Reflections

Laura Love Higbee

Virginia Commonwealth University

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Reflections

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

by

Laura Love Higbee
Bachelor of Science: Early Childhood Education, University of Vermont,
Burlington, Vermont, 1997

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
August, 2004
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Artist Statement

Much of my artistic inspiration comes from my walks in nature. I explore the many different textures of stones, wood chips, tree bark, water ripples, lily pads, birds' feathers, and webbed feet. I find that the reflections on the surface of a pond, and the shadows and highlights on my subjects, are most beautifully captured as they are veiled by the dusk sunlight.

Sometimes I prefer to capture an image more inclusive of the environment. Other times I am more intrigued by the up close view of a subject, sometimes abstracting it. Through photography I can capture the quiet moments in nature, whether shooting an image of the graceful gaze in a goose's eye, or the ripples created on a pond's surface after a duck glides by.

The colors of nature are quite beautiful, but often add an extra element of distraction in photos. Soft black and white nature images are my way of providing a quiet contrast to the everyday hustle and bustle we have all become so accustomed to.
on end. But it was one of the most rewarding projects that I have ever been involved in. I was pleased with the results and gained a real appreciation for the hard work and commitment needed for this type of sculpture. I continued to work on other sculpture media such as clay for the courses Ceramics and Figurative Sculpture, as well as the use of foam core, sticks, and plaster wrap in Sculpture Studio. I have produced a wide range of sculptures; however, I turned my energies to photography.

In my second focus area, photography, I was able to explore the Photoshop program to manipulate my photographs and create a web page. Computers I and II taught me techniques which I now use on a regular basis when altering digital photographs for projects. My work is focused on traditional black and white photography. I knew early on, while in my first V.C.U. black and white photography class, that my technical knowledge of photography was increasing. I found it enjoyable not only to shoot the images and visually organize my compositions, but also to develop and manipulate images in the darkroom. Eagerly, I took more photography classes, continuing to strengthen my compositional and technical skills.

Photography

My photo work has been inspired by my nature walks. I observe both the larger surroundings as well as the small details which make nature so interesting. I place attention on the textures, the reflections on water, the light
and the shadows to create a sense of calmness and serenity. These quiet moments are what initially drew me to nature. But over time, it was the geese and ducks that kept bringing me back. I am captivated by their unique personalities. Some are quite timid and cautiously waddle away, while others are very uninhibited and approach me at close range. Pride is a trait which some birds exhibit, while others seem more tattered and worn, as though abused by more dominate birds. The goose photographed in Crazy A (Appendix, Figure 1) was a good example of an aggressive bird. Many of the other birds kept their distance from him because he had no qualms about pecking them and pulling out their feathers. He did not have the best physical appearance as some geese did fight back, resulting in his tattered feathers. As I observed him, he was in my face quacking and nipping at me, yet I found him very intriguing, because he seemed starved for attention. He followed me around as though he wanted me to listen to him, or maybe he was merely fussing at me, trying to exert his dominance within his territory. In photographing him, my intent was to capture his abrasive personality.

Time spent with these animals compels me to create portraits of these dynamic and diverse birds, which I capture from different viewpoints. I photograph whole birds in their surrounding environments such as my photograph entitled Can't see the pond for the lily pads (Appendix, Figure 2). Here a lone goose looks out over the vast lily pad covered pond. A textured surface of lily pads appears to have taken over this pond. I wanted to
photograph this goose as being somewhat puzzled as to where the pond has gone.

I also photograph isolated body parts of the birds. In themselves, these isolated body parts become intriguing sculptural forms. My telephoto lens allows me to zoom in and capture the complex details of the soft-textured goose feathers and the reptilian-like scaly skin on webbed duck feet. In Crooked (Appendix, Figure 3), I wanted to explore the curviness of a goose's neck, which is almost in an "S" shape. The sharp contrast of the blacks and whites of the goose's head and neck are repeated in the sharp contrasts of the light stones and their deep shadows. I also want to point out to the viewer the gentle softness in the birds' faces in many of my photographs, which I feel lends an overall state of calm to the images. Serene (Appendix, Figure 4) captures the tranquility I observe in these birds, which in turn creates a tranquil state within me. Serene is one of my prettier photographs due to the sweet and very gentle expression of this beautiful goose.

In terms of a personal connection to photographing birds I think back to a childhood experience. When I was in the second grade, my mom surprised me with a white duck with unusual blue eyes. One day while I was playing at my friend's house, my duck left home looking for me, but only got as far as our next door neighbor's lawn. Our next door neighbors called animal control to come get her, even though they knew she was my pet. We soon found out that our neighbors had her carried off and taken to a local park. My parents and I drove...
to the park right away, only to find hundreds of ducks, many white, but none with blue eyes. We were never able to find her. I often wonder if I'm still looking for my long lost pet. Perhaps by taking black and white photographs and not revealing the colors of the ducks' eyes, the photographs could be of my duck. In the photographs *Honeybunny, is that you?* (Appendix, Figure 5) and *Pondering* (Appendix, Figure 6) I really felt as though these images captured my lost duck. Especially, in *Pondering*, it is as though she could be pondering where I might be and whether to search for me. She could also be pondering if I am her long lost childhood companion. The photo of *Honeybunny, is that you?* represents the joy and surprise of our potential reunion, with the gaping of the mouth, almost a smile. Yet in the eyes there is sadness, perhaps for the years that we were separated.

