Choice and Chance: Thoughts on My Journey

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Choice and Chance: Thoughts on My Journey

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 Statement

My love of learning, teaching, and providing creative spaces for people to connect informs my work and my life. For me, art is like life: messy, physical, and, if done with intent, beautiful. It is more about the process than the result; it is about recognizing that although we make choices, there are many things we cannot control; it is about being so present in the moment that everything else fades away. How I live, what I do, what I believe, and my art are all the same.
Choice and Chance: Thoughts on My Journey

Introduction

I began my college career late in life. In my mid thirties, I was working full time as a hairstylist and was a part time student at Thomas Nelson Community College. By the time I was 40 I had graduated from Christopher Newport University (CNU) twice. When I received my first Bachelor of Arts in English, coupled with teaching certification for middle school English and history, I was ready to begin my new career. However, it did not take me long to learn that it was not enough to love teaching, you also had to love what you teach. So, I went back to CNU and earned a second degree in Fine Arts.

While I was taking my last classes at CNU, I heard about the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) off-campus art program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). I was interested in continuing my art studies because I still felt my artistic training needed development. After taking some classes at VCU I realized that the wealth of knowledge, support, and relationships that were available through this program would prove to
be invaluable to me as a new teacher and a developing artist. A few semesters later I enrolled in a ceramics class, and what began as just taking a few classes for fun has culminated in a Master of Interdisciplinary Studies, and some of the most enriching relationships of my life.

My Aesthetics

For me, life is about duality - choice and chance; life and death; love and loss; individual and universal. These seemingly contradictory experiences each embody the essence of the other in its core. I recreate this duality in my work by juxtaposing contrasting elements.

I like to control the outcome of the piece as well as allow for chance to play a role. For example, I have always been drawn to things because of their color and texture. This was not a conscious choice, it was purely by chance that these things appealed to me, but it is my choice to incorporate color and texture as primary elements in my work. And, although I control some aspects of my work, I allow others to be controlled by chance.

In more general terms, chance controls some of the most fundamental elements that make me who I am. Chance
decided if I was born in the United States or China, if I was born into a household with wealthy parents prepared for a child, or to teenagers who were not able to care for themselves. At some point, I began to question my circumstances and how chance had brought me to where I am. This was the critical time that I began to be aware of my choices in my life and in my art. Living on this planet as a human being meant that I would experience life and death; love and loss; and joy and pain. I decided to pay attention to these opposing aspects of life and to make choices that affirmed my life. I decided to seek out and provide learning environments to others and myself. The critical moment and the journey are universal, the choices we make along the way and the details of our experiences are individual. These are the concepts I keep in mind as I work.

Artistic Influences

Although there have been numerous influences on my work as an artist, there are a few that stand out for different reasons. Mark Rothko (1903 -1970) stands out for his use of color and his ideas about what he creates and how a viewer responds to it; William Morris (1957-) for his
When I first saw a room full of Mark Rothko’s work, all I remember was the beauty and the range of emotion they evoked. The works ranged from vibrant, passionate pieces like No.14 (Appendix, 1) to ones that seemed hopeless and melancholy like No. 4 (Appendix, 2). It is this ability to capture an emotional feeling and invite a response that motivates me in my work.

Rothko was an intellectual who did not explain the intent of his work; he believed that an explanation was impossible because the meaning of the work was not limited to the intent of the artist or the interpretation of the viewer, but lies in the place where the two meet. He believed that to appreciate his art there had to be a relationship between the finished piece and the viewer. Art writer Jacob Ball-Teshuva states that the aim of Rothko’s work was to express the essence of the universal human drama. His thoughts and attitudes are the things that make him an influence on my work. He was the first artist whose
work touched something universal in my spirit. This is the type of experience I want my viewers to have.

William Morris' work had a similar effect on me but for different reasons. William Morris is a contemporary glass artist whose finished work resembles ceramics. I first saw his work at the Chrysler Museum in Norfolk, Virginia, where his cinerary urns were featured. When I walked into the room where his urns were displayed, I was overwhelmed. Morris began the Cinerary Urns series in response to his mother's death. He says that creating the urns allowed his mind to rise above the intellect's and the ego's need for security. He also says that the urns' power was in their ability to become the vehicle through which the realm of the unknown might be accessed. For him, the urn became the place his mind rests and his soul finds its way to true peace beyond thought.

The power of his work was unmistakable and his ability to take his loss and transform it into a thing of such beauty amazed me. Experimenting with the surface of his vessels, he takes an object representative of death and creates an object of beauty (Appendix, 3). Each piece is unique in texture, color, and form, and yet their function remains the same. He employs a variety of techniques for
securing the lids of his vessels, which adds dimension to the piece. It is the power, the function, and the techniques he employs that make his work influential to me.

