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# Repetition

Betsy J. Yost

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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## **Repetition**

A thesis 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 work is about memory, and my awareness of the repetition of large and small events in my life. In my paintings, drawings, and mixed media I create rhythmic patterns with images and colors to imply a sense of recurrence. I often repeat imagery such as paper dolls or geometric and organic shapes in my work. I choose and repeat shapes and colors that remind me of events in my childhood and in my life as an adult. I see these multiple images as symbolic self-portraits which prompt memories of recurring events, such as waking up each morning or remaking a mistake or running into an old friend. By incorporating personally familiar and repeated imagery, I want to trigger a *déjà vu* experience. I want the presentation of my memories to evoke the same in the viewer.

# **Repetition**

## **Introduction**

I have always loved to draw and paint. In elementary school and high school I looked forward to each art class. I enjoyed every creative process available to me, and even took art classes at a local community college while still in high school. When I went to college, I was introduced to art history which mesmerized me. For the first time, I began to think about the content of a work of art, and about how an artist can visually respond to the world. I majored in art history while also taking many studio art classes.

After graduating, I worked various jobs to support myself. Besides a stint of volunteer work at an art museum, my jobs did not directly relate to art. I occasionally took night-time art classes at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), and I drew and painted for my own enjoyment. In my late thirties, I decided that it was time to pursue a career that directly related to art. So, I enrolled in the Art Education Program at VCU. After graduating with a second bachelor's degree, I began teaching at a local high school.

In the first years, after becoming a teacher, the only artwork that I had time to create were examples for the lessons that I was teaching my students. I was thinking and talking about art every day at work but producing very little work of my own. When it was time to renew my teaching license, I took a mixed media class offered through the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) program. Taking the class reawakened a creative part of me that had gone dormant. Later, I took several painting classes in the program. The result was that I began to develop a body of work in addition to becoming a better art teacher. Eventually, I decided to seek a master's degree in the program, and chose my concentrations to be painting and mixed media.

## **Aesthetics**

The subject of my work focuses on my search for the personal and universal meaning of memories and experiences. I use repeated symbols, lines, and abstract shapes to represent my recall of personal events that have occurred more than once. I often make symbols touch or interlock to imply a connection with others who have had experiences similar to my own. This use of symbolism began when I became aware that certain events in my life seemed to repeat themselves. It seemed to me that there was something I was not learning or recognizing that was causing me to find myself in certain situations over and over again. I felt that if I visually explored these occurrences, I could understand them, or at least see them coming and control the outcome. As I searched for the meaning of these repetitive events, I noticed a periodicity in mundane activities that most of us share. I use repetition in my work to symbolize a personal and universal experience of recurring events, and our memories of them.

I began using a repeated cut-out paper doll shape in my work. Initially, I thought of these dolls as a portrait of myself repeating activities. They also suggested a simplified group of people who all looked alike, which developed into an emblem for a commonality of experiences that we all share. In addition to paper dolls, I use geometric and organic shapes and lines. I also repeat colors to enhance the reiterative effect. The repetition of marks and coloration references my personal memories of events as well as collective memories of experiences we all share.

My process involves layering images with media and color. Some images are of my own creation. I also use store-bought, standardized templates to embed a look of familiarity. After I stencil, scumble, layer, and manipulate media and images, I sometimes obscure parts of the patterns with a layer of paint or by sanding. This causes colors and images to become blurred,

symbolizing how memories can come in vague flashes. In this way, I present visual information to prompt a feeling of recollection.

I use repetition as a metaphor for my memories of recurring events. It also symbolizes how people share a connection through similar experiences and their memory of those experiences. The probe for meaning and understanding of personal and collective memories informs my conceptual approach to making art.

