Urban Energy

Liz Bahl-Moore

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Urban Energy

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

The urban environment of New York City is the source of inspiration for my prints and paintings. I am fascinated with the range of architecture and the intensity of sights and sounds. It is exhilarating for me to be in this setting that is ever changing and I want to share this excitement with the viewer.

In my work, I layer photo transfers, stencils with acrylic paints, and printing inks to convey a sense of urban energy. I use a range of bright and bold colors that reflect my vivid memories of this environment. I also want to balance geometric and orderly structure with the chaos of crowded streets. The layering technique, mixed media approach, and scope of colors allow me to arrange and rearrange elements of the environment to express the excitement of the city landscape.
Urban Energy

Introduction

As a young child, I loved drawing pictures on anything I could get my hands on even using the backside of my homework assignments. I knew I wanted to become an artist. However, I felt limited by the small rural Pennsylvania town I lived in. During my teenage years my family moved to Williamsburg, Virginia, another small town. However, there were more opportunities here. My high school had a large art program that allowed me to improve my skills and envision a career as an art teacher. I continued my pursuit and enrolled in a small undergraduate art program at Longwood University, and focused on art education and photography.

After earning my degree and teacher license, I began teaching in Virginia for Culpeper County Public School System. Later, I accepted a position with Williamsburg-James City County Public School System. During this time, I had opportunities to travel to New York City on multiple occasions. Because I have lived in small towns my entire life, I became captivated with every aspect of this city. In this environment, I absorbed and relished all of the sights and sounds. I had discovered my creative inspiration; I wanted to translate the excitement I felt into my art.

At that time, I also wanted to further develop my studio skills and my education in order to be a working artist and more effective art teacher. I applied to and was accepted in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in the Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). In the program, I concentrated on printmaking and painting and created imagery based on the sights and my experiences in New York City.
Aesthetics

Large urban environments are loud, cramped, and full of well-kept to run-down structures. There are multitudes of people and traffic everywhere. While visiting New York City, I wandered around the streets taking pictures and tried to record everything I saw. I accumulated hundreds of images to use as my source of inspiration for my work. To recreate the eclectic excitement and energy I experienced, I decided to experiment with mixed media for both my printmaking and painting. These multiple materials and media would help me express the range of sensations of my city experience.

In my printmaking, I created stencils to use in my monoprint images. I developed over a dozen stencils based on my photographs that I mixed and matched on my inked plates to create a variety of cityscapes. Depending on the color combinations, I created ominous, dark streets or upbeat, bright spaces. Eventually, my stencils were coated with residual colors of ink. The application of this left-over ink added to the visual complexity that I was seeking. As some of the stencils started to deteriorate, I kept using them to show the aging and decline that occurs in a city.

In my acrylic paintings, I used packaging tape, contact paper, and iron-on materials to transfer my photographs onto canvas, canvas board, and paper. The tape and contact paper materials allowed me to show the contrast of photographed structures against colorful and textured painted surfaces. I also pieced together structures of my own making and collaged them into large cityscape views. When using the iron-on process, I was able to insert ghost-like silhouettes and partially missing sections of buildings which relayed a sense of decay. I wanted to show all aspects of the city, both positive and negative.
I also included encaustics in my paintings. I printed my photographs of the city onto computer paper, applied them to a wooden panel and then layered colored wax over the images. After the wax set, I carved into and scraped sections away to expose images of the city and buildings. The random and multidirectional carving marks and layers of wax helped me to relay the feeling of crowded streets and crazy traffic patterns.

Urban environments have fascinated me since I started traveling to New York City. I wanted to recreate the excitement and energy I felt in this environment. I experimented with a variety of materials in printmaking and painting to present a range of colors and textures.

**Influences**

After I determined my urban theme, I realized that there were several artists that influenced my work. I re-examined the work of Romare Bearden (1911-1988), Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946), Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986), and Charles Sheeler (1883-1965).

I have admired Romare Bearden since I attended a retrospective show of his work, including his collages. Bearden was an African American artist who used collage to create vivid imagery of his years in the South, in southern Pennsylvania, and in New York City. He realized that collage gave him the ability to merge different materials and media to create expressive compositions. In his work, he combined cut-out shapes, figures from magazines and newspapers, textured papers, and acrylic paints.

One of Bearden’s works, *The Block* (1971), is a collage of papers, foils, paints, inks, and graphite on fiberboard and plywood. It consists of six panels with the
dimensions of 48”x 36” each, which makes the entire piece a large scale image. In this collage, he depicted a busy African American neighborhood street with figures and vehicles against brightly-colored and graffiti-plastered structures. Bearden’s figures seem to be hustling down the street in between zooming cars. Some figures are children playing near their homes, another group are part of a funeral procession near a church, and others are musicians harmonizing near a barber shop. Bearden also exposed activities taking place on the inside of the buildings. In the apartment windows, figures are peering out, watching television, engrossed in a conversation, or making love. His composition showed different activities inside and outside of each building on one street of New York City. This was a visually intriguing way to tell the story of this area. By using collage, he created a sense of energy that I wanted to explore in my own work.

