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## Processing Nature

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*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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## **Processing Nature**

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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## Table of Contents

Artist Statement.....	ii
Introduction.....	1
Concepts and Intent.....	3
Influences .....	4
Body of Work.....	9
Conclusion .....	14
Bibliography.....	16
Appendix .....	17
List of Figures .....	17
Images.....	18
Resume.....	24

## **Artist Statement**

In my artwork, I merge nature with typography. I use macro-level photography to capture details of nature, such as the pistils of a flower or the sensory hairs of an insect. I print enlargements and transfer these photos onto pages of poetic text about nature, or collage them onto canvas. Once transferred, I use multiple media to alter and enhance features of the photos. I intentionally obscure much of the text which allows me to place focus on the overall layout and design. The arrangement of lines of text and spacing of words is used to create a visual rhythm. The poetic script acts as a foundation or platform for presenting the often unnoticed elements of nature.

In developing a piece, I use a wet transfer which allows me to obtain subtle textures and imperfections that occur from the process. To add visual interest and complexity, I continue to manipulate the surfaces with various media and marks. This approach helps to create a blending of text and image. Similar to reading a poem or observing nature, I want to engage the viewer in an experience of visual poetry.

# Processing Nature

## Introduction

Growing up, I was lucky to be exposed to different forms of art. My parents owned a print shop that included a design department. My mother had a love and flare for arts and crafts which she had me participate in to keep me busy. We often visited galleries and museums where I spent hours wandering the rooms taking in all that was offered. I learned to appreciate different forms of art very early on.

When I entered college I was not sure what I wanted to study. So, that first year I took a plethora of courses in the hopes that one would provide a calling, which happened when I ended up in a photography course. That first course gave me the comfort that I had come to appreciate from the art world and I knew this was the path to follow. Once I found my stride in photography I ventured into other forms of art, from design to ceramics to painting. All of the courses provided me with a sense of purpose. I realized then I had a lot to learn as an artist and to this day I still have that feeling. However, I am now more comfortable in exploring my art and expressing myself through my compositions. I believe it benefits me and my artwork to be a perpetual student of the arts.

After finishing all the photography requirements in my undergraduate program, I took some graphic design courses. The techniques I learned and used in photography translated over to design very well. Graphic design by its features is precise and requires organization, which played well to my strengths as an artist. Because I

diversified to graphic design, I ended up working as a graphic designer for an advertising agency after graduation and spent years establishing my process in digital design. The technology I learned in the early years of my career offered me opportunities beyond just commercial advertising, and I employ much of that technology in my current artwork.

As I worked as a designer and created my own artwork I found my love of teaching. I had been creating art and exploring my concepts and creative development processes for years when I got a call to teach a digital composition course. Those early experiences as a designer and artist provided me expertise that I could offer to others. At that point, I started teaching Communication Design at Northern Virginia Community College. I also established a freelance design business to provide a creative outlet for myself.

Soon, I was giving much of my creative energy to my students and I was not taking time to expand my own endeavors. So, I decided to continue my own work and studies by enrolling in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). I wanted to push beyond what I had determined were limitations that I found in my artwork. Through the program, I worked to better appreciate what I was creating and why I was creating it. I focused on photography and computer in the arts as my concentrations, and combined these areas into a cohesive body of work. These disciplines offered me the platform to challenge myself once again by combining learning with my teaching.

## **Concepts and Intent**

My experiences have shaped the work I create today. From the early days of watching my mother make detailed paper dioramas to my years of teaching and working as a designer, I have felt compelled to bring order to my work. I have developed an ability to be observant, express my thoughts, and address my constant need to learn.

In my work, I focus on my experiences in the natural environment. I observe the beauty of nature through my camera lens. However, my work also pulls me back indoors to where I have the joy of working with design principles. It is at this intersection that my body of work is realized.

I mix imagery with text to express the relationship that nature and typography can have with each other. I seek to portray the tiny details that nature offers with a twist of expression delivered through the structure of typography. The photographic and textual compositions build and grow over time. I combine these images with book pages or hand-written text that visually complement the photographs' sentiment. For example, if the photograph features a butterfly I search for text that has words or phrases that reference butterflies. I also evaluate the structure of the typographical selections to highlight areas within the objects of the photographs. Finally, layering a variety of materials helps me blend and contrast the soft subtle features of the photos with the sharp and defined lines of text. My objective for each piece is to create a rhythmic flow of images and texts that is enhanced by the use of other materials and mediums.

