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An Intuitive Approach

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

I explore the inherent features of painting, glass, and ceramics. I focus on the materials and work in a spontaneous, exploratory manner. This process of discovery fuels my creativity in working with each media as I develop an awareness of their possibilities and limitations. The better I know my materials, the easier it becomes to be expressive with them.

In my paintings, I am interested in exploring my own personal response to paint and the weight of color on canvas. In these works, I often depict stylized architecture in a landscape. My glasswork focuses on color as inspired by my paintings, and in addition is an investigation of textures and patterns. I often create modular tiles, which I arrange to form larger compositions. Glass allows me to use brilliant, transparent colors no other material offers. In clay, I shift attention from color to basic forms. I combine and contrast textural elements as I investigate the clay and its features. Each of these media offers me an opportunity to intuitively express my creative impulses while allowing for a variety of outcomes.

An Intuitive Approach

Introduction

As a young girl I needed to make things. At the most primal level, I experimented using various types of dirt for making mud pies and dried them in the sun. During my youth, I would find scraps of paper, tape, ribbons, or anything that was lying around and make dolls, doll clothes, toy animals, play money, and wallets. As I grew, I spent countless hours creating paintings, drawings, and sculptures with various media. My parents recognized my need to create and provided never-ending resources, such as crayons, watercolors, and large rolls of paper or fabric. My mother taught me to sew and my father taught me how to use his power tools. Having the support of my parents enabled me to build a level of self-confidence with my own creative intuition.

I enrolled in Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) after high school, and was admitted into the inaugural Art Foundations class in the School of the Arts. Later, I started my course work as a painting and printmaking major, but soon decided that I wanted to teach art and changed my major to art education. At that time, I took my first ceramics class, which had a profound impact on my life as an artist. So, again, I changed my major, this time to craft studies, and I spent all my extra time in the clay studio. Later, I re-enrolled in art education in order to obtain my teaching license. After graduation, I was fortunate to land my first job in Hanover County, Virginia at the same school where I now teach.

As a teacher, I focus on process and encourage my students to experiment with media, this is also the driving force behind my own art making. Each media presents new challenges and there is a time of discovery as I explore what the media can and cannot do. Each experiment

gets me closer to finding the area where my mind is engaged in making the formal decisions at-hand. I know I have found my inner artist when the time passes quickly without notice, like being in some sort of creative trance.

While I was immersed in my teaching, I took a class for recertification in VCU's Off-Campus, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program. This class was incredibly rewarding and revitalizing. I decided that I wanted more of this experience, so I applied to and was accepted in the degree program. I chose craft studies and painting for my two areas of study.

Aesthetics

I work in an intuitive, process-oriented approach using paint, glass, and clay. Each one offers me unique opportunities to reveal the essential formal features of the media. For instance, in painting, the emphasis is color; in glass, the translucency is the central element; and, in clay, I focus on form. My aesthetic is guided by the basic elements and principles of design. However, my exploration can take different forms, such as combining and contrasting textures, patterning, or imagery. I also manipulate a media to find its physical boundaries and often incorporate unplanned outcomes. Through experimentation and practice, my level of craftsmanship has accumulated yet I still strive to retain a fresh and spontaneous interaction with the materials.

In my paintings, I work in a quick and gestural manner. I place attention on color and basic form in presenting imagery. In doing this, I have developed a type of shorthand to communicate visual ideas. I leave brush-strokes visible and keep forms simple to reference the two-dimensional picture plane. I choose abstracted, simple architectural structures such as a old building or barn. I often choose a high-saturated, complementary color palette. Then, I change

the colors and tones of the basic pictorial shapes, from one work to the next, to explore the weight and power of color.

Sometimes, I explore traditional color ideas, such as the theory of how colors visually behave in relation to one another. These theories were introduced by Joseph Albers (1888-1976), the influential artist-educator. By studying his ideas, I was able to experiment with how a color may appear to recede or advance in relation to another color. In his book, *Interaction of Color* (1963), Albers stressed learning by direct perception and his approach seemed very natural to me. My experimentation with color interactions allowed me to draw the viewer's attention to the way designs, shapes, and colors can exist independently from the object they depict.

