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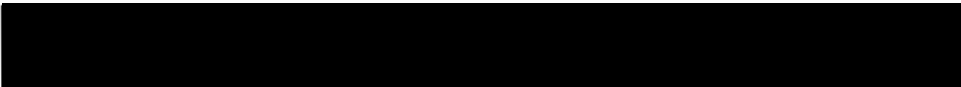
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School of Graduate Studies
Virginia Commonwealth University

This is to certify that the documentation prepared by **Wendy Bruce** entitled

Quiet Conversations

has been approved as satisfactory completion of the documentation requirement for the degree Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art.


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Quiet Conversations

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Artist's Statement

Several years ago, a professor suggested to me that my work was like a series of conversations. At the time, I was reading everything I could find about spirituality in art including the writings of Wassily Kandinsky. He asserted that the vital element in a work of art is the emotion in the soul of the artist, which has the capacity to evoke a similar emotional response in the observer. He believed that painting is in no way different from a song; each is communication. As I reflected on everything I had read and on my instructor's comment, I began to think of my work as a quiet soulful conversation with myself, with other artists, and with my surroundings. In a conversation, as in an artwork, it is important not to say too much or monopolize the conversation.

Quiet Conversations

Although I had been painting for several years prior to entering Virginia Commonwealth University's (V.C.U.) Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (M.I.S.) program, it was not until the second painting class that I began to think critically about the content and direction of my work. At the time, I was working on a series of encaustic paintings inspired by memories of a childhood friend. Don Crow, the instructor, observed the work and quietly commented to me, "Your works seem to be a series of conversations...with each other and with the world." Something clicked when he said this as I had been reading several books about spirituality in art. Many of the writers asserted that, in order for a work of art to be successful, there must be some connection made with the observer. One of the artists I was reading about was Xavier Toubes, who is currently a ceramics professor at the Art Institute of Chicago. He said, "Art, you see, is involvement with the world. When you are in the act of creation, you are in a dialogue with the world and with your materials."¹ These events prompted me to change the direction of my work. Prior to this and to entering the M.I.S. program, my paintings were self-revealing. People had a difficult time trying to relate to the works because the only conversation I was having was with myself. I began to understand that, with respect to my work, I had to learn how to be a better communicator. I found this to be a coincidental chain of events because my motive for entering the program was to have more interaction with other artists.

¹ Polly Ullrich, "Xavier Toubes," *American Craft* (June-July 2001), 65.

The Topics of Conversation: Objects

I started to think of my paintings as a group of quiet conversations with myself, with other artists, and with my surroundings. The subject matter of the works varied but all were linked thematically to issues of spirituality. Many of the pieces were inspired by nature or by natural objects. The life, death and rebirth cycles seemed to create a soulful connection for me. Works that I completed at this time were *Birdsongs No. 2* and *No. 5* (Appendix, Numbers 1 and 2). These works were similar in themes of regeneration but also of individuality. The *Birdsongs* were begun in response to Aretas A. Saunders' documentation of the singing of various birds. In 1948, he invented a diagrammatic system to notate pitch, duration of the notes and volume. Several reproductions of his musical shorthand are incorporated into my paintings. As I was completing the paintings, I thought about my choice of imagery. For artists throughout the ages, birds have been metaphors for the soul's journey heavenward and are sometimes referred to as messengers of the gods. Many of the artists I have read about, such as Emily Carr (1871-1945) and Nancy Graves (1940-1995), utilized the image of the bird. For Carr, birds were a symbol of endurance. In her book about Carr, Sharyn Rohlfen Udall noted that "Her attic retreat had two large eagles painted on the ceiling; often she would lie beneath them and 'absorb their strength'."² Birds in Carr's work seemed to impart a spiritual element to her paintings while Nancy Graves found the bird's eye view to be the inspiration for her works presented in the 2002 exhibition *Aves: Forms in Flight*. Like Graves and Carr, I am inspired by the creativity and self-sufficiency of the creatures. The

² Sharyn Rohlfen Udall, *Carr, O'Keeffe, Kahlo: Places of Their Own* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 174.

artist is similar to the bird: we sing, dance, build, display ourselves, display our structures and the possessions we gather. Birds are truly the artists of nature. And, birdsong, like conversation, creates the challenge of a response.

