Frame of Mind

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Frame of Mind

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

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**Artist Statement**

*Frame of Mind*

The creative process offers me an escape and tranquility worthy of sharing. When creating art, I reflect on the people, places, and things that move me. I convey my frame of mind through the brush to the canvas. The result is intense strokes of color that deliver clarity of emotion for others to experience. The intention of my work is to share a world that satisfies the eyes, mind, and soul. There is something about each piece that I hope will keep the viewer returning to absorb, contemplate, and enjoy.
Introduction

My first degree was a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) in Illustration. I took my first oil painting class while pursuing a BFA in Art Education. Being used to working with smaller scales, it was a welcome change to stretch canvas by the foot instead of cut paper by the inch. My brushes changed from short handled #4 rounds to long handled #12 filberts. I switched from working with smoothly graduated value changes, found with illustrative watercolor and airbrush techniques, to the movement and direction created with the stroke of an impasto laden hog hair brush. No longer were the decisions of each brushstroke lost in a bleeding wash or a soft-edged spray. Each stroke of paint spoke with its own voice, yet sang in chorus with all other brushstrokes on the canvas. I was quickly aware that when I walked into the painting room, with its distinct smell of turpentine and freshly cut wood, I was entering a world that allowed me the freedom to break new personal artistic ground. I was soon hooked on the versatility of the medium of oil. However, my second degree, in Art Education, would consume me for the next five years. I had only touched on an interest that would be given a chance to surface again during the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) Off-campus Program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU).

When I took my first MIS class, I found the same boost of creative energy that made my undergraduate painting class so unique. In addition, taking a class with other art teachers was an ideal way of improving my technique, sharing experiences, and
gaining insights. There is a wonderful benefit to taking a class that consists entirely of teachers that share your interest in the subject. It is the quality of the course’s teachers, as well as the camaraderie and support of my peers, that made each new class a pleasure. Before I knew it, I had more than enough credits to enroll in the MIS program as a degree-seeking student.

Mental Adjustments

My feelings about my role as an artist have had a conflicting history. My first degree in Illustration emphasized that I needed to create artwork to please others. First, an art director or a publisher would choose my work. I wouldn’t get published if the art director wasn’t drawn to it. Second, my work would need to appeal to the audience. Children’s book illustration appeals to an entirely different collection of people than an editorial illustration, therefore my style would cater to the group who was going to see my work. The part of the illustration process that I could control was my style and my target audience. The subject matter would have been out of my hands.

As a fine artist, I get to choose both the subject matter and the approach. I get to stay true to my own sense of aesthetics. One may think working as a fine artist would be liberating, but until recently, I have felt otherwise. I have struggled with how my work should fit into the art world. Narrowing down a style to pursue has been difficult because I enjoy so many approaches and find merit in them all. In addition, I have always felt that for my art to have meaning it must reflect some deep corners of my own psyche or
make some kind of profound personal statement. However, my search for meaning came from the actual process of working in oils.

While trying to emulate the style of masters who took full advantage of the expressive quality of the medium, such as Claude Monet (1840-1926) and Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), I found the brushwork to be my muse. Once I found myself in the act of painting, my voice started to resonate in my work. Drawing with the paint made each stroke the choice of several decisions. The direction, speed, color, tone, weight, length, and impasto all spoke volumes about my artistic intentions. As my confidence increased, my ability to set the mood of each painting began to refine itself.

Animal Series

The desire to create artwork with emotional impact is what drove my initial series of paintings. I chose subjects that could act as a dynamic catalyst for powerful and moving images. The Animal Series helped me find a confidence in color choice, composition, and brushwork that had been waiting to be expressed.

The first painting in the animal series, entitled Elephant (Figure 1), laid the foundation for the rest. This 48”x36” painting presents the viewer with a worm’s eye view of a charging elephant, which occupies most of the picture plane. Rhythmic brushwork wraps around the modeled elephant’s body. The ground appears to shake as dust is kicked up behind him. I used backlighting from the implied light source, the sun, which causes the edge lighting on the head, legs, trunk, and tusks. This edge lighting is represented with weighted contour lines that add to the visual energy of the scene.
Emphasizing contour line is a stylistic effect that recurs throughout my work. I have employed the technique of dramatic foreshortening to engage the viewer and make the elephant appear to be breaking free from the confines of the canvas.

The elephant’s powerful and aggressive nature is echoed in the color choice and dramatic brushwork. The color scheme is monochromatic, allowing me to focus on value and direction of the brushwork. When working with arbitrary color, I find that working monochromatically is a great place to start. In Elephant the alizarin crimson sky is alive and echoes the movement of the oncoming pachyderm. I used red to symbolize the power and strength of the elephant.

From the first marks on the earliest preliminary sketch for Elephant, the figure eight has been the structural armature over which the compositional skin has been stretched. The main movement follows counter-clockwise around the contours of the ears, down the trunk, clockwise across the feet, and back up the tusk on the left. I used other figure eights in construction of the ears, the head and torso, and the tusks and head.

Figure 1. Elephant, oil on canvas, 48” x 36”, 2000.
The repetition of this form helped me create a unified group of shapes and adds a complex system of weights and counterbalances.

Each dynamic diagonal has an opposing diagonal. Each figure eight presents a pair of reflective s-curves. This attention to symmetry, though broken and reassembled in this example, becomes a driving aesthetic force in my work.

The idea that remains a constant throughout my work is a search for a visually arresting way to stir the emotions of the viewer. The animal series helped me exercise my ability to make more subjective choices with color and brushwork, as in Whale (Figure 2) and in Bull (Figure 3).