These photographs have been a meaningful way to symbolize various aspects of my life. They have helped me revisit a time of my childhood, reminiscing over my lost pet, photographing birds which captured her likeness, gentle and beautiful, just like my time spent in nature. On the other hand, I felt compelled to capture the abrasiveness put forward by the aggressive duck. His attitude to me represents the nature of the urban hustle and bustle, the harshness which wears on me over time, driving me to retreat to a calmer environment. It was somewhat ironic to photograph a bird symbolizing aggression in such a tranquil setting. Sometimes though, the birds I photograph are not representative of a time in my life or a commentary on society, but are
solely photographed due to their forms and textures.

Influences

Being a person who has a love of animals as well as nature, I gravitate to art in which these themes are the subjects. For years I have loved the work of William Wegman (1943-). His images of his weimaraners are so endearing to me because of their expressiveness and human-like personifications. They appeal to me because of the humorous way in which he makes us look at ourselves through the guise of these dogs. Another photographer of animals, in whom I recently became interested, is Elliot Erwitt (1928-). He lets the animals' personalities shine through in his clever compositions. Many of my images capture the personalities of my subjects, but in a more subtle way than these two photographers. I photograph birds in their natural environment doing what they would naturally do rather than staging the birds.

My compositions are also very much about form, texture and the overall state of tranquility, which has been influenced by the artist Ansel Adams (1902-1984) whom I've admired since I was a child. His work has always been very beautiful to me, capturing the magnificence of nature which many overlook in their everyday lives. To me his work makes people stop and recognize the beauty which surrounds us. Living in such a fast-paced, high-populated, over-developed area such as Northern Virginia, I can appreciate the qualities Ansel Adams has captured. I too have found a way to capture these qualities within my
urban neighborhood. My photograph *Ripples* (Appendix, Figure 7) is a good example of a quiet scenic view shot in a quiet wooded oasis.

Conclusion

It has been a very fulfilling experience to work on my master's degree through V.C.U. I feel fortunate to have been in an art program that was flexible with my teaching schedule. The M.I.S. program has provided me with a variety of techniques which have helped me to develop as an artist, especially in my pursuit to grow as a photographer. Though I am nearing the end of my graduate program, I wish to continue taking courses which will challenge me and keep my skills sharp. Currently, I choose to teach art to children at the elementary level, but I would like to eventually move to teaching art and photography at the high school level. The professors I have worked with in this program have been knowledgeable and supportive, helping me to develop and refine important skills, which in turn I look forward to imparting to others.
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Laura Love Higbee

Education
2004  Master of Interdisciplinary Studies of Art Program, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA. Concentration: Black and White Photography and 3-Dimensional Studies

Teaching Licensure and Endorsement
2002  Virginia Art Education Endorsement Pre-Kindergarten-12th Grade
1999  Virginia Early Childhood/Primary Education Teaching License, Pre-Kindergarten-3rd Grade
1997  Vermont Early Childhood Education Teaching License

Professional Teaching Experience
2001-Present  Art Teacher, Willow Springs Elementary School, Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax, VA.
1998-2001  Kindergarten Teacher, Parklawn Elementary School, Fairfax Co. Public Schools, Alexandria, VA.

Professional and Educational Organization and Committees
2003-Present  Arbor Day Committee, Fairfax County Public Schools.
2003-Present  Business-School Partnership, Fairfax County Public Schools/Fairfax VA Government Center.
2001-Present  Art Liaison for the Willow Springs Elementary School and Union Mill Shopping Center Partnership, Clifton/Fairfax, VA.
Reflections

Introduction

In previous years, drawing was my choice method of artistic expression. As far as I can remember, even as a small child, I have been drawing. Though I loved drawing early on, I was excited by and open to different media throughout my school years. I was also fortunate that both of my parents were very supportive of my artistic endeavors. During my junior and senior year of high school, I also enjoyed working with children in the after school program. Coming from a family of educators, it seemed fitting that I chose to study Education at the University of Vermont as an undergraduate.

I now am a licensed K-12 art teacher at Willow Springs Elementary School in the Fairfax County, Virginia public school system. In 1999, I decided to pursue a Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (M.I.S.) degree through Virginia Commonwealth University (V.C.U.), concentrating on photography.

Media and Focus Areas

This graduate program allowed me to explore new media and practices before deciding on my focus areas of sculpture and photography. I was one of the few students to learn the ancient technique of bronze casting that V.C.U. briefly offered to the M.I.S. students. It was an extremely demanding process physically, with heavy lifting, sledge-hammering, and chiseling for days...
Professional and Educational Organization and Committees Continued

1998-Present  Member of Association of Fairfax Professional Educators, Fairfax, VA.

1998-Present  Technology Committee Member, Fairfax County Public Schools.

Exhibitions

2004  Reflections, Thesis Exhibition. Verizon Galleries at the Ernst Community Cultural Center, Annandale, VA.

1992 & 1993  Artwork exhibited at University of Vermont, Burlington, VT.


1991  Artwork exhibited at Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia, PA.

Honors as an Educator

2004  Student work selected for the First Virginia Bank 2004 Calendar Contest. Willow Springs Elementary Art Department awarded $250 and the student will be awarded a $300 savings account at First Virginia Bank.

2002-2004  Student work selected for the cover of published business flyer for the Union Mill, Colonnade Shopping Center, Clifton/Fairfax, VA.