In contrast to Bearden’s focus on African American culture and life, my intention was to focus solely on the overall energy of this urban environment. Like Bearden, I used a variety of brightly-colored paints in contrast with black and white architectural structures. I manipulated layers of colors with stencils of buildings and bridges. I also used bright colors and multiple textures to relay the excitement.

Two other artists who were influenced by New York City were the married couple, Alfred Steiglitz and Georgia O’Keeffe. Steiglitz was a German-American photographer and prominent New York gallerist. O’Keeffe was an American painter, who became known for her influence on American Modernism. In the 1920s and 1930s, they shared a studio and both used the city as their source of inspiration. They were looking at the city during the development of the modern skyscraper.
In Stieglitz’s work, *From the Shelton: Lower Part of the G.E. Building* (1930), there are two structures that dominate the foreground. He photographed these buildings running off the picture plane, which gives the illusion that they were taking over the skyline. Around these two skyscrapers are an abundance of crowded, small nineteenth-century structures. The manner in which he showed the congested and expanding city was influential to my own work.

In addition to Stieglitz’s imagery, I was influenced by O’Keeffe’s energetic painting *Radiator Building- Night, New York* (1927). In this painting, she depicted facades of six dark buildings. O’Keeffe used a darkened palette to show that night had fallen on the city. There is a sense that this city never sleeps because she painted more than 100 little yellow, gray, and white rectangles that represent nighttime activity. Behind the buildings, there is a horizontal streak of red on the upper-left side of the canvas, and on the right-hand side there are indications of factories and smoke. These elements add to the overall excitement of the scene. Unlike Stieglitz’s black and white photography, she was able to manipulate colors and imply textures to convey a city full of life.

Like Stieglitz, I was fascinated with the buildings and structures that characterized New York City. I composed images that emphasized the assortment of buildings and structures from different time periods all crowded together through the city. Like O’Keeffe, I used color to enhance the excitement in my work.

Lastly, Charles Sheeler has influenced my work. Sheeler was an American painter and photographer who was known for his commercial work. Sheeler’s interest in New York was evident in his short film entitled, *Manhatta* (1920). He developed the film
with Paul Strand (1890-1976), an American photographer and filmmaker who was considered Alfred Stieglitz’s protégé. The film focused on the city’s massive skyscrapers.

Sheeler’s painting, *Convergence* (1952), presents minimized architectural details diagonally overlapping a stylized cityscape. This easel sized oil painting depicts two different views of the city existing in the same space. He used a range of neutral colors in the layering of the buildings and views. This piece was influenced by his photograph, *Park Row Building* (1950), and his lithograph print, *Delmonico Building* (1926). This image was the culmination of Sheeler’s painting and photographs coming together for the first time in his career.

His approach of using his photographs as the motivation for his paintings inspired my own methods. I took many of my photographs and turned images of buildings into stencils that I overlapped or juxtaposed in different arrangements. His work showed me the range of variation that is possible. This allowed me the freedom to experiment and explore my experiences.

Romare Bearden, Alfred Steiglitz, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Charles Sheeler have had a significant impact on my work. It was interesting that, at one time, these artists found New York City as fascinating as I do. Through their influence, I incorporated vivid colors and textures to recreate a sense of excitement and energy. In addition, I incorporated my photographs as stencils and photo transfers.

**Printmaking**

As I developed my theme and drew inspiration from my influences, I started
creating stencils from my New York photographs. In Which Way (Appendix, 1), I layered new and used stencils onto a large inked Plexiglas plate. The plate was inked with a brown tone. Then, I layered used stencils with red-violet residual ink on top. Finally, I placed uninked stencils onto the inked plate over used stencils, also with residual ink on them, to block ink in areas. The uninked stencils prevented ink from contacting the paper, thus the white of the paper reads as other architectural details. I also developed texture by soaking the paper before printing, repeating the use of some stencils, and not cleaning the plate between runs through the press. The stencils ranged in size from up-close views of architectural detail to full views of bridges and buildings. With the color combination, different views of the city, and development of texture, I was able to construct a city skyline that seems varied and endless.

I took a different approach in my next print, Reflections (Appendix, 2). I printed the plate three different times to build variety of colors, textures, and structures. The first layer was a light green color and the uninked stenciled areas revealed the white of the paper. In the next aquamarine layer, I overlapped stencils to reveal some of the details of the first layer. In the final layer, I used a brown ink with another set of stencils. The darker color helped to create contrast to the lighter right-side of the paper. With layering, I was able to create a city block where it was difficult to determine where a building started and ended.

Finally, Urban Purple (Appendix, 3) was an experiment in using tan printmaking paper and stencils with residual ink to create a close value print with subtle textures. I began by inking the plate with a magenta color and layered this with used and new stencils. On some of the buildings, there are blue and violet residual inks evident.
While running the plate through the press, I used extra weight to create an embossing effect in the stenciled areas. This resulted in background buildings impressing a texture onto the foreground structures. This feature added to my goal of replicating a crowded, overlapping view of the city.