In my glasswork, my compositions are composed of the design elements of line, color, shape, and texture. I use layering techniques to add complexity to pieces. Some of the layers of glass include photo transfers, copper wire, glass frits, cut glass pieces, and dichroic glass (which has various unique optical properties). I do not start with a preconceived idea, and as I work ideas emerge. I work with established techniques as well as with experimentation. I often incorporate unexpected results from the kiln, such as blended colors and air bubbles. These very subtle changes can add richness to the overall piece.

With clay, I focus on creating wheel thrown vessels. I use a traditional approach to symmetrical, non-functional objects. Once clay is centered on the wheel it is ready to be formed. While the wheel rotates, the first decision about form is to choose between cylinder and sphere. Most of the time, I choose a sphere in my search for a beautiful form that includes a large body. I find the rounded form visually pleasing and suggestive of fecundity and hopeful possibilities. A small footprint and neck on a pot help to place emphasis on the fullness of a belly. The big-bellied form is also well suited as a canvas for a glaze.

Craftsmanship is always an integral part of my work. To me, having good craftsmanship means having an awareness of detail and knowing when and how to incorporate unexpected or uncontrolled events. As I emphasize with my elementary students, some of the finest aspects of a work can result from utilizing what may at first seem like a mistake. I use a process-oriented approach in all of my work in each media. Using the basic elements and principles of design as a guide, I intuitively incorporate the inclusion of unplanned outcomes. As I balance this with my development as a craftsman, I discover my own spontaneous interaction with the materials.

Influences

In addition to exploring Joseph Albers' color theories, I have also been influenced by leading potters of the mid to late twentieth-century. I was first introduced to concepts of Japanese aesthetics through the Bernard Leach textbook, *A Potter's Book* (1940). Leach, known as the father of British studio pottery, brought the Japanese concept of pottery as a non-functional, aesthetic object to the West in the 1920s. One of the concepts espoused by Leach was truth to the materials. He emphasized the Japanese idea that form results from the process as opposed to working towards a preconceived idea. Leach recognized that Japanese aesthetics and the craftsman looked to the media as having its own natural beauty. As stated by author Emanuel Cooper, "Leach insisted that the natural qualities of the clay should be allowed free expression. The play of fire, the extrusion of minerals through the glaze, even the potter's thumb marks, could be left to speak for themselves." (Cooper, 364) I found this approach both liberating and exhilarating because it allowed me to concentrate on the technical issues of working on the wheel without trying to achieve a given result. This idea rang true to me as a broader application to all of my media. I am guided by Leach's Eastern approach, and accept

and work with the natural features of the media.

I also discovered the work of Canadian born artist and monastic, Brother Thomas (1929-2007). His work is the ultimate in ceramic beauty to me. He spent his last twenty-two years as the artist-in-residence at the Mount Saint Benedict Monastery in Erie, Pennsylvania. He is known for his porcelain pottery and unique, complex glazes. Because of his high standards in craftsmanship, Brother Thomas destroyed eighty percent of his work because of undesirable outcomes.

Brother Thomas's pottery took on many forms, such as canteens, plates, and covered jars. The forms are simple and thrown with perfection. Each became a canvas to display glazes that he developed. His goals for the glazes were variety of color, depth of surface, and multiple textures. The colors range from natural earth hues to bright and saturated reds, yellows, and blues. The glazed surfaces have a layered appearance suggestive of illusory depth. Many glazes have unique qualities, for example, *Large Vase With Cover* (Pucker Gallery, 179) displays an ancient Japanese glaze called *Honan Tenmoku*. This is a dark glaze with a surface that develops splotches in the firing that look like oil spotting. It is made of feldspar, limestone, and iron oxide. The iron crystals in the glaze increase the chances of this surface effect. Various firing techniques, such as extending the cool down process that keeps the glaze molten for longer, affects the color and spotting. *Honan Tenmoku* glazes range in color from black to persimmon to yellow.

Another vessel, also titled *Large Vase With Cover* (Pucker Gallery, 176), shows a glaze he called *Armenian Bole*. Armenian bole is clay native to Armenia that is usually red because of its iron oxide content. Brother Thomas combined the clay and other minerals such as hydrous silicates, aluminum, and possibly magnesium in this glaze resulting in multiple shades of brown,

rounded splotches on a light beige ground. On this pot, he allowed the glaze to flow down in streaks that suggested tree trunks in a forest.