My approach in building a composition begins with a methodical and structural process. For example, each piece starts with the selection of a digital photograph, which focuses on macro-level objects that I find in nature. My goal is to reveal the small details of an object focusing on the parts that make up the whole. As the work develops, I gradually use my intuition and make more spontaneous decisions. The artwork begins to evolve by layering a variety of media, such as when I collage pages of books onto a support. I tend to use poems because they have a variety of line lengths and give the reader small bits of content. My experimentation has also taken me to old books as well as horticulture books. The variety of books provides an assortment of typographical styles that allows for contrast. The textual lines on the pages afford structure and visual complexity. By combining the organic features of nature and the structural format of text, I intend to create a new response to an image.

## **Influences**

My love of photography started with Ansel Adams (1902-1984) who I was introduced to during my first photography course. He is well-known for his vast, black and white landscapes as well as for being an environmentalist. He found joy walking through nature and presenting the wilderness to others. Through his photography, he captured attention for environmental issues that resonated for preservation. Adams' love for the environment was echoed in the work he created.

He believed that "a photograph was made, not taken." (Adams, 15) He wanted to present images that moved beyond the recording of an instant to a translation of the



scene through a tonal range. His masterful treatment with exposure and contrast allowed his work to capture the environment. It was important to him that viewers witnessed what he saw through his camera and the techniques he employed.

Adams' landscapes engulf the viewer with their perspective. The vantage point offered by his photographs express the peacefulness as well as the enormity of the world. His seizing of light through the control of shutter speed and aperture, to obtain the most precise exposure, provided an exact level of stillness we can find in nature. He had the ability to use values of brightness to capture details and project textures on the subject. *Old Tree, Snowstorm* (1948) embodies his use of light reflecting off the crisp white snow against the dark texture offered by the tree. The snow covered trees and low hanging clouds back dropped by the mountain are simply portrayed, yet what occurred in nature and what was left behind was complex.

Even though Adams was best known for his landscapes he did offer an *Intimate Nature* series, which focused on details of nature. In *Icicles, Yosemite* (1934), he isolated an element that appeared in one of his panoramic landscapes but offered the viewer a more specific examination. In these photos, he kept to his calculating manner of capturing the different tones of light. By working with smaller apertures and longer exposures, the close-up photos offered sharp details that reveal his use of the tonal range. Even with this viewpoint of nature, the series exemplified Adams comprehensive practice of presenting elements of nature in focus and in balance. This view is the magnification of a small piece within a much larger setting that moves beyond an all-encompassing view of nature. The details of light, shadow, and highlights in these

images more closely highlight the composition than the depicted object.

With the influence of Adams, I ventured to the outdoors to find what I could uncover in nature. I focused my attention on macro photography and observed and recorded nature. Much like Adams' *Intimate Nature* works, I present a visual that moves beyond the usual depiction of nature. I focus on the pieces within a larger subject taking a more intimate approach to the composition. I present photos that are closer to something we could pick up and examine with a magnifying glass, yet usually do not notice. I look for a distinct view for a shot by isolating an area within the subject. As with Adams, I work to control my camera to yield high quality images that offer sharp details and an isolated focus. His work encourages me to explore and express what I find in nature and offer it to others.

Another artist that inspires my work is Jasper Johns (b. 1930). I visited the Modern Museum of Art in New York, and as I descended the escalator one evening, my eye was drawn to his work, *Flag* (1954-55). This piece was a mixed media collage. I stood for a while evaluating the layering effects. It was at that moment that I realized that the piece was a composite of multiple media and multiple applications. In this work, Johns used encaustic wax as an additive element. The wax created different textures and surface depth, which added visual interest and complexity. It is this use of mixed media that I similarly employ while building my own artwork. Much like Johns, I look to present a simple subject in a new way. The assemblage and collaging of various elements are done to build up the surface of the piece and provide more dimension. Johns dedicated his time to the application of various media to offer a

visual that was familiar, yet unfamiliar. For example, he used newspaper strips in *Flag* to make the surface more dynamic, giving it a three-dimensional effect. The unevenness of the application of the encaustic wax on the newspaper created ripple effects but left behind distinguishable letters. The words are not readable however the letterforms are recognizable. This technique of presentation and his use of multiple media is where Johns offers me the most guidance. By adding layers, the image morphs and changes. By using a variety of media, such as watercolors or wax, I am able to control the presentation of the piece. My use of encaustic wax comes from my desire to adhere media beyond the use of glue or paint. It allows for building textural depth as well as adhering pigments and paper.