A second topic of conversation is the emotional capacity of everyday objects. Depictions of a child's dress, a chair, a rock or a bone appear in my paintings. We often develop complex attachments to ordinary items that might address a memory or serve as a reminder of passing time. Domestic items are common, familiar and easily overlooked. Therefore, the objects can easily transcend themselves. They can grow in meaning as they change in form and character. In *Conversation No. 3* and *Conversation No. 4* (Appendix, Numbers 3 and 4), a girl's dress patterns serve as the basis of a visual dialogue about identity formation and memory. While creating the works, I thought about how my idea of self was influenced by the drawings of girls and women that appeared on the cover of the pattern packages. To create the works, I collaged actual dress patterns onto two boards. I applied wax on top of the patterns in order that parts of the design be concealed. From the cover of the pattern package, I cut out images of a dress and placed it on the surface of the works. Last, I incorporated red and pink threads into a final layer of wax. In each of the works, I varied the size of the boards so that one panel of each work would appear more significant than the other. As I was varying the size of the panels, I thought about how some conversations seem to be one-sided or how one part of a conversation may be more relevant than another.

Remembrances No. 3 and *No. 4* (Appendix, Numbers 5 and 6) utilize the image of a solitary chair. In these works, the chair is a symbol for the self. As I experimented

with the placement of the chair against different colored grounds, I noticed that in each painting the chair seemed to convey various emotional characteristics. In *No. 3*, the chair is placed in a red ground, creating a feeling of anxiety. In *No. 4*, the chair is devoid of color communicating a sense of vulnerability and loneliness. Contributing to the complexity of these emotions is the relationship of the small scale of the chairs to the rest of the composition.

Tools are the everyday objects depicted in *cut, puncture, mend* (Appendix, Numbers 7, 8 and 9). I view tools as symbols of strength. The term “power tool” intrigues me. At the start, I was thinking about the idea of power--how we struggle with the lack of it, the acquisition of it, what it actually is. The death of a family member occurred while I was completing the series, so the meaning of the work began to become more acutely about loss of power. I found it compelling that the hard, resistive tools were created using only soft, fluid thread. In order to produce each piece, I digitally photographed or scanned the tools, altered their shapes and colors and then stitched the images onto water-soluble fabric. Once the pieces were finished, I washed the fabric away, leaving only an image in thread. I compared the act of rinsing away the support material to the process of loss and recovery. At the end, I began to see the thread paintings as symbols of the power of healing.

The Topics of Conversation: Subjects

Other conversations occur with women artists and writers whose work I admire. I needed to learn about the role of women in the arts, so I spent a lot of self-directed energy

finding books about women artists and traveling to museums and galleries. I also looked for women writers who wrote about their lives. Of particular importance to me were the writings of Janet Frame (1924-). My work, *no trouble* (Appendix, Number 10), was created in response to her personal story of mental illness in which she came to understand that, in order to hide her disease from friends and family, she would have to be “no trouble, no trouble at all.”³ In an experiment with casting rubber, I created the cast of a briar. When I removed the form from the plaster, it resembled a spine. As I read about the treatments she endured, I knew that the spine would be used in a work honoring her. It is peculiar that it started out as a briar because she always felt unattractive and out of place, yet she grew into a well-known writer. Her story was one of incredible strength and redefinition of self, which encouraged me to stand firm in my declaration of myself as an artist. Many of her poems and stories are about mortality, grief, alternate hidden meanings and memories, which were some of the same ideas I was working with.

Messages from Georgia: Is this mine? (Appendix, Number 11) was an encaustic work I created after reading Udall’s book *Carr, O’Keeffe and Kahlo: Places of Their Own*. Georgia O’Keeffe (1857-1986), of the three, seemed the least sure of her ideas. She questioned whether any of her works were truly her ideas alone. Her voice can be heard in the work in a quotation from her that I inscribed into the wax. I placed an image transferred from one of my encaustic paintings in the lower center of a large ground of rose-colored wax. The image included two chairs of the same size, but they differed in

³ Janet Frame, *An Angel at My Table* (New York: George Braziller, 1984), 65.

shape. Shortly after the encaustic was completed, I saw the works of a colleague in which he had included a chair as the central object in his painting. I began to wonder if I had absorbed the idea from him.