Lastly, in *Square Canteen Form Vase* (Pucker Gallery, 77), he used what he called *Ice Crackle Glaze*. This glaze exhibits a clear, deeply cracked surface with veins of green and gold, reminiscent of granite. It is his general approach to experimentation that has inspired my own work.

The Eastern way of thinking about pottery as an art form has made a deep impression upon my work in all media. It gave me an approach, but also awakened an appreciation of raw materials and a connection to the forces of nature through the interaction of materials. This way of working has allowed me a great deal of freedom to experiment and carry on a continuous learning process. It also helped me to develop an acceptance of natural organic phenomena that can occur in the creation of a work. Like both Leach and Brother Thomas, I search for the elusive and natural beauty that can result when the forces of nature are set free.

Paintings

Most of my oil paintings are small to easel-sized works on mat board, paper, or wood. I choose to work on mat board because it is a readily available support that I can quickly prime for my experiments with color. The scale is small so that I can explore multiple color combinations in a short amount of time. My brushstrokes are gestural and the forms are minimized and abstracted. The imagery is typically the old out buildings on my cousin's farm.

In *Farmhouse Kitchen* (Appendix, 1), I chose a simple old kitchen out building in a landscape. I simplified the forms as a way to explore color and its effects. I tried different color combinations and settled on a high contrast, complementary color approach. To begin my

experiments using complementary colors, I applied a ground layer of bright orange paint to the gessoed surface. Then, I laid out a square wall and the two-story façade of the kitchen in a thin, quick wash of white. I left the parallelogram, that represented the roof, in orange, and painted the sky in a complementary blue. The complementary blue and orange caused a visual vibration that was intense, so I shifted the hue of the roof to red to decrease the intensity of the vibration. Adding white flattened and silhouetted the sides of the structure thereby bringing attention to the relationships of the colors.

In *Farmhouse Kitchen #2* (Appendix, 2) I used a cardboard model while painting. The use of the model prompted me to add three-dimensional details that translated into additional colored planes. In this piece, I chose the complementary colors of green and red. Instead of underpainting with one of the complements, I chose a more neutral flat wash of brown. The brown wash forced me to think in terms of painting light rather than shadow. I wanted to explore the interaction of complementary colors to enhance a feeling of light through the use of contrast. Using Albers' principle that warm colors advance and cool colors recede, I brought the walls of the building forward with a warm red and dropped the trees into the background with a cool green. In experimenting with Albers' color exercises, I found that a saturated color could also advance, so I applied an intense blue (a typically cool color) to the roof. I dropped the warm yellow sky into the background by tinting it with white, following the principle that lighter tones recede. The palette was non-naturalistic but relied on the effects of color combinations to present a naturalistic reading of a three-dimensional building.

In the work on paper, *Truck Shed* (Appendix, 3), I used a turquoise ground as a base for an analogous color harmony of blues and greens. The blue-green scheme reflected colors that I

saw in nature. The analogous scheme also helped to create a sense of serenity in the setting. The shed was the dominant object in the painting. So, to bring it forward, I used a thin application of white to achieve high contrast against the turquoise ground. Then, in contrast to the white, I used a dark umber on the shadows of the structure. The umber helped to establish the space inside the shed while also advancing it in front of the blue-green background. The lighter but saturated warm red caused the truck to emerge from the shadowed space of the interior. In this piece, I used color to place three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional plane.

My paintings are small, quickly executed color studies. When depicting farm buildings in a landscape, I experimented with color to explore the possibilities of inferring three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surfaces. My investigations in the properties of color have been based on the exercises of Joseph Albers. Using color properties such as hue, tone, saturation, and contrast, I arranged the elements of a painting's composition to organize shapes.

Glass

I took my color experiments and their results to my glass works. I begin a work by laying out the glass elements I have at-hand. I use layering techniques to create color interactions, such as using complements or experimenting with colors to visually advance or recede shapes. Often, I get unexpected results that are interesting to me and often prompt new ideas. In glass, I also work without a plan and let ideas develop as I work.