## **Influences**

My influences include visual artists, writers, and art historians. The work of artists, such as Raine Bedsole (b. 1960), Jim Dine (b. 1935), and Jasper Johns (b. 1930), has had an impact on my choice of imagery and my handling of media. The author and art patron Gertrude Stein's (1874-1946) writing about repetition and memory was instrumental in bringing my diaphanous thoughts to a coherent voice. The observations of British art historian, critic, and curator, Briony Fer (b. 1951), concerning how and why postmodern and contemporary artists use repetition encouraged me in my work. Lastly, British historian Simon Schama's (b. 1945) ideas about collective memory helped me understand how the way we see our physical world affects our reading of a painting, and thus helped me to devise ways that I present my subject matter.

Much of the imagery of my work was inspired by the mixed media paintings of Raine Bedsole. In Bedsole's work entitled *Ephemeris: diary* (2000) (Zevitas, ed., 24), a silhouette of a female figure is repeated on twenty wooden, 8"x 5" panels. In each repetition, the figure was created using different media and textures, while the shape of the figure remained the same. (In one panel, the figure was positioned upside down.) I was immediately struck with the idea that this imagery perfectly expressed my pursuit for the understanding of my experiences. The

repetition of the image referenced my recognition that events seem to repeat themselves. I saw Bedsole's work as a portrait of myself doing the same thing over and over again, such as getting up each day and going forth with my search for meaning. The fact that her images were the same shapes, but were different in their presentation, implied to me the awareness of a succession of experiences that were very similar. Because one has to remember an earlier event to become aware of its similarity to a later event, repetition can imply memory. My response to Bedsole's work caused me to add repetition as a metaphor for memory to the content of my work.

I thought long and hard about the iconography I would use to express my content. In my exploration, I tried gridding paper and canvas, and repeated expressive figure drawings. I also considered using photographs of myself as a shape to repeat in my paintings. During this search for a motif, I thought of the work of Jim Dine. In one of his series, Dine used his bathrobe as a symbolic self-portrait. In an interview with Marco Livingstone, author of *Jim Dine: The Alchemy of Images* (1998), Dine said, "From the beginning, those tools, or those objects, or that robe, were metaphors for me and my condition, whatever my condition was at that time. Or my history. It was me painting my history" (Livingstone, 20). This quote prompted me to devise a symbolic self-portrait. I chose to use a paper doll shape cut from folded paper which, when unfurled, produced a line of repeated shapes. Later, I abstracted my representation of self and replaced the paper dolls with geometric and organic shapes.

Jasper Johns' scumbling techniques influenced me in my series of paper doll paintings. I adopted it to break up and subdue bright colors that were too prominent, thereby allowing my iconography to become more important than the coloration. I was also inspired by the restrained beauty of Johns' depiction of a widely known symbol of an American flag, in his painting *White*

*Flag* (1955). In several of my works, I have scumbled a layer of white paint over part or all of a nearly finished work, producing textured white areas. I used Johns' strategy of obscuring a familiar image with white in my own work to suggest vagaries of memory.

The writings of Gertrude Stein guided me to organize my initially nebulous thoughts about repetition into an aesthetic concept. In *Lectures in America* (1935), Stein writes, "Remembering is repetition anybody can know that. In doing a portrait of any one the repetition consists in knowing that that one is a kind of one, that the things he does have been done by others like him that the things he says have been said by others like him" (Stein, 178). Reading this by Stein cemented my commitment to using repetition in my work as a significant part of its content. Though my personal experiences serve as prompts for my imagery, the repetition of the imagery represents universality.

My work has also been influenced to an important degree by art historians. In *The Infinite Line* (2004), Briony Fer describes her book as being "about the strategies of remaking art through repetition in the wake of the exhaustion of a modernist aesthetic" (Fer, 2). Fer maintains that, beginning in the late 1950s, there was a shift of focus in art from the modernist "conception of art based on the idea of the picture" (Fer, 4) to an investigation of time, exemplified by repetition and seriality. She maintains that artists used repetition and series to discover new ways to depict "the most everyday and routine habits of looking" (Fer, 3). She puts forth the idea that in varied ways, artists used the concept of repetition itself as content. Though *postmodernism* is a term used for widely diverse art beginning in the mid- twentieth-century, Fer writes that repetition is a thread of unity in the era which continues in much of contemporary art. Reading her book gave me a deeper understanding of artists who were a generation ahead of me, and helped me find a sense of place for my own work in contemporary art.