Both of the artists mentioned above tapped into what Carl Jung would call the collective unconscious. Jung believed that some experiences in life are common to our species and that we are born with a knowledge that influences our experiences and behaviors, especially emotional ones. Some of the experiences that Jung would argue demonstrate the collective unconscious in action are the experiences of love at first sight, déjà vu, and the immediate recognition of certain symbols and myths. This idea of a collective unconscious that unites people despite cultural, economic, or religious beliefs is one of the reasons that I leave my work open for interpretation. It is these universal experiences and feelings that I attempt to touch upon when I place a figure in a foreign landscape, as in Voyage IV (Appendix, 4) or create a painting without recognizable subject matter, as in Meditations on a Journey (Appendix, 5).

In matters of experimentation and technique, my strongest influence has been Robert Rauschenberg. His commitment to observation, growth, and experimentation is
impressive. He has spent a lifetime observing and commenting on contemporary culture in new and often unusual ways. He has used items as mundane as newspaper and house paint or as bizarre as a stuffed goat or raven. It is this commitment to experimentation and the ability to see the whole world as material for artmaking that inspires me.

**Lidded Vessels**

Clay has always been my medium of choice. I enjoy it's physicality - that it is nearly impossible to work with clay and stay clean; and its plasticity - that it has the ability to become as utilitarian as a bowl or as non-functional as an abstract object. The most personally significant ceramic piece I created combined both utilitarian and sculptural elements.

I lost my son on October 5, 2001 and for over a year I did not create anything. I was devastated, and even though I had promised myself I would create a resting place for my son's ashes, it wasn't until I took my first pottery class through VCU that I began to fulfill this promise. Somehow, the safety of the class structure and the support of the instructor and the other students made
it possible for me to create *Forever in my Arms* (Appendix, 6).

It was not long after I created that piece that I saw William Morris’s Cinerary Urn Exhibit at the Chrysler Museum of Art and was touched both by his work and by his ideas. Initially, I thought I would make urns as a special place for people to keep their loved ones who had passed away. However, I quickly realized that although making my son’s urn had been a healing process for me, it was not something I could do for people with whom I did not have a personal connection. But, the urns would not let me go.

Eventually, I began to view urns and their sealed contents as symbols for our lives. I made vessels with tied lids to represent things we try to keep safe. I also began to think about vessels as containers for secret things we don’t want people to know and how we sometimes go to elaborate lengths to disguise or make beautiful the containers we keep our secrets in. The vessels symbolize my life and the life of my family and friends.

My lidded vessels are vertically oriented to represent hands lifted together in offering just as our lives are offerings (Appendix, 7). The lids are tied in a complex way, making it near impossible to retie them the
same way if opened (Appendix, 8). I did this because I believe that once something contained is released, it is changed forever. And although the untying may not always be pleasant, it presents an opportunity to grow.

The vessel series began as a response to the loss of my son and along the way I learned about family, friends, and community support in a way that forever altered me. My son’s death untied the lid to my vessel and I will never be the same. I will always be broken and a little battered but infinitely more accessible and in some unexplainable way the experience has left me whole.

Digital Imagery

During my MIS program, I learned how to manipulate and produce computer transfers. I used these processes to create a mixed media series entitled Voyage and a large work entitled The Opera and the Peacock.

The Voyage series is comprised of six images that are attached to 15"X15"X3" wall-mounted boxes. I like to use boxes as a ground because they are extremely stable surfaces that give a sturdy, fixed place for conceptual and sometimes unnerving images. Each of the images portrays a figure in an environment. This series is one of mystery
and discovery, of things that are known and things that are unknown. For example, the first two pieces in this series, *Voyage I* (Appendix, 9) and *Voyage II* (Appendix, 10), show figures standing on a precipice in a seemingly hostile environment; depicting the moment of choice when none of the options seem to be favorable.

All six of the images in this series were developed using a similar process. I began with an unsuccessful piece of work I had created in the past because incorporating it symbolized an act of redemption. Each of the boxes were covered with encaustic, an old medium (the ancient Egyptians were known for their encaustic works) and I combined this with a new medium (digital imagery). I wanted to demonstrate the concept of a universal human experience that transverses time. To represent a human presence, I chose to use mannequins because they are somewhat androgynous and cannot be identified as specific individuals. Therefore, they do not represent a specific experience but a universal one.

My next work, *The Opera and the Peacock* (Appendix, 11), is a multi-panel piece that started with two images. The first image was a photo I had taken of the interior of the Sydney Opera House in Australia because I was
drawn to the strong structural and compositional divisions of the space (Appendix, 12). The second image was taken of The Peacock Room, designed by James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) in Washington, DC (Appendix, 13). Again, I have chosen opposing elements of the old and the new but this time they were images of places instead of media.

