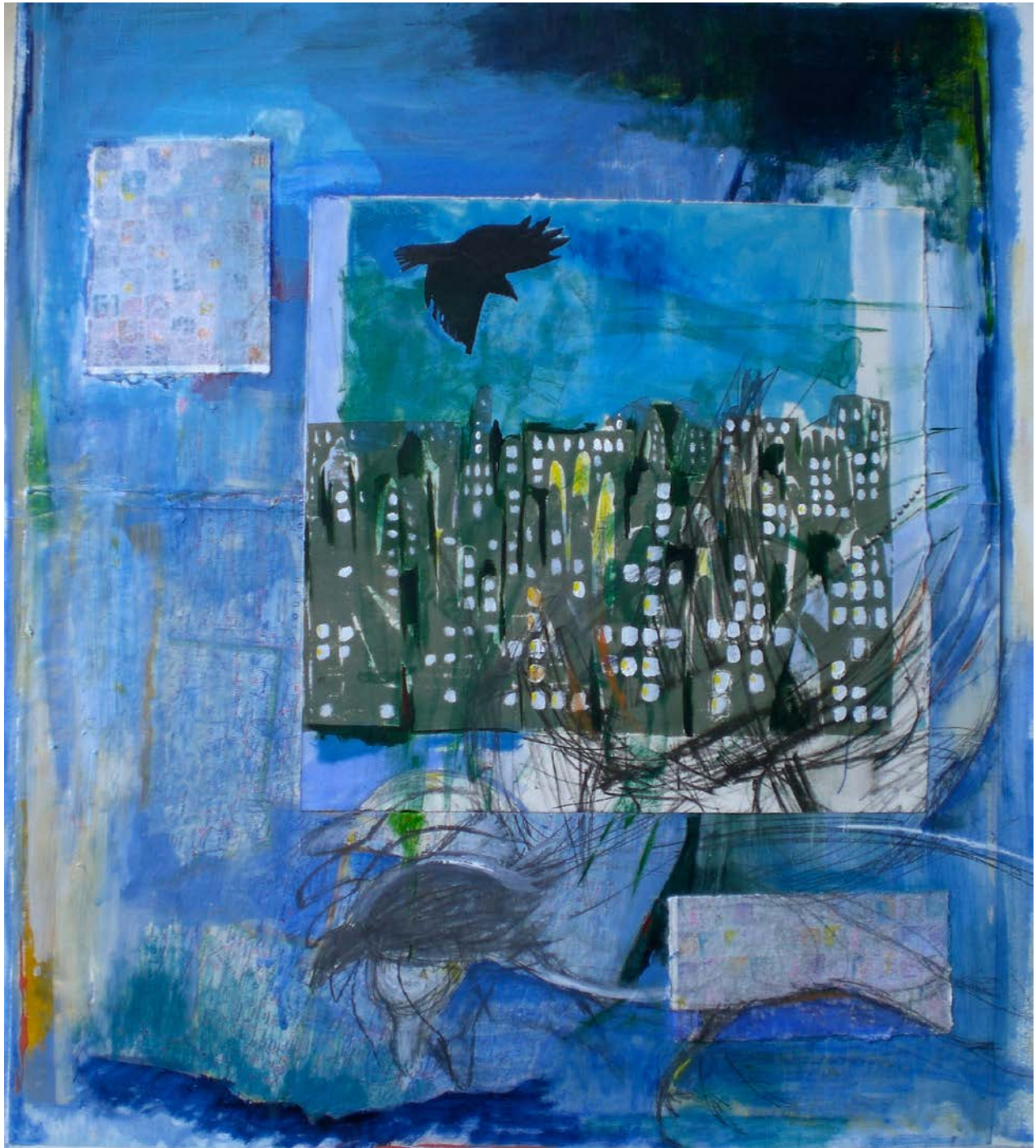


Figure 9. *Flyover*, collagraph, acrylic paint, colored pencil, map, and rice paper on paper, 23"x20", 2012.

## **Emily R. Shepardson**

### **EDUCATION:**

- 2013                      Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, Emphasis in Painting and Printmaking.
- 1985                      Bachelor of Fine Art, Corcoran College of Art+ Design, Washington, DC, Emphasis in Painting and Printmaking.

### **CERTIFICATION:**

- 2007                      Teaching Certification in K-12 Art, University of Virginia, School of Continuing and Professional Studies, Falls Church, VA.

### **TEACHING EXPERIENCE:**

- 2008 – present           Visual Arts Instructor, Thomas Jefferson Middle School, Arlington County, Arlington, VA.
- 2008                      Art Instructor for Children's Programs, Corcoran School of Art + Design, Washington, DC.
- 2005 – 2008              Substitute Teacher, Arlington Public Schools, Arlington, VA.
- 2005 – 2008              Art Instructor, Arlington Arts Center, Arlington, VA.

### **OTHER SIGNIFICANT WORK EXPERIENCE:**

- 1987 – 2000              Jewelry Designer, *Two Chicks Jewelry* and *Emily Shepardson Designs*, Arlington, VA.

### **PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:**

- 2009 - present           National Art Education Association, Reston, VA.
- 2009 - present           Virginia Art Education Association, Reston, VA.

**SOLO EXHIBITIONS:**

- 2013                    *Fly Like Winged Birds*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA at the Education Center, Arlington, VA.
- 2010                    *A Full House, A Pair of Gloves and Three Birds*, Verve Gallery, Petersburg, VA.

**GROUP EXHIBITIONS:**

- 2012                    *Artomatic 2012 in Crystal City*, Arlington, VA.
- 2012 - 2013           *Sketchbook Project*, Art House Co-op, Brooklyn, NY.
- 2009 - 2012           *Faculty Show, (Annual)* Arlington Public Schools, Education Center, Arlington, VA.