Another historian and critic, Simon Schama, writes in the introduction to his book *Landscape and Memory* (1995), “landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock” (Schama, 7). He continues, later saying, “So *Landscape and Memory* is constructed as an excavation below our conventional sight-level to recover the reins of myth and memory that lie beneath the surface” (Schama, 14). His words inspired me to pursue ways to use iconography in my work that would stir memories in the viewer. Under Schama’s influence, I was determined to expand my representation of memories, shared and personal. So, after the paper doll series, I used organic templates of my own making based on fabric designs. I also used store-bought, standardized templates to suggest a familiarity and recognition. In some works, I distressed the surface to imply that the image was not new, that it was one that had been observed for ages.

My influences have been many. My choices of media, iconography, technique, and content owe much to the work of many artists. The writings of authors and historians have energized me to broaden and deepen the content of my work. They have provided me with new ways of thinking and talking about art in general and my art in particular.

## **Works**

When developing my imagery, I considered carefully different ways to paint repeated motifs. For my first painting, *Paper Dolls I* (Appendix, 1), I set rules for myself in an effort to eliminate distractions that would dilute the symbolism of the image. In addition, I wanted to explore the amount of pictorial variety I could create by using only the positive and negative shapes of the line of paper dolls. So, I chose a complementary color scheme of orange and blue. Then, I cut out lines of paper dolls to use as positive templates, and also used the discarded paper

to make reverse templates. Starting at the top of a large (48"x36") canvas, I laid down a template horizontally and outlined it in pencil. Thereafter, I alternated the positive and negative templates. I placed them right side up and upside down, horizontally from top to bottom. I varied the spacing between the templates to create a syncopated visual rhythm.

I chose flat color (color with no variation in value) to paint each of the drawn lines of shapes. I alternated hues of orange with hues, tints, and shades of blue. Each shape was painted in one value. The choice of a complementary color scheme created a strong optically illusionistic effect. This was one outcome of my investigation of pictorial variety with limited options. Because the effect of the color combination was so strongly experienced by the viewer, it lessened the impact of the imagery. I chose to explore further.

I began other paintings in the same way as the first. In *Paper Dolls III* (Appendix, 2), the initial paint layer was composed of hues of orange interspersed with hues, tints, and shades of blue. However, this time I introduced scumbling and blending of one color over another. I added yellow-orange and red-orange to the color scheme. In some areas, I scumbled alternating, short horizontal and vertical strokes. In other areas, I minimized the brushstrokes and smeared the paint so that the color blended. I varied the combinations of scumbled and blended color over flat color throughout the painting. The muted color combinations of complements and near complements enhanced one another in a subtle way, and the optically illusionistic effect was eliminated. At this point, the focus of the painting became the doll imagery instead of the optical effect of color complements. Using this technique, I made a series of paper doll paintings. I explored seemingly endless ways that I could combine the templates and the colors.

The repetition of forms and variation in color begun in the paper doll series informed my subsequent work. For instance, in *Seven Blue Squares* (Appendix, 3), I used a small paint roller

to apply much of the paint. I also expanded my pigments and added the colors pink and yellow-green to my palette. The repetition of the organic green shapes and the geometric blue squares replaced the paper dolls in the earlier series. Iconography became less important. Repetition, in itself, became what was meaningful. Repetition represented the recognition of a current experience being similar to remembered ones. It also implied similarity within a group.

In other paintings, I incorporated shapes adapted from patterns in my clothing as a symbolic self-portrait. In *Green Line* (Appendix, 4), I made a stencil derived from a fabric shape and repeated it in high contrast above an area of repeated rectangles in low contrast. The variation in contrast not only added variety to the work, but represented how some of our memories are distinct while others are less defined. As a strategy to suggest familiarity and recognition in the viewer, I used store-bought stencils in my work, which were sturdier than the hand-made ones. In *Blue Merge* (Appendix, 5), these sturdier stencils enabled me to use oil stick to lay the design on an acrylic ground. I chose an interlocking design to infer a relationship between personal and collective memories.