While creating this piece, I was thinking about how the memory of our experiences are sometimes complicated and fused and how often the things we remember as mistakes in our lives turn out to be the things that create the beauty in our lives. I was compelled to work on an image that addresses the issue of interpretation and reinterpretation of our personal histories and experiences.

In making the piece, I began layering, duplicating, flipping, and altering the images in an attempt to complicate and fuse them. Scale became an issue in this piece because I was working with architectural elements and I wanted to relay a sense of massiveness. I decided to divide the overall image into sixteen wall-mounted boxes and made the individual sections 10"X8"X2". Because the piece is arranged in a grid, and the spacing
between the pieces is variable, the total size of the piece is variable.

Adapting the process I had used for my Voyage series, I attached the images to the front of the boxes and painted the sides black. The use of boxes serves several purposes. They break the overall complexity of the image into smaller less complex elements and they allow for each section to be seen as individual parts of a whole. By painting the sides black, I was showing that our experiences and interpretations are, at best, limited to the surface. To strengthen this point, I emphasized parts of the image by adding encaustic and oil paints, demonstrating that we choose the events in our history that we would like to share with the world. However, it is the overall culmination of the experiences, good and bad, that makes us who we are. Often, it is the events we do not wish to claim that touch others and reveal our humanity.

Conclusion

The MIS program has taught me many things, mainly that our vulnerabilities, the things we try to hide, can be the things that connect us. I expected the program to
strengthen my artistic skills and I was not disappointed. What I did not expect was the wealth of self-knowledge, teaching knowledge, and support I would receive. I learned everything from practical advice on rubrics and lesson plans to more abstract ideas on getting students motivated and managing the unruly child in the classroom. The learning environments created by my instructors facilitated an open, safe environment where we were all free to share our fears, receive support, and to grow.

As I look to the future, I find myself at a crossroads. I love teaching and I love my students, however the experience of the MIS program has opened up a new world to me. I now see how making art can be therapeutic, that the process of making art in a space with other people allows me to open up my creativity. I am now considering enrolling in the Graduate Art Therapy Program offered through Eastern Virginia Medical School (EVMS), as a means of furthering my experiences based in the MIS program. I want to learn more about how to provide a similar therapeutic experience to others. No matter which path I choose, I have come to realize that I am an artist, I am a better teacher and I am a better student. For me, that made the whole experience invaluable.
Bibliography


Appendix

Image List

Figure 1. Mark Rothko, No. 14, oil on canvas, 72"X67", 1953.

Figure 2. Mark Rothko, No. 4, mixed media on canvas, 104"X89", 1964.

Figure 3. William Morris, Cinerary Urns, blown glass, assorted sizes, 2002.

Figure 4. Voyage IV, digital imagery and encaustic, 15"X15"X3", 2005.

Figure 5. Meditations on a Journey, encaustic and oil, 24"X48", 2005.

Figure 6. Forever in my Arms, ceramic and encaustic, 13"X13"X12", 2004.

Figure 7. Lidded Vessel 3 (foreground), ceramic, 21"X7"X7", 2003.

Figure 8. Lidded Vessel 11, ceramic, Anagama kiln fired, 16"X8"X8", 2005.

Figure 9. Voyage I, digital imagery and encaustic, 15"X15"X3", 2005.

Figure 10. Voyage II, digital imagery and encaustic, 15"X15"X3", 2005.

Figure 11. The Opera and the Peacock, digital imagery, encaustic, and oil, each panel 10"X8"X2", 2005.

Figure 12. Sydney Opera House, Interior, digital photography, 4"X5", 2002.

Figure 13. The Peacock Room, digital photography, 4"X5", 2004.
Figure 1. Mark Rothko, *No. 14*, oil on canvas, 72"X67", 1953.

Figure 2. Mark Rothko, *No. 4*, mixed media on canvas, 104"X89", 1964.
Figure 3.
William Morris,
Cinerary Urns,
blown glass,
assorted sizes, 2002.

Figure 4.
Voyage IV,
15"X15"X3"
digital imagery
and encaustic,
2005.
Figure 5. Meditations on a Journey, 48"X24", encaustic and oil, 2005.

Figure 6. Forever in my Arms, 13"X13"X12", ceramic and encaustic, 2004.
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(foreground),
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2003.

Appendix 8.
Lidded Vessel 11,
16"x8"x8", ceramic
Anagama kiln fired,
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Sydney Opera House,
Interior,
digital photography,
4"X5", 2002.

Figure 13.
The Peacock Room,
digital photography,
4"X5", 2004.
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