Johns selected imagery that the mind can readily identify. Even though a flag can carry a host of connotations, it is up to the viewer to find the meaning and purpose behind the artwork. It is within the artists' expression that the piece becomes real for the viewer. Johns stated in an interview in 1965 that "... a painting should include more experience than a simply intended statement." (Sylvester, 465) He created a dialog with the viewer versus just presenting an image. The use of his collaging and essential altering of a subject provided this dialog. The marrying of fine arts with everyday objects is a motive I share with Johns. Showing a flower or a flag is fine, but displaying unexpected details pushes the boundaries of tradition and elevates a subject in its visual presentation.

Johns also believed that the art was in the actual creation not necessarily in the final piece. With my own structured practices, I too submit to the process more than

the glorification of the final artwork. The building of pieces with many different media moves what was basic to a visual that is more complex.

I feel fortunate to have a diverse background in both traditional fine art and contemporary graphic design. In the area of graphic design, I find Paula Scher's (b. 1948) mixing of fine art with graphic design to be exceptional and whimsical in practice and presentation. In *The Maps* painting series, that includes *The United States* (1999), she freehand painted white lettering to identify a location. The paintings do not represent an actual map because the cartography is skewed and at times disjointed in actual location. In *The United States*, she painted the text to build the landscape of the map through changes in size, shape, color, and direction. These changes create the different textures throughout the artwork. Her attention to detail, in depicting the land mass with the letterforms, communicates the hierarchy of the location within the paintings. A traditional atlas or road map would be handled by shading and lines, but she used text to create the dimensional elements of the land. For example, in *Tsunami* (2006), she radiated the words from the eye of the tsunami to visually identify the named locations that were affected by the storm. The circular depiction provides a feeling of how the waves moved across the Indian Ocean. It was her intent to give an impression of the magnitude of the event not a direct representation of that area of the world.

Scher's ability to capture the viewers' attention with typography shows the complement of letterforms to the elements of art. The shapes, colors, and lines of the typographical elements in her imaginatively altered maps are used to depict the

topographical aspects of the land or water. Her techniques appeal to my structured graphic design side, yet the uncommon display charms me into thinking about new uses for letterforms. Scher's work motivates my use of typography as formal elements of art. Much like Scher, I work to employ typography to provide a sense of movement in a piece. By altering the direction or overlapping the text, new shapes and forms are created and highlight areas within a composition. With placement and type size, I give visual weight to an area within the image.

My body of work exemplifies the various influences I have had in my life. My continued desire to learn, explore, and evolve are traits I share with these artists. The pieces I create cross and weave on the paths of these individuals. They provided me with a framework for various methods, techniques, and media to explore. Adams, Johns, and Scher were all innovative in their artwork. They did not settle for what was expected. Similar to these artists, I continue to push beyond what I have done and recognize that exploration and expansion is a part of my process and a part of my artwork.

### **Body of Work**

The process to create my artwork guides the direction I take. In combining typography with imagery, I use a range of approaches. I begin by selecting a photograph that has a wide value range. Then, a substrate such as stretched canvas, canvas board, or handmade paper is chosen to transfer the print. I collage book pages and digital prints onto the substrate to build up the surface. Many times, I apply the

collaged pages into patterns to enhance the image, or they are applied randomly to make an uneven texture more apparent. Sometimes, in the transfer I either remove all the paper or leave some behind for added surface texture. At this point in the process, I apply watercolor pencils or watercolor paints to subtly enhance the colors of the object. Next, encaustic wax is used to create texture or blend with other pigments to develop both smooth and bumpy coverage. When working with canvas, I often use embroidery floss to add depth and coarseness within a composition. Prismacolor markers help outline an object, write text, or color areas within the transferred photograph. The intent with the variety of media and pigments is to build layers.

*A Resting Spot* (Appendix, 1) is a piece where I first collaged poetic text about nature to a canvas board. Then, I applied a digital photograph of a Monarch butterfly. I continued by heightening the colors of the transferred photo with watercolor pencils, and applied thick, smooth strokes of the pigment until the colors were opaque. After the pigment dried, I applied encaustic wax to enhance the intensity of the pigments. The use of a palette knife allowed me to control the application. Lastly, I used a black watercolor pencil and hot wax to draw the legs and antennas of the butterfly. The surrounding floral ground and text were meant to accent the butterfly. My intention was to promote the details of the butterfly to emphasize nature and the beauty of such a small part of a larger setting.