In *Blue Memory* and *Pink Memory* (Appendix, 6 and 7), I chose to obscure the image to convey a sense of how memories can fade. To do this, I painted an acrylic ground which was striped in alternating colors. One color was the stripe, and the second color contained the oil stick stenciled pattern. I then painted over the entire painting in one color. Over this layer, I painted a layer of gesso, and when dried, I sanded the entire painting with a rotary sander. By layering the media, then sanding through the layers, I could metaphorically uncover lost or obscured memories.

In two of my mixed media works, entitled *Blue Stripes* (Appendix, 8) and *Blue Pieces* (Appendix, 9), I glued rectangles of blue painted paper over a vertically striped acrylic ground. I

arranged the torn pieces of paper pointing in different directions along alternating stripes, and I varied the vertical space between the attached pieces of paper. This produced a restless pattern of distinct shapes connoting the way a memory may become influential or obsessive. I continued my experimentation and combined my imagery and procedures in a variety of ways.

These processes of working evolved over time as my thoughts about the meaning of my work progressed. In my paintings and mixed media work, I used repetition to explore my recognition of repeated experiences and their relationship to collective experience. I used strategies to suggest the process of remembering and to convey my expanding search for understanding of the meaning of memories.

## **Conclusion**

During my time in the MIS-IAR Program, my work has grown in quality and quantity. I began with a vague idea about how to express my observation of confusing reiterative events. Through the influence of artists, authors, and art historians, that idea expanded into an aesthetic concept that guides my choices of iconography and process.

In creating this body of work, I became aware of issues in contemporary art, which in turn has made me a better art teacher. I am now better able to guide my students to create original bodies of work that address current themes. This has served them well in winning art awards and applying to art schools. I am grateful for all of the experiences and professorial guidance I received in the MIS-IAR Program, and I look forward to my continued growth as an artist and educator.

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## Appendix

### List of Figures

- Figure 1. *Paper Dolls I*, acrylic on canvas, 48"x36", 2010.
- Figure 2. *Paper Dolls III*, acrylic on panel, 36"x24", 2010.
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- Figure 6. *Blue Memory*, acrylic, oil stick on panel, 24"x24", 2013.
- Figure 7. *Pink Memory*, acrylic, oil stick on panel, 24"x24", 2013.
- Figure 8. *Blue Stripes*, acrylic, paper on panel, 24"x24", 2013.
- Figure 9. *Blue Pieces*, acrylic, paper on panel, 6"x6", 2013.

