Crescendo

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Crescendo

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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May, 2016
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Artist Statement

I have always found comfort and warmth in my family. When I am not with them, I find myself clinging to the objects they leave behind as a substitute in their absence. As I began to re-create these objects through paintings and ceramics, I realized that I was creating symbolic portraits of my family. These portraits are tangible family moments preserved in pigment and clay.

In recent years, my siblings were deployed to war and I began to represent them as various instruments. These instruments, both musical and tools of war, chronicle who they were and who they are now. Where I once presented guitars and violins, now I include rifles and bombs.

In my painting process, I use subtle lighting techniques to reveal objects hidden in the shadows. What little light is present reveals a trigger on a rifle or a string on a violin. I want the viewer to consider firing a shot or striking a chord.

My ceramic sculptures also take on both attributes of weaponry and music. I sculpt in porcelain and all the pieces are given the resonating chamber (f-holes) of a violin. Although the pieces resemble bombs and grenades, the hollow white porcelain contrasts the destructive purpose of a weapon to beautiful forms that may be capable of producing a tune. These pieces mirror how I see my siblings, as once beautiful souls that are now used as instruments of war.
Crescendo

Introduction

I was born in a farming and fishing village in Bohol, Philippines. My mother was an American Peace Corps volunteer and my Filipino father was involved in our village government. Along with my five brothers, we had a unique and amazing childhood living on an island that had very little electricity, running water, and few paved roads. We immigrated to the United States when I was thirteen years old. Assimilation was difficult as we struggled with the language and culture. My memories of high school are comprised of awkward, embarrassing, and agonizing moments that I try to forget. We did not know how to dress, talk, or eat like the other students. It was clear that my brothers and I were oddly different. While the average American youth joined sports and clubs after school, we came home and worked with my father at a variety of job sites ranging from masonry, carpentry, and landscaping to help make ends meet. Over time my brothers and I found creative interests. Music, art, and drama were areas that made us fit in. Soon, our small home was filled with musical instruments, art supplies, and construction tools.

I excelled in art. Painting, drawing, and sculpting gave me a voice without having the requirement to speak. My artwork gave me an identity and confidence. In high school, I thrived in my art courses and created a portfolio that I used to win a scholarship to attend Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, Maryland. My path was different than that of my brothers, they joined the military to help pay for their education. While I flourished in school, learning art history and approaches to making art, my siblings were deployed to various military conflicts half way across the world. Part of me felt that I should be with them. Instead, I began to pay tribute to their sacrifice through my artwork. My early works were patriotic; a theme that
mirrored their sense of duty to our country. It was not until I enrolled in Virginia Commonwealth University’s Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program that my work developed into a more conceptual and meaningful direction. I chose the areas of painting and craft and material studies to move my work from the subtle forms of propaganda to the realities of war.

**Aesthetics**

My work deals with the concept of how war shaped my brothers from gentle, creative boys to weapons of war. After a year in Iraq, one brother came home but he left behind his youth, his smile, and his music. A teenager should never have to take up arms, take a life, or grieve for his friends. What I thought would be of comfort to him, like music, no longer appealed to his senses. It was not long when he bought his first rifle and handgun. It was ingrained in him through military training that his life depended on these instruments, so a ritual of dismantling and cleaning became his source of comfort through familiarity and a sense of security. I noticed that he took on a different persona while he was immersed in this ritual, he was confident, focused, and had a feeling of purpose, traits that were absent without his rifle. This was a moment out of many that I symbolically address in my paintings and sculpture.

I found that presenting these weapons in paintings was a difficult task. A painting of a rifle could easily be seen as a work with a pro-war feel. To avoid this implication, I incorporated musical instruments and aspects of music in my work. Music and war seem to have a neutralizing effect in combination.

Compositionally, I center all subjects on the canvas. I render the weapons and instruments in precise detail. I want to present the objects with a special or divine status by
manipulating the warm earth tones to create a focused light. In doing this, I use a subtractive painting technique. I apply layers of paint and then remove some pigment from each layer to create the illusion of dramatically focused light. This method helps me give a venerating effect to the objects.

In my ceramics, I chose to create pieces through a coiling technique achieved by layering coiled clay to build vessels. Each of the quarter-inch coils has to be blended down on to the previous layer in order to achieve height. Accuracy is crucial and I have to rely on my sense of space and form to create perfect symmetry.

All of my sculptures are a straightforward representation of bombs and grenades with f-holes cut into their bodies. The f-holes give the weapons a resonating chamber, and therefore blend aspects of war with aspects of music. Scale was an important consideration that I toiled over. I made the pieces to look like weapons but in the scale of a musical instrument. My decision to create the pieces so that they were comparable to the size of a violin or guitar was to conceptually question the purpose of the object. Lastly, I chose high fire porcelain due to its pure white body that adds a visually fragile element to the work. Instead of a military olive drab color, the pieces are glazed with a crackled clear glaze to reveal the white porcelain. This glaze produces a delicate crackling and helps stress a vulnerability of the surface.