The concept of beauty in art is often a subject of discussion in my work. In 1999, the Hirshhorn Museum mounted an exhibition titled “*Regarding Beauty*”. Thirty-six artists, twelve of them women, addressed questions such as “Does beauty exist in the mind or are there actual standards of beauty?” and “Can beauty be found in ugliness?” I created *Beauty Unaware* (Appendix, Number 12) and *Beauty Discourse* (Appendix, Number 13) after seeing this show. *Beauty Discourse* was created using felt and thread and depicts two genderless heads exchanging thoughts about beauty. The felt acts as a blackboard upon which embroidered thoughts sink in and out so that some thoughts appear more readable than others.

Beauty Unaware was created without any pre-conceived idea of what it was addressing. At the start, I just wanted to visually capture this beautiful, yet poisonous, Sundew plant in thread. It seemed appropriate to use thread because embroidery is often described as beautiful. I juxtaposed an image of the Three Graces with the plant. In Greek mythology, the Three Graces attended to the needs of Aphrodite, who was the embodiment of desire. Aphrodite offered physical and spiritual pleasure that was transformative. In contrast, the Graces offered a kind of genuine, unassuming beauty that innocently exists. The poisonous Sundew plant, which is also very beautiful, is destructive. I view the plant and the Graces as opposing aspects of beauty—one is unique and honest, while the other has a hidden agenda. I titled the piece *Beauty Unaware*

because regardless of what occurs with the poisonous plant, beauty will survive in all its various forms. The meaning of the piece seemed to evolve over time; I currently regard it as my response to some of the critics' reactions to the Hirshhorn show and to the place of beauty in contemporary art. In twentieth century art, beauty is often linked with sentimentality; however, I regard something as being beautiful when it is unique.

Thomas Moore, a contemporary writer in the area of archetypal psychology, wrote, "For the soul, beauty is not defined as pleasantness of form, but rather as the quality in things that invites absorption and contemplation."⁴

Whether I am addressing ideas about beauty, responding to the thoughts of other artists or investigating the power of everyday objects, all of the images are chosen intuitively and all works seem to convey the idea that there is sacredness to be found in everyday life. Many of the meanings I have attached to the images have evolved and will continue to change as the conversation develops.

Listen and Respond: Where Did the Conversation Lead?

Life events that occurred while I was in the program led me to focus more intently on the spiritual aspect of my work. It became vital to me to find some proof that there is life beyond this one and that there is a reason for all of the struggles we encounter. The conversations I had with Don and those he had with the group during critiques gave me permission to address these difficult issues in my work. Prior to being in his class, most of my studio class discussions focused on technique and materials. Don wanted to know

⁴ Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life* (New York: Collins Publishers, 1992), 279.

what the work was about! Where was I going with this and why? Don would bring books from the V.C.U. library to me so that I could see that other artists were working with similar ideas. After reading the books, I responded by seeking my own inner vision of reality that was greater than my individual self. One book of tremendous importance that I read was *Concerning the Spiritual in Art and Painting in Particular*, by Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944). It was the first time I had ever heard someone refer to the “soul of the artist.” He wrote, “The general relationship of those works of art which through the centuries are not weakened but always more and more strengthened does not lie in the external but in the deep roots of mystical content.”⁵ *Chair Series No. 3, No. 7 and No. 9* (Appendix, Numbers 14, 15 and 16) were completed while I was reading this book. The room acts as a psychological space and the chairs reference individuals. I incorporated the image of the bear. It was an image that one of my elementary students was working with at the time. I also used the image of a lion that I found when I was searching for bear photographs. When people ask me why I chose the bear or lion, I can offer no explanation other than the images seemed mysterious to me. Reading Kandinsky’s thoughts gave me permission to include this unexplained, numinous content in my paintings. This new way of working, without predicting the outcome or pre-selecting the imagery, led me to create some of my most successful pieces. *Untitled* (running men) (Appendix, Number 17) depicts two men running in an interior space away from a bear. As I was working on another painting that included the image of a bear, I found a book about the figurative photography of Edward Muybridge (1830-

⁵ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art and Painting in Particular* (San Francisco: Wittenborn Art Books, 1976), 53.

1904). On my studio table, I noticed the bear and Muybridge's running men in proximity to one another and they seemed to create some type of peculiar discord, so I juxtaposed them together in an implied interior space.