Cookies (Appendix, 4) is a tile composition of kiln fused glass. I arranged small square tiles in squares, radiating out from a central square. The central tile displays multiple layers of colored glass that appear to be pieces of confetti floating in the air. In choosing the glass for this

piece, I applied Albers' theory of advancing and receding colors. Since I had experimented with this concept in my paintings, I was able to apply the ideas to colored glass. I wanted to create a unified piece using multiple glass tiles to provide a visual feast of color and texture.

The border tiles were both full and partially fused because I wanted a contrast of smooth and relief texture. Full fuse firing reaches 1500 degrees and causes all of the glass in the tiles to melt uniformly. After cooling, the glass is one smooth piece. In the partial fuse process the temperatures reach a lower heat. This temperature leaves glass pieces attached but still holding some of their original form. Including both types of processes provided an element of contrast, not only in color but in texture.

The center tile was formed in layers that were made by adding glass and then refired. The initial firing for the central tile was a pot melt. In this process, I suspended a 4" clay flower pot, full of red glass pieces, on posts in the kiln. When the temperature reached the melting point the glass ran out of the bottom hole of the flower pot in a spiraling motion and formed a circle. For the next layer of the central tile, I arranged small shapes of opaque and transparent brightly-colored glass onto the circle tile. At this stage, I was mindful of how the color was dispersed and how it either visually advanced or receded. Then, I fired the piece to a full fuse temperature. Two more layers were added with additional colored glass as well as dichroic glass. Dichroic glass is an example of thin film optics. It is glass that contains micro-layers of oxides that reflect a polychromatic light. The colors change depending on the angle of view. Lastly, I presented this piece in a simple black frame to be viewed on a wall.

Seeing how the shapes and colors receded or advanced within the thick center piece of *Cookies* gave me a new direction for my work in glass. So, with my newly discovered direction, I

began to create 1/2" thick glass panels. In *Landscapes* (Appendix, 5), I started by arranging black and clear strips of glass in horizontal bands from the top to the bottom of a sheet of glass. This piece went through a partial fuse. I then cut through the horizontal bands vertically to create strips of black and clear glass. Next, I interspersed these bands with long horizontal strips of colored transparent glass and fired the panel to full fuse temperature.

For the next layer, I continued building fictive depth by adding glass in colors that appeared to advance. Then, I added some vertical glass rods to relax the overall horizontal composition. At this point, I fired the piece and noticed how the horizontal features of the colored striations evoked the landscape. The vertical glass rods gave an impression of trees. I wanted this panel to be viewed from the front or back, so a third firing was necessary to enhance the reverse of the glass with additional shapes, rods, and dichroic glass. Finally, I mounted the glass panel into a commercially manufactured stand that allows the viewer to view the piece from both sides.

Parsley (Appendix, 6) is the largest of my glass panels and it is the most complex in construction and composition. In this piece, I wanted to use multiple processes while continuing my experiments in color. This piece grew in stages and underwent several firings to achieve the layering of shape and color.

I began by taking tiles from earlier firings and arranged them onto a glass panel. Then, I added coarse frit which I sprinkled with blue powdered frit. When fired, the frit, added an interesting color and texture to the tile. Next, on the border of this piece, I added clear glass tiles (that contained photo transfers of parsley), copper wire inclusions, and powdered and coarse frit. Photo transfers are made from using special photo paper that is coated with glaze and printed out

from the computer. In this case, I used a high contrast image of parsley from my garden. The image was then attached to a sheet of glass, like a decal, and fired to a low temperature. Then, I cut this sheet into squares and rearranged them around the border. I interspersed strips of blue transparent glass and thin copper wire, twisted into spirals, between the glass squares and refired the piece. The outcome was a complex, multi-layered panel of glass.

With each firing something unexpected occurred in my glass pieces which drove my creativity. My work in glass is a continual discovery of new directions.

Clay

In my clay work, I create wheel thrown vessels. Spherical, large-bellied vessels are the forms of choice for me. A technical benefit of the large body is that it provides a welcoming surface for a glaze. Conceptually, the full, rounded form implies a hopeful expectancy. To place more emphasis on the roundness of the belly, I strive to attain a small footprint and neck on the vessel. I often create lids for these vessels, because a closed form suggests a sculptural form. As in painting and glass, I often experiment with glazing by choosing complementary or analogous color combinations. Craftsmanship is an over-riding concern as I work in clay.