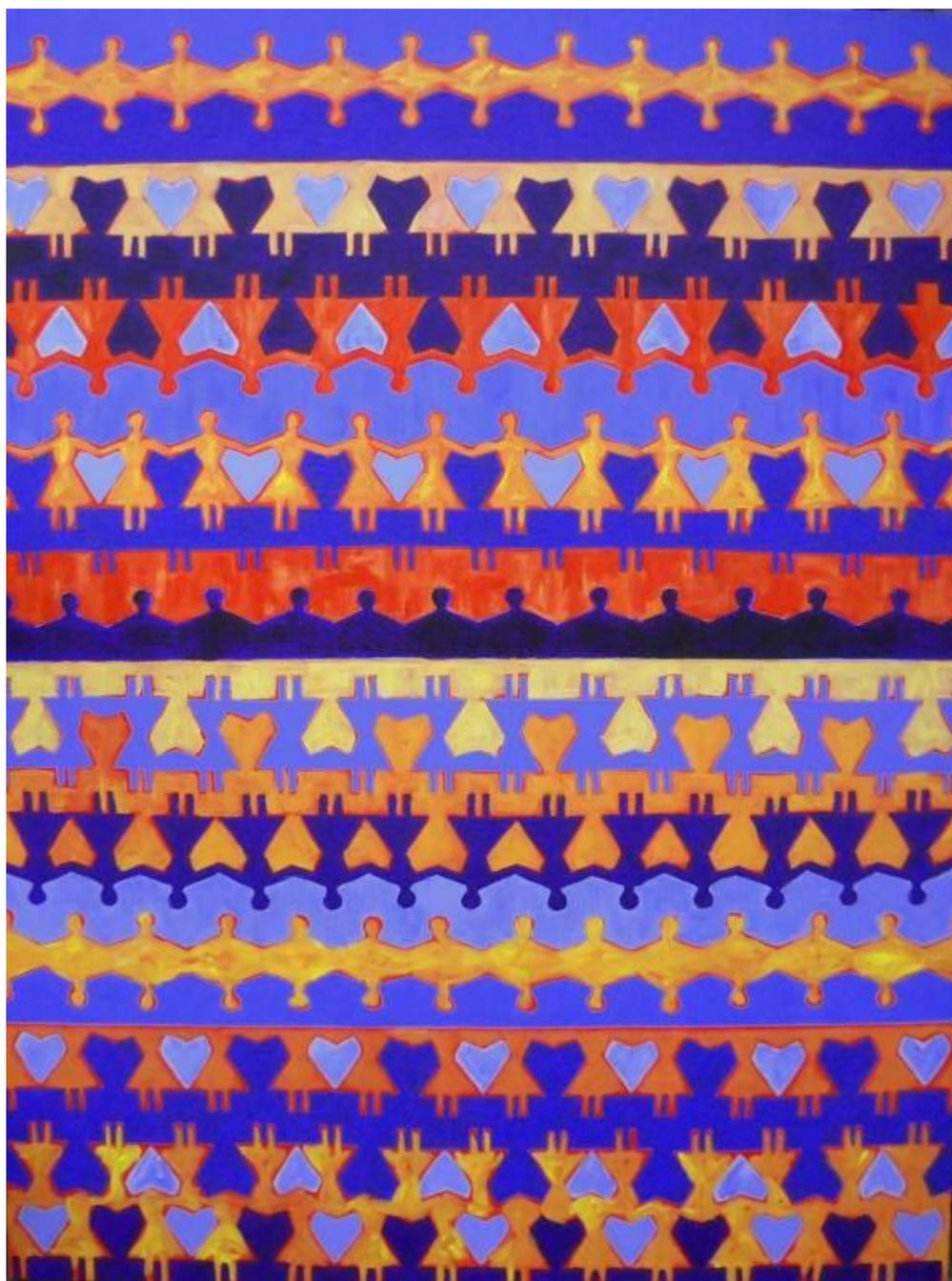


Figure 1. *Paper Dolls*, acrylic on canvas, 48"x36", 2010.



Figure 2. *Paper Dolls III*, acrylic on panel, 36"x24", 2010.



Figure 3. *Seven Blue Squares*, acrylic on panel, 36"x24", 2011.



Figure 4. *Green Line*, acrylic on canvas, 48"x36", 2012.



Figure 5. *Blue Merge*, acrylic, oil stick on panel 48"x36", 2013.