All of the readings and my discussions with Don guided the conversation to another level. Attentive listening became integral to my work as I listened to what other artists had to say as well as my own intuitive voice.

The Manner in Which Something is Said

In a conversation, as in a work of art, how something is said sometimes reveals the true intentions of the speaker. In an artwork, the manner in which something is said would be the artist's use of color, line, shape and materials and the information provided by the artist in the titles. I intentionally use subdued colors that convey a quiet and calm order conducive to the idea of quiet spirituality. Shapes, even when they represent a geometric structure, tend to be rendered organic as the edges are softened with thread or wax.

Many of the works are not framed; those with frames are constructed using as little material as possible. Most are painted white or lightly stained to minimize the edge. This is done to maximize the viewer's ability to connect with the piece unobstructed by its presentation.

The works have ambiguous titles or no titles at all. I do this so that the viewer has the opportunity to attach his or her own meanings to the pieces. It is also important to me that the imagery remains fluid and receptive to change. I find that viewers are better able

to connect to the artworks in some way if the imagery remains vague.

The primary materials I use, encaustic and thread, engage the body and the mind. Both are fluid rather than resistive materials. Many of the encaustic's characteristics make it uniquely suited to quietly address my thoughts concerning non-physical reality. I believe there are many layers to our existence. Jasper Johns (1930-) referred to the wax as "being like flesh".⁶ When used as a collage medium, encaustic can act to both conceal and reveal hidden layers, just as skin contains our internal structures. It may encapsulate collaged materials or be scraped away to excavate layered imagery. The layering of various materials into the wax is parallel to the layering strategies we mimic in our own self-construction.

Cloth holds an emotional connection in that it touches our bodies from the day we are born. It is an appropriate foundation for some of my artworks as it is uniquely suited to address certain ideas related to cycles of life, death, and rebirth. The repetitive stitching, found in many of the works, is soothing and seems to relay a sense of energy. The contemporary artist Betye Saar has described thread as a metaphor for connection. She refers to the act of stitching as "spirit centering".⁷ The repetition of stitching is comparable to the rhythm of our heartbeats. It can also be seen as healing in that, with each stitch, a wound is created and then healed.

People always ask if they can touch my encaustic and embroidered work.

Although this quality is found in some of my works, it is not always inherent in others

⁶ Bill Beckley and David Shapiro, *Uncontrollable Beauty: Towards a New Aesthetics* (New York: Allworth Press, 2002), 399.

⁷ Jeanne S. M. Willette, "Stitching Lives: Fabric in the Art of Betye Saar," *Fiber Arts*, (March-April 1997: 45.

such as in *Tires on Tar* (Appendix, Number 18). This book was created using a tire I found on the interstate. My brother had just written a poem called *Tires on Tar*. The poem was about loneliness and feeling like an outsider. I chose to use the discarded tire, as it seemed an appropriate material for a poem about isolation and separation. The tire also presents an interior and exterior which serves as a metaphor for an individual. I collaged and stapled his poem and my image transfers directly onto the interior surface of the tire. The exterior of the book presents a tire that has been shredded and marked by its journey; the interior is where viewers can find the essence of the book.

Glass and wood were the materials I selected for *f-word book: the creative process* (Appendix, Number 19). Words in this freestanding book include frantic, frenzy, frustrated, fractured, frazzled, and finally free. As I often do with the encaustic paintings, I encased objects such as pins, wire and paperclips between two pieces of glass, fused them together in the kiln and then constructed a wooden frame for each page. The supports for the pages of the book are colored and graphite pencils of different heights. The creative process is one of recycling ideas and materials, so the use of recycled glass, pencils and wood seemed to reflect this activity.

All of the materials I use are selected according to what is most appropriate to the message. Sometimes it is more suitable to use encaustic or thread; at other times, I find that more unusual materials are required. Whether I am utilizing a tire or assembling found materials, each media in its own unique way invites the viewer to come closer.

Small Talk

In a mixed media class, taught by Martha Saunders, we were introduced to the idea of letting pieces develop without the final product in mind. She suggested that I begin reading about femmage. Femmage is a type of collage created traditionally by women that includes textile materials such as lace and thread. Miriam Shapiro (1923-) coined the term in the late 1960's to describe her fabric collages. I enjoyed the fortuitous nature of encaustic and the way in which found objects could be incorporated into the wax. So, I applied encaustic to the technique of femmage. I decided that I would work small and then somehow join the pieces together into a larger unit if needed.