Lotus (Appendix, 7) is a raku-fired, wheel thrown covered jar with a hand-modeled lid. When throwing this form, I pushed the limit of the clay walls in order to achieve a rounded belly. I applied slab handles for visual balance and then deeply carved the neck and handles in a spiraled pattern to add detail. To finish the full-bodied form, and as an homage to Eastern pottery, I hand-formed a lotus blossom for the top.

I glazed the white clay body with a clear glaze. By using the raku process, I knew that

the clay body would remain white but be crackled in black from smoke. This Japanese firing method is accomplished by pulling a fired vessel from the kiln and covering it with a variety of plant materials, such as sawdust or leaves. These added materials catch fire and smoke the clay body black. Finally, the vessel is uncovered and sprayed with water to encourage a crackle effect. The ancient raku process and results are the epitome of the Eastern aesthetic of pottery. Raku implies that the artist is being true to the materials and accepts the natural results of the process. Both Leach and Thomas embraced this thinking in their work.

Delight (Appendix, 8) is a round-bodied bottle form. In this piece, I wanted to achieve a light and airy appearance to the vessel. I trimmed a small footprint to enhance the fullness and lift the rounded form. To further lift the form I hand-formed petal-like shapes into a stopper. These shapes were intended to give a weightless feeling to the piece. I painted underglazes on the stopper and dipped it in clear glaze that crackled in the raku firing.

Seafoam (Appendix, 9) is a wheel thrown, stoneware covered jar. I threw a spherical form to increase the surface area as a canvas for the glaze, as inspired by Brother Thomas' round forms. For the high firing process, I used a warm brown stoneware clay. I chose the clay for its rich color and smooth throwing qualities. After throwing the body, I threw a lid. The handle is a cast off from the trimmings of a pot made earlier. The glazes I used were made by MIS-IAR instructor and potter, David Camden. First, I dipped the pot into a matte turquoise blue glaze. While the body dried, I dipped the lid into a lavender glaze and the handle into a cream white glaze. Then, I poured a lavender glaze over the dried pot while holding it sideways. This was inspired by some of Brother Thomas's pieces that have splashes of glaze over the body. As the finished piece came out of the kiln, I realized that not only did the handle remind me of waves but the color also

suggested sea foam.

My work in pottery continues to be a significant part of my life as an artist. Every aspect of the process fulfills some primal instinct to create. I hope to continue to develop my skills and knowledge towards achieving the perfect statement of beauty in ceramics.

Each of the media that I have worked with has given me many challenges. As I became more familiar with each, I gained a more complete understanding of how they could be manipulated. Now, with an ever-expanding knowledge base, the acts of spontaneous creativity that are so nourishing to me come more easily.

Conclusion

The MIS-IAR Program has been a wonderful experience for me in many ways. It was beneficial to work in a room full of art teachers. Many have become life-long friends and colleagues. Their interest and caring comments went a long way in helping me develop my personal belief in my artistic directions.

The instructors were extremely knowledgeable and willing to go the extra mile in fostering creative growth. In the beginning, I had no idea how far I would be able to develop my art making. I had basically only created samples for my lessons and put my own art endeavors on hold. Having working artists as instructors is truly an invaluable experience that I will never forget. I am grateful for the time I have spent in the program.

The MIS-IAR Program has affected my teaching in many positive ways as well. By placing myself in the role of a student, I became more aware of how my ideas are formed. By working and expressing those ideas, I became more aware of my process. Becoming self aware was empowering and helped me design lessons that incorporated new and process-oriented opportunities for my students.

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Figure 3. *Truck Shed*, oil on paper, 9" x 12", 2011.



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Figure 7. *Lotus*, raku clay, 13.25" x 8" x 8", 2009.



Figure 8. *Delight*, raku clay, 8" x 5.5" x 5.5", 2009.



Figure 9. *Seafoam*, stoneware clay, 6.5" x 4.5" x 4.5", 2012.

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Education

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 School Board Office
 Hanover County, VA
- 2009 *Mural Painting Exhibit*
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 Mechanicsville, VA