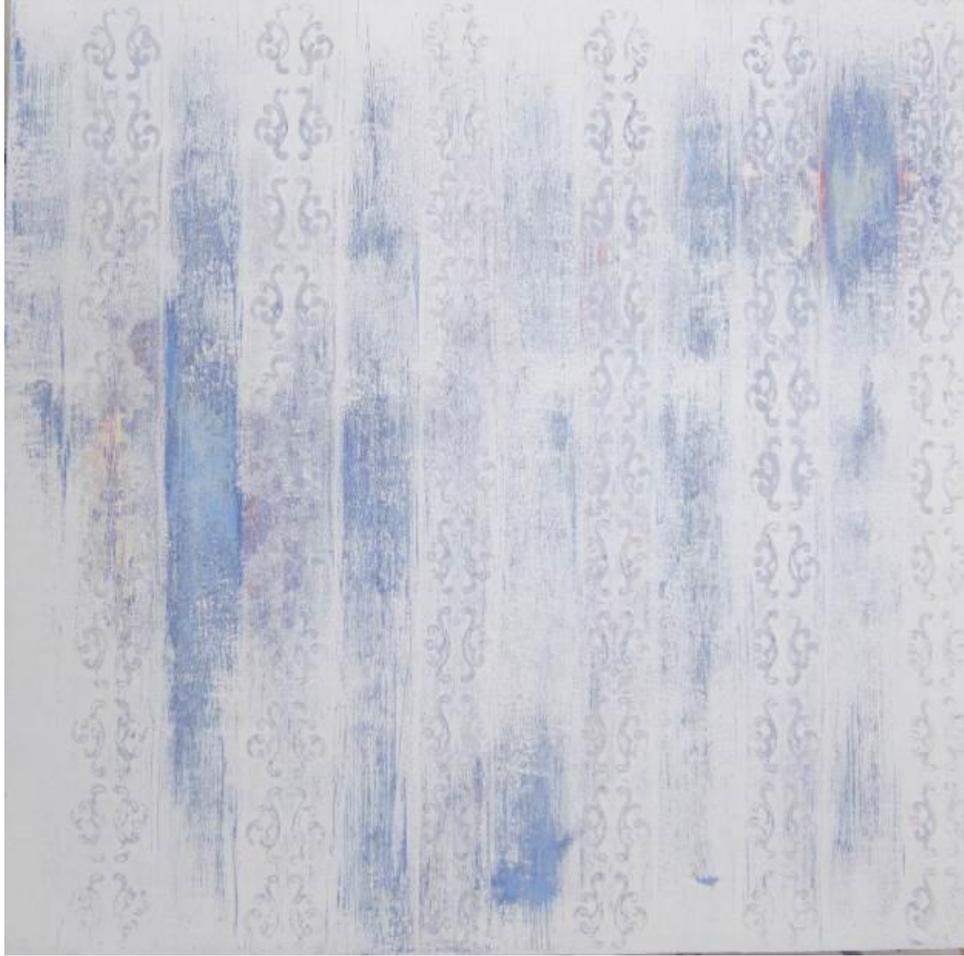


Figure 6. *Blue Memory*, acrylic, oil stick on panel, 24"x24", 2013.



Figure 7. *Pink Memory*, acrylic, oil stick on panel, 24"x24", 2013.