Influences

Artists that interest me are the ones that manipulate light and shade with intensity and drama, a technique called chiaroscuro. Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) used light and shadow with theatrical precision in creating a scene. In his painting Samson and Delilah (1629-30), he reinvented a classical, standardized story by leading the viewer away from Samson, the hero. To
do this, Rembrandt subdued him in shadow and shifted the focus onto Delilah, the antagonist. What makes Rembrandt’s work unique is his use of light and shadow to shift the attention from Samson to Delilah and redirect the focus of the tale.

Another master painter, who also used *chiaroscuro*, was Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610). Like Rembrandt, the light in his painting reinvents stories or retells them from a new perspective. *Doubting Thomas* (1602) depicts a biblical story of Jesus revealing his wound to his apostle Thomas in order to prove that he has risen from the dead. Out of the four individuals in the painting, there is not a single face that is clearly defined by direct light including Jesus himself. Instead, Caravaggio uses *chiaroscuro* to place attention on Jesus’ hand gripping Thomas’, forcing his finger to touch the wound on his abdomen. This scene has been commonly illustrated with Jesus as the source of light. Caravaggio chose to cloak Christ’s face in darkness leading the viewer to focus only on his fatal injury to show that he indeed has risen from the dead.

Like Rembrandt and Caravaggio, my painting subjects are shrouded in shadow and strategically lit for the audience to rethink the purpose of the object and to provoke thought. I also use this method of re-shifting focus by manipulating the illusion of light to help my audience better understand my point of view rather than a description of a object.

In ceramics, the issue of light and dark is not as vital in the work. Instead, I focus on scale, balance, and space. An artist that I emulate in my work is Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957) who worked with clean geometrical lines and a variety of materials with symbolic meanings. *Bird in Space* (1923) is a piece in which he simplified the characteristics of a bird to focus on the idea of flight. Brancusi had reduced the animal’s figure to a sleek and minimal form, void of feathers and wings, leaving only an aerodynamic shape. In my work, I use
Brancusi’s concept of reducing an object from its original state in order to direct a point of view. The bombs are stripped of their identifiable olive drab paint and stenciled serial numbers, leaving only hollowed white vessels that allow me to place emphasis on form and function.

**Painting**

As I developed my painting ideas, I remembered how my siblings acted and what they relayed to me after their military experiences. For instance, I watched one brother clean his rifle and listened to him say, *This is the bolt carrier, the charging handle, and the firing pin. My life depends on these parts being clean, a grain of sand could cause the rifle to jam, a grain of sand could end my life.* When the rifle was once again assembled and immaculate, he ceremoniously placed it on the wall. I watched him take a step back and break a smile, he was proud of his work, *Now I can sleep*, he said. This moment was etched in my mind and it became the subject of a painting.

In *Now I can Sleep* (Appendix, 1), I highlighted the parts my brother identified as crucial to his survival. I made sure that I rendered the bolt carrier, handle, and pin as accurately as possible so not to insult his efforts in educating me. I employed a *chiaroscuro* effect to light the vital parts and subdue in shadow the rest of the rifle. It is painted to scale to relay a sense of realism. When I physically mounted the painting on the wall, I couldn’t help but feel a similar pride in my work as he did.

*Insomnia* (Appendix, 2) is a painting of a Russian AK-47 (Avtomat Kalishnikov 1947) rifle, the weapon of choice of the Iraqi Armed Forces. This painting is a companion piece to *Now I Can Sleep*. It is a representation of my brother’s fears as he remembered the time when his Marine Corps unit first entered Fallujah, an insurgent stronghold in Iraq. He recount, in
graphic detail, how he cringed every time he heard the sounds of a 7.64 round (caliber bullet used by an AK-47) impacting the armored personnel carrier. He relayed his fears to me and revealed that the sound would echo in his mind as he slept. I was surprised to find out how much he knows about this weapon, he can differentiate the sound from its barrel from an American, British, or Canadian rifle. In this piece, I wanted to present the opposing forces’ weapons as a symbol of fear. This rifle is the world’s most highly produced weapon and has been commonly associated with America’s enemies since World War II. I chose to render the rifle by accentuating the most recognizable parts, such as the curved magazine and ribbed body, so there is no mistaking this gun for another. This rifle’s design has not changed much for over sixty years, so a veteran from the Korean War to the latest War on Terror would recognize it.

There was a time when my brothers’ minds were tuned to a more peaceful sound. Sharp (Appendix, 3) depicts a violin. It is a symbol of the sound that once echoed in our home. In this painting, I chose my brother’s old violin as the focus. It had not produced a single sound since his deployment to Iraq. I remember him explaining to me the meaning of crescendo, the loudest peak in a slowly rising piece of music. The challenge was how to convey this term in a painting and to depict sound as visual elements. In order to appreciate sound you must first have silence. So, I painted the background black to represent silence. Then, I placed an image of a violin centrally on the canvas. Again, I used chiaroscuro to reveal the parts of the instrument. I highlighted the resonating chamber and the void of the f-hole. To relay the idea of crescendo, I revealed the strings in increasing degrees. The first string appears to catch a small bit of light, in the second string I revealed more of its length, and continued this rendering until I had painted the fourth. These four ascending lines are meant to represent a slow rise in sound. They are the sharpest detail in the painting. I chose to represent the neck and the scroll as a faint silhouette to
give direct focus to the strings.