In the next piece, I wanted to create a different composition using the same elements. *Dandelion Seeds* (Appendix, 2) depicts the macro-level of dandelion seed pods in bloom. First, I transferred the image of dandelion seeds to an old book page

about world art. The page of text is turned ninety degrees to the left, running the text vertically, in order to echo the stalks of the blooms. I wanted to use the text as a structural element, and it was not intended to be read in the normal way. Next, I tore the edges of the book page and adhered it to deckled handmade paper, then painted with encaustic wax over the stocks and white blooms. After the wax was dry, I sewed embroidery floss along the stocks to continue the emphasis of vertical lines through the composition. The final results of this piece were meant to capture the nuances of both image and materials. It was a culmination of concept, process, and execution.

In *Chickweed* (Appendix, 3), I continued to experiment with similar techniques and media but without the use of text. This piece depicts an individual chickweed flower. The chickweed is no larger than the head of a pin with only the colors being evident from a distance. I photographed it to open up a world of details in this miniature object. I transferred the photo with matte medium and worked to create flawed and torn edges. By including deckled and flawed edges, the boundaries of the composition are softened and mirror the edges of the handmade paper foundation. I presented the pistils and petals in the photo and heightened their color with watercolors. Next, I used embroidery floss on some petals to create texture and enhance the area around the focal element. Lastly, I applied hot encaustic wax with a palette knife. I used gestural strokes and built up layers of wax on the work to both obscure and emphasize aspects of the image. For this piece, I wanted to embrace the texture of the handmade paper as it affected the transfer image. By working with texture instead of typography, I was able to achieve subtler features of the image and

create depth with materials.

My next piece, *Helicopters* (Appendix, 4), is on stretched canvas. This image presents oak tree seed pods. To begin, I tore book pages of poems into individual strips and collaged them on the lower left and right areas where the image would be transferred. When tacky, I peeled the transfer paper from the photographed inked image. I continued my work with watercolor pencils, watercolor paints, and encaustic wax on the area of the pods, but left the surrounding ground in the broken colors of white and black. The photograph emphasized the negative space and the location of the typography. With the use of additional additives, I was able to heighten the colors to express brightness and the growth of the object.

Continuing my trend of experimenting and exploring different uses of similar materials and techniques, I created *Buzz Buzz* (Appendix, 5) on a deep (6"x6"x2") stretched canvas. The image is of a large scaled bee on an abstracted ground of a macro-view of a pink flower. First, I applied a piece of printed tissue paper to the canvas using matte medium. The paper contained music notes and poems, which provided a visual of what I perceived to be the bee's sound. Then, I transferred the bee using fluid medium and I worked to remove the paper from the ink of the transfer. I wrote *Buzz Buzzzzzz* with Prismacolor markers and added the element with wax and embroidery floss. Finally, I used Prismacolor markers around the outline of the bee. The layered media and the text were meant to simulate the vibration a bee makes as their wings flutter. This piece was created to comprise all the mediums and materials I experimented with during the development of my body of work. I paid special attention



to developing texture and building layers.

My work continued to expand in technique and process with *Pink Flowers* (Appendix, 6). The image is a magnified view of a pink Spider Lavender flower. I worked on canvas board and employed a digital print for transfer, then used watercolor pigment. Using Prismacolor markers, I handwrote the words *pink* and *flowers* along the petals of the flowers. The vertical writing visually elongated the petals and provided a sense of movement. After writing the words, I painted hot encaustic wax with a palette knife over the petals to highlight spots within the composition. The handwritten application of words, directly on the transferred image, offered a new dimension in texture. I was able to achieve texture with freeform text placement.

In my body of work, I explored new artistic approaches, which were inspired by the artists that have been influential to me over the years. By learning techniques and aesthetics from these artists, I achieved a new level presentation in the visuals I offered. By evaluating their work and assessing their materials and applications, I was able to include similar practices that allowed me to communicate in a way that emulates these masters, yet showcases my individual expression. These artists provided me with the inspiration to combine my love of photography, my work with typography, and my experimentation with materials, all of these allowed me to grow as an artist. My exploration of nature photography was guided by my evaluation of Ansel Adams' work. Paula Scher provided me insight into the practice of typography as an element of art that enhances the overall visual message. With the help of Jasper Johns' work, I sought out new applications of media that were not previously in my repertoire.

My choices of media and materials presented new application challenges that I embraced and expanded. I merged color, image, and texture into compositions. I learned to appreciate their characteristics and how they shaped the direction in the creative process. I reached past my once established process and created new work.

## **Conclusion**

Before entering the MIS-IAR Program, my work was feeling forced and stalled. Through the Program, I gained excitement and intrigue and consistently pushed myself to venture in new creative directions. I learned to embrace risks and have found security in my experimentation. Even in my comfort area of photography, I expanded my curiosity for subject and practice. I honed technical skills to prompt new discoveries and further my concept development.