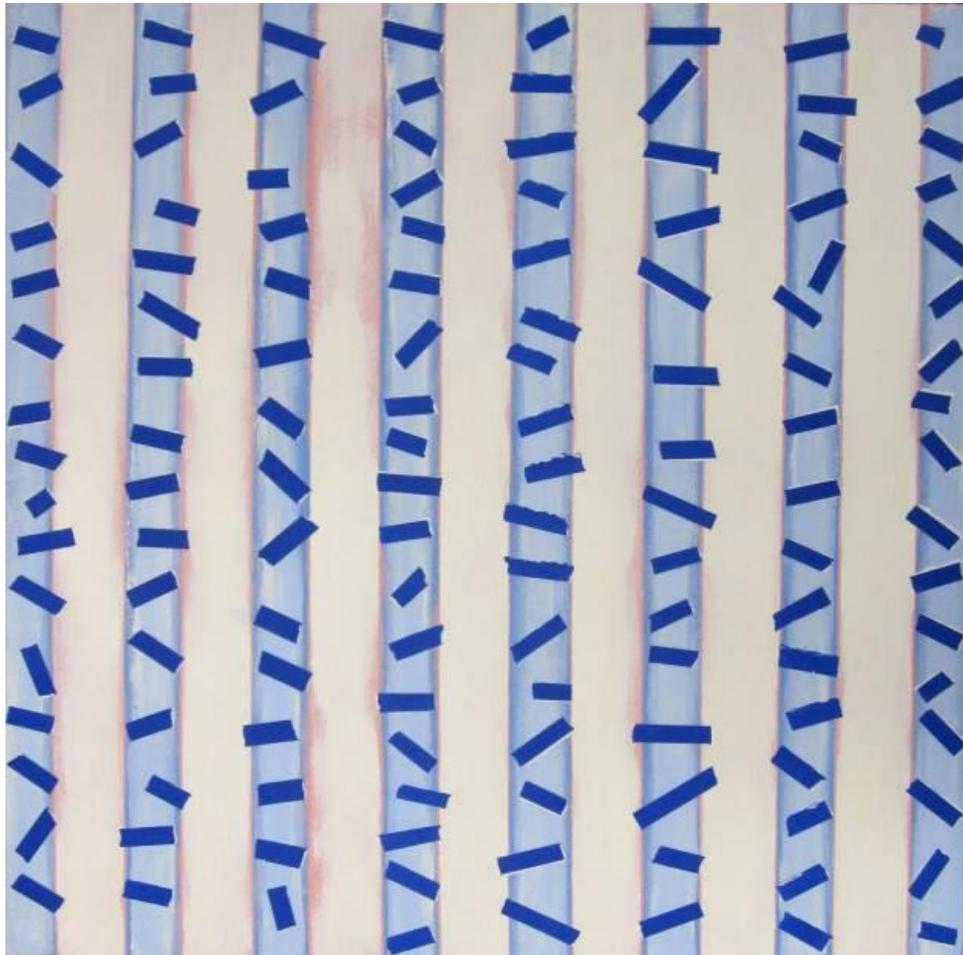


Figure 8. *Blue Stripes*, acrylic, paper on panel, 24"x24", 2013.



Figure 9. *Blue Pieces*, acrylic, paper on panel, 6"x6", 2013.

## Betsy Yost

### EDUCATION

- 2015                      Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art  
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA  
(Painting and Drawing)
- 1997                      Bachelor of Fine Arts  
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- 1976                      Bachelor of Arts  
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### TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- 1997-Present            Art Teacher, J. R. Tucker High School, Henrico, VA

### RELATED EXPERIENCE

- 2000                      Summer Arts for Children, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA
- 1998-1999              Summer School Arts Program, Chesterfield County, VA

### AWARDS

- 2004                      **High School Art Teacher of the Year**, Henrico County, VA

### PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

- 2002-Present            National Art Education Association (NAEA), Reston, VA

### EXHIBITIONS

- 2015                      *Scheduled. Repetition*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in  
Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth  
University, Richmond, VA, at artspace, Richmond, VA
- 2014                      *Repetition as Metaphor*, Solo Show, Saint Gertrude High School Gallery,  
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- 2014                      *artspace at Twenty-six*, Capital One Bank, West Creek, Richmond, VA

## **EXHIBITIONS (continued)**

- 2013                    *Educator Exhibit*, Central Office, Henrico County Public Schools,  
Henrico, VA
- 2013                    *Artist as Educator*, Crossroads Art Center, Richmond, VA
- 2012                    *Educator Exhibit*, Central Office, Henrico County Public Schools,  
Henrico, VA
- 2012                    *National Art Education Association (NAEA) Art Show*, St Paul’s Episcopal  
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- 2011                    *Educator Exhibit*, Central Office, Henrico County Public Schools,  
Henrico, VA
- 2011                    *NAEA Art Show*, St Paul’s Episcopal Church, Richmond, VA
- 2010                    *Educator Exhibit*, Central Office, Henrico County Public Schools,  
Henrico, VA
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Henrico, VA
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- 2008                    *Educator Exhibit*, Central Office, Henrico County Public Schools,  
Henrico, VA
- 2008                    *NAEA Art Show*, St Paul’s Episcopal Church, Richmond, VA
- 2007                    *Educator Exhibit*, Central Office, Henrico County Public Schools,  
Henrico, VA
- 2000                    *Henrico Educator Exhibit*, James Center, Richmond, VA