Other aspects of femmage include reassembling, restructuring, and collecting elements. Small bits of writing are often incorporated into the work and the imagery is often secretive. I found that I was already using many of the ideas and techniques of femmage, so I looked to those artists for further inspiration. A subway installation by contemporary artist Joyce Kozloff (1942-) in Wilmington, Delaware began as small tiles that would fit in her lap; the notion of lap work did not go unnoticed by me. I began to think, in a conversation, small talk could lead to larger talk. In other words, meaningful discussions cannot begin without small talk. Often, my pieces were successful enough to stand alone while at other times I found that I needed to join several of the smaller pieces together into a larger one. I intended *leaf fall* (Appendix, Number 20) to be a small, one panel work. As individual paintings were completed, I decided that they often had more to say as a part of a larger unit. I created a way of hanging these small pieces so that they could be grouped easily in any number of configurations.

With small pieces, I sometimes would mount more than one encaustic panel in a supporting frame. I discovered that, when the panels are placed together in a frame, associations are created between the pieces. Although I was working large at the outset of the program, I currently complete smaller works that can be mounted together into larger pieces.

I discovered that small pieces did not have to mean small subjects. I found that breadth and depth of thought have no relation to physical size. I am reminded of the small children I teach and how so often they say something in class that I find extremely profound.

Future Talk: What to Say Next

Talk can change lives. What we say to ourselves and what we say to others can have a powerful effect on our emotional well-being and our creative motivations. What was the result of all of this talk? I now introduce myself to others as an artist. The artwork has created an arena in which I am self-actualized. As my sense of self developed, I moved away from self-investigation towards an investigation of the art.

In my research regarding conversation, I was fortunate to find Theodore Zeldin's *Conversation*. In his book, he describes the history of conversation and how conversations have altered history. He explains how every new era changes the subject of the dialogue and how all of this talk can change lives. He writes, "The most successful conversations are when ideas are reshaped or new thoughts are introduced."⁸ As the

⁸ Theodore Zeldin, *Conversation* (Mahwah, NJ: Hidden Springs Press, 2000), 14.

result of completing this course of study, my ideas have certainly been refined and I am more knowledgeable of materials and methods. I have emerged a different person as the result of quiet conversations with myself, with other artists, and with my surroundings.

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Appendix

Slide List

1. *Birdsong No. 2*, 2000, encaustic mixed media, 10" x 8"
2. *Birdsong No. 5*, 2000, encaustic mixed media, 10" x 8"
3. *Conversation No. 3*, 2001, encaustic mixed media, 10" x 8"
4. *Conversation No. 4*, 2001, encaustic mixed media, 8" x 10"
5. *Remembrance No. 3*, 2001 encaustic mixed media, 12" x 12"
6. *Remembrance No. 4*, 2001, encaustic mixed media, 12" x 12"
7. *cut, puncture, mend; (leather punch)*, 2002, thread, 8" x 6"
8. *cut, puncture, mend; (hammer and nail)*, 2002, thread, 8" x 6"
9. *cut, puncture, mend; (needle and thread)*, 2002, thread, 8" x 6"
10. *no trouble*, 2001, encaustic mixed media, 14" x 10"
11. *Messages from Georgia: Is This Mine?*, 2001, encaustic mixed media, 28" x 24"
12. *Beauty Unaware*, 2001, embroidered painting, 12" x 9"
13. *Beauty Discourse*, 1999, embroidery on hand felting, 18" x 24"
14. *Chair Series No. 3*, 2000, encaustic mixed media, 9" x 5"
15. *Chair Series No. 7*, 2000, encaustic mixed media, 5" x 9"
16. *Chair Series No. 9*, 2000, encaustic mixed media, 5" x 9"
17. *Untitled (running men)*, 2001, encaustic mixed media, 7" x 12"
18. *Tires on Tar*, 2001, mixed media book, 6" x 30" x 18"
19. *f-word book: the creative process*, 1999, mixed media book, 9" x 36" x 6"
20. *leaf fall*, 2001, encaustic mixed media, 24" x 45"

Wendy Bruce