In my prints, I was able to experiment with layering stencils, colors, and textures to create different views and convey the excitement and energy of New York. I decided to take these ideas and techniques to my paintings.

**Painting**

In my paintings, I continued building layers and textures. I worked with acrylic and encaustic paints and different types of photo transfer. The photo transfer techniques included packaging tape, contact paper, and iron-on transfers. These materials and approaches allowed me to incorporate my photographs into works in a variety of ways.

My painting on canvas, *Layer of a City* (Appendix, 4), was created with acrylic paints, iron-on transfers, and acrylic inks. First, I applied yellow acrylic as a base color to the canvas. This created a bright tone to work from and made the buildings stand out in the composition. After the paint dried, I ironed on transfers of structures. Since I was ironing onto stretched canvas, I was able to achieve unexpected textures due to the uneven adherence of the transfer. It implied that the buildings were decaying or older than others. Next, I painted gloss medium over the iron-on images so they would not peel off. In the subsequent layer, I applied acrylic inks in linear patterns over the image. These lines resembled subway routes that lie beneath the city. Finally, I added orange
paint in between the inked linear patterns to further break up the picture plane and intensify the sense of congestion.

In *Homage to New York* (Appendix, 5), I decided to use tape and contact paper to transfer images onto the stretched canvas. With tape and contact paper transfers, I was able to collage and rearrange transfers on the composition without damaging the transfers. First, I applied several heavy layers of paint and to add texture I scratched areas out with palette knifes and other tools. I applied the large contact paper transfers of the buildings on the bottom two-thirds of the canvas. On the top third of the format, I applied tape transfers of individual structures to create the feeling of an endless skyline.

In the mixed media painting, *Different Views of a City* (Appendix, 6), I sealed photo copies of my images with encaustic materials on three wooden panels. I chose small wooden supports to handle the weight of the wax. The encaustic technique allowed me to build multiple layers of colored wax with my images. The wax allowed me to conceal and reveal sections of the buildings and city. I used bright hues in contrast with the photo copy tones of my images. However, I wanted to add another layer of structures to create the crowded affect similar to my other paintings. In the center and right panels, I created two wax transfers from parts of a photograph and miniature pastel drawing. I placed the images face down in a smoothed out, warm section of colored wax. In order for the image to stick to the wax, I burnish the back of the paper until the wax cooled down. Finally, I carefully pulled the paper off the wax without distorting the printed image. This added another layer of buildings to the painting and created that sense of a crowded city block.

In both my prints and paintings, I experimented with different techniques to
achieve exciting, crowded streets that I found fascinating in New York City. My overall imagery evolved and became visually more complex with the use of multiple colors and textures.

**Conclusion**

The MIS-IAR Program has had a profound influence on my artistic and professional life. The Program reminded me that I am an artist and I must make time for my creative endeavors even with my busy schedule as a teacher and mother. I realized that working as a professional artist makes me a better teacher to my students. I also understand that my students need time to experiment with materials and plan out personal themes in order for them to achieve success. I now encourage more collaboration between students in my classes, and I expect to do the same with my creative peers.

Finally, I want to continue making personal connections with different artists in history and recognize that I need to share that importance with my students. We can learn so much from our past if we are given a chance to explore it. I want to help my students find their inspirations and creative voice, as well as continue to pursue my own.
Bibliography


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Professional Organizations or Memberships:
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2007-present This Century Art Gallery, Williamsburg, VA
2004-2007 Voices of the Blue Ridge, Culpeper, VA
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*Virginia Artists 2014 Juried Exhibition,* Charles H. Taylor Art Center, Hampton, VA. Juror: Tosha Grantham

*Artists Who Teach Juried Exhibition,* Charles H. Taylor Art Center, Hampton, VA. Juror: Jeffrey Allison

*Annual Members’ Show,* This Century Art Gallery, Williamsburg, VA

2013  
*The 2013 TVAEA Art Educator Show,* Downing Gross Cultural Art Center, Newport News, VA

*Artist Who Teach Juried Exhibition,* Charles H. Taylor Art Center, Hampton, VA. Juror: David Johnson

*Annual Members’ Show,* This Century Art Gallery, Williamsburg, VA

2012  
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2009  
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2007  
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2006  
*A Moment in Time: Artists of Windmore Show,* Village Frameworks and Gallery, Culpeper, VA

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*Elements: Artists of Windmore Show,* Village Frameworks and Gallery, Culpeper, VA

*Heart of Virginia Festival Outdoor Art Show,* Longwood University Rotunda, Farmville, VA

2004  
*Heart of Virginia Festival Outdoor Art Show,* Longwood University Rotunda, Farmville, VA

2003  
*Heart of Virginia Festival Outdoor Art Show,* Longwood University Rotunda, Farmville, VA