*The Call* (Appendix, 4) is a painting of a trumpet, another instrument that one of my brothers played. This one in particular represents some of my family’s angst and fears. It is the same instrument that is used to play Taps during a soldier’s funeral. It has also been used in the trenches to signal for men to charge machine gun fire or to sound a retreat. In this work, I wanted to merge the instrument of war and peace in one visual statement. *The Call* takes on two meanings: one is that music can be used in war and the other as a way to symbolically call a soldier home in a funeral. In developing the image, I highlighted the valves and finger rings similar to highlighting the trigger of the rifle. I once again used *chiaroscuro* to imply a crescendo of light as it travels from the valve to the top of the trumpet’s bell.

When I paint, I build on layers of pigment in the order from light to dark using acrylic paints, charcoal, and ink. Then from total darkness, I begin to remove layers, revealing more and more light by removing layers. The more I dig through layers, the brighter the painting becomes. It is clear that war has changed my brothers, and painting these objects and instruments became a way for me to reach out to them. Like my painting process, I dig to reach a light that was once present in my brothers, and I hope will come through again.

**Sculpture**

*Be All You Can Be* is a slogan that the United States military used to attract young men to the Army. My brothers were subjected to this propaganda and enlisted in the services. The army then turned them into weapons of war. After their service, I was disheartened that the military did nothing to help transition my siblings coming back to civilian life.

*Be All You Can Be* (Appendix, 5) is one of my works dealing with my brothers having
PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). I made bombshells to symbolically represent my brothers after war. On the five porcelain shells, I wrote the words Be All You Can Be in a faded military olive drab to imply overuse, wear and tear, and the passing of time. I used clear cracked glass glaze on each of the vessels to illustrate a fragile state. I chose to use white porcelain clay to contrast with the camouflage colors of war. White is associated with purity and innocence, and in this case, white is tainted with a faded military logo.

In all the porcelain pieces I addressed war and its lingering effects. In the piece Shell (Appendix, 6), I represented a military weapon used to carry a payload of explosives as an empty delicate vessel. To emphasize the fragile nature of these post-war soldiers, I again used the cracked glass glaze. In the body of the shell, I placed two facing f-holes to give it a musical attribute and to suggest a resonating chamber. Often these bombs are equipped with a whistle that gradually gets louder as it approaches the ground and upon impact, a crescendo in war. The title Shell has a dual meaning intended to be interpreted both as a container for incendiaries and as a fragile vessel.

Fragments (Appendix, 7) is another porcelain work with dual meaning. This piece is modeled after the shape of a standard military hand grenade. In the military, hand grenades are commonly identified as fragments or frags but this term is also applied to the emotional and mental state of a soldier coming back from war. I created the piece without a pin, indicating that the weapon is now live and ready to blow. The f-holes are once again present on the body of the grenade giving the piece another purpose.

The sculpture series is about my brothers coming home from war and their attempt to adjust back to civilian life. The bombs and grenade represent what they have become by way of conflict and war.
My work on canvas also addresses the journey that my brothers took from gentle teenage boys who had an affinity for music to becoming weapons of war in the military. I used a still-life approach in creating symbolic portraits and the Old Master technique of chiaroscuro to tell a story. In both of my media, I examined conflict that affected people I know. It is my hope that others recognize that soldiers coming home are casualties who have suffered beyond the physical damage of the human body. War and conflict cut deep through a human being’s soul and his or her suffering often is undiagnosed and unrecognizable. Perhaps music will still play a role in my brother’s life, in healing or as a prosthetic for an amputated spirit.

Conclusion

The MIS-IAR Program allowed me to convey my thoughts and feelings that I’ve had for my brothers during their endeavors in war. I was able to create a tremendous amount of paintings and sculptures that are deeply personal to me. The courses offered, along with teacher guidance, were instrumental in helping me develop a mature series of work.

I began my studies in the MIS-IAR Program soon after my twins were born. This was a time that could have been a difficult stage to pursue a master’s degree. However, this program gave me the flexibility to take courses during the evening hours or weekends. During the coursework, my teaching career took me overseas. The program once again accommodated my situation by helping me find opportunities to continue my studies online and through independent work. I am indebted to this institution for going above and beyond in allowing me to finish my studies.

I am currently teaching art with an International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum in the Kingdom of Bahrain. The IB program demands students to be versatile in different disciplines.
and to experiment with different approaches to art. The MIS-IAR Program has vastly improved my ability to connect ideas with different media and has made me a better educator. This program was also instrumental in helping me acquire an upcoming teaching position at Singapore American School (SAS). I was one of forty-nine candidates applying for the art position. The SAS is a prestigious institution known to only employ the most progressive teachers with interdisciplinary skill sets, qualities that the MIS-IAR ingrained in me as a student and played a key role in distinguishing me from other candidates. I plan to continue my studies beyond graduation by maintaining my relationship with my MIS-IAR mentors and teachers. In order to remain a great educator, I must be an even better student.
Bibliography


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