The growth I have experienced during the Program has affected my teaching in many ways. Now, I promote more experimentation and risk-taking by my students as well as more in-depth documentation of their development process. This benefits my students because they feel more in control of their creative projects and they have recorded evidence of their process. My goal for students is to apply their knowledge to new endeavors and creations. I stress that their current project will lead to more involved work in the future.

Each of my peers and instructors offered me guidance and inspiration. They embraced me as a member in a very supportive community of talented individuals. They demonstrated limitless possibilities in their advice as well as the suggestions to

move me forward. Each person I interacted with pushed me beyond my own expectations in my growth as an artist.

What comes next is seen through fresh eyes. As I move forward in my creative life, I will incorporate not only the skills and knowledge learned in my courses but also the intangibles such as perseverance and the embracing of new opportunities. Whether it is in finishing a piece of art, a new course, another degree, or a new occupation, I have found my creative voice in the Program which I will carry with me from this point forward.

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## Appendix

### List of Figures

- Figure 1. *A Resting Spot*, digital print transfer, old book pages, encaustic wax, watercolor pencils on canvas board, 8" x 8", 2016.
- Figure 2. *Dandelion Seeds*, digital print transfer, handmade paper, encaustic wax, embroidery floss on old book page, 8.5" x 11", 2016.
- Figure 3. *Chickweed*, digital print transfer, encaustic wax, watercolor pencils, watercolor paints, embroidery floss on handmade paper, 8.5" x 11", 2016.
- Figure 4. *Helicopters*, digital print transfer, old book pages, encaustic wax, watercolor pencils, watercolor paints on stretched canvas, 16" x 20" x 1", 2016.
- Figure 5. *Buzz Buzz*, digital print transfer, printed tissue paper, encaustic, watercolor pencils, Prismacolor markers, tracing paper, embroidery floss wax on stretched canvas, 6" x 6" x 2", 2016.
- Figure 6. *Pink Flowers*, digital print transfer, encaustic wax, watercolor pencils, Prismacolor markers on canvas board, 6" x 6", 2016.



Figure 1. *A Resting Spot*, digital print transfer, old book pages, encaustic wax, watercolor pencils on canvas board, 8" x 8", 2016.





Figure 2. *Dandelion Seeds*, digital print transfer, handmade paper, encaustic wax, embroidery floss on old book page, 8.5" x 11", 2016.



Figure 3. *Chickweed*, digital print transfer, encaustic wax, watercolor pencils, watercolor paints, embroidery floss on handmade paper, 8.5" x 11", 2016.





Figure 4. *Helicopters*, digital print transfer, old book pages, encaustic wax, watercolor pencils, watercolor paints on stretched canvas, 16" x 20" x 1", 2016.





Figure 5. *Buzz Buzz*, digital print transfer, printed tissue paper, encaustic, watercolor pencils, Prismacolor markers, tracing paper, embroidery floss wax on stretched canvas, 6" x 6" x 2", 2016.





Figure 6. *Pink Flowers*, digital print transfer, encaustic wax, watercolor pencils, Prismacolor markers on canvas board, 6" x 6", 2016.

## Julia J. Turner

### Education

- 2017 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art,  
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia,  
Focus Areas: Photography and Computers and the Arts
- 2004 Master of Education,  
George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia,  
Instructional Design (Curriculum and Instruction)
- 1994 Bachelor of Arts,  
Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant, Michigan,  
Majors: Photography and Graphic Design

### Career Highlights

- 1998-present Professor of Communication Design  
Northern Virginia Community College, Sterling, Virginia
- 1997-present Freelance Designer  
JJTurner Creative, Haymarket, Virginia

### Awards

- 2013 *Outstanding Service to the College*,  
Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale, Virginia
- 2008 *Faculty of the Year*,  
Northern Virginia Community College, Sterling, Virginia
- 2005 *Technology in Education*, Virginia Community College System,  
Richmond, Virginia

### Exhibitions

- 2017 *Processing Nature*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in  
Interdisciplinary Arts Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth  
University, Richmond, Virginia, at Mix Colors Art Studio,  
Bristow, Virginia
- 2000-2016 *Faculty Art Show* (annual), Northern Virginia Community College,  
Sterling, Virginia
- 2013 *Go Font Yourself*, Northern Virginia Community College,  
Sterling, Virginia
- 2008 *Art Across the Sea*, Yuhan College,  
Seoul, Korea