Keeping in mind the spirit of the early Impressionists, who created a new painting language in order to capture the fleeting effects of light with dabs and dashes of pure color, I used bold brushwork and broken color to echo the power and movement of an
array of large animals. I enlivened my own painting technique by inspiring it with the sheer brut force of elephants, rhinoceroses, whales, and bulls. Extreme foreshortening, bold strokes and colors, dynamic movement, and the subjects’ relationship to the space in the picture plane were all used to catch and hold the viewer’s eyes and interest. Though there is a dramatic change of subject in my work beyond Animal Series, I feel that my efforts to be bolder and more creative with my style were worthwhile, and influenced the work that followed.

The Painted Figure

Undone (Figure 4) is a transitional painting from animals to the human figure. My bold brushwork is the same, but here I wanted to create a sullen tone. The ripple effect in the water from Whale has now become the sheet on which the figure rests. I used a complementary color scheme to keep the visual energy alive, and used contour lines to allude to colored light sources. I placed the viewer in an intrusive proximity to the figure’s nude body. We become keenly aware of her inhibited modesty by the closed-off pose. In a sharp contrast to the overwhelming feeling created with the unrestrained force of powerful animals, I let the figure’s vulnerability reflect a somber mood.

Figure 4. Undone, oil on canvas, 27” x 36”, 2003.
I reinterpret this and other moods in a series of paintings and sculptures that use the female figure as the subject. My admiration for the 19th Century Neo-Classicists and Pre-Raphaelites has affected my choice of subject. Victorian artists like J. W. Waterhouse (1849–1917), John William Godward (1861-1922), and Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898) painted beautiful young girls imbued with both modesty and sexuality, often in pensive or languid poses. These artists’ story-telling ability, mastery of the medium, and sensitivity to mood are all things I have tried to emulate in a series of figurative works. Each of these works present a young woman in a moment of quiet thought, leaving the viewer the clues of posture and subtle facial expression to contemplate and interpret. The viewer is invited to discern the frame of mind the woman is in, with moods ranging from solemn to reflective, wistful to melancholy. The paint stick drawing, entitled *The Letter* (Figure 5), shows stylistic techniques that I developed in the *Animal Series*. The hill of grass and foliage behind the subject shimmers with strokes of broken color. The wrapping of the sky and foliage around the woman’s head leaves a halo-like

Figure 5. *The Letter*, oil paint stick on paper, 22” x 30”, 2005.
effect. Repeating the contours of a foreground subject in the background is an approach that is new to my painting style developed in the MIS program.

_The Letter_ exemplifies the contemporary influences that have brought about my matured style. The setting is timeless, though the approach reflects the influence of a modern-day painter. Ever since seeing paintings by the Spanish painter Royo (1945 -), I have studied his dramatic brushwork, interpretation of Mediterranean light, and combination of realistically rendered beautiful young women with impressionistic floral landscapes. In the forward to a book of his artwork, he is quoted speaking about his own process, “…my aim has been for my painting to flow from within, and in the most natural way possible, so that I am led by my emotional state of mind.”¹ This has given me something to strive for in my own artwork. He is a master at using color, the illusion of the effects of the Mediterranean light, and impasto-rich brushwork to effect an overall mood and atmosphere in his paintings. I am attracted to the works of an artist who’s own influences direct me back to the masters of Impressionism.

**The Figure in Clay**

_Weston 1_ (Figure 6.) is one of my reinterpretations of master photographer Edward Weston’s (1886-1958) photographs of his wife from the

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1930s. His nudes depict a psychological and emotional side of his spouse that I have tried to include in my own work. The intimacy found in marriage allows me an insightful understanding of the complexities of emotions my wife embodies.

I have used my knowledge of my wife’s personality to inspire my figurative clay pieces. My wife was not the physical model for the sculptures *Whimsy* (Figure 7) and *Woman* (Figure 8), though the expressive nature of each piece conveys aspects of her personal character. In *Whimsy*, I worked from a series of photographs taken from all sides of a pensive-looking female figure. The figure was deep in thought, and her position was relaxed. I repeated various shapes and forms to unify parts of the sculpture. The rhythms of the locks of hair are repeated with a larger scale in the parallel grouping of arms and legs. In the same way I unified the parts of *Elephant* by repeating the figure eight shape, I repeated a triangular shape throughout the figure as seen in her bent right arm; in her bent legs; in between her right arm, leg and torso; and with her whole body, in order to help unify the various parts of the figure’s pose.

In *Woman*, the standing figure reflects not only my feeling about my wife, but also all of mankind. We see a nude woman standing tall, just reaching the top of a rocky mountain with her head held high, gazing into the distance with bold determination. As the Greeks sculpted the ideal human form to represent physical and mental beauty, I have
given this woman an athletic build to infer strength in mind and character. She is the embodiment of all that is good about women and men alike. Having her hands bound with a rope behind her back represents the intangible flaw, weakness, or insecurity that holds one back from bettering him or herself. This is no longer an ideal figure but rather a symbolic commentary expressing that no one is perfect. I depict the figure reaching the top of the mountain, even over rocky ground with hands tied. I want this figure to represent a sense of hope that mankind can overcome all obstacles.

**Mature Work**

I use my own reference photographs as an aid that stimulates my creativity in painting. As a photographer, I am most pleased with the effect given by a narrow depth of field. The main subject is in sharp focus, while the rest of the image blurs out into patterns of colors and shapes that accentuate without distracting from the subject. This effect, given by a lens’ select focus, has helped me come to my most recent approach to
my artwork. I can appease my illustrator’s drive with a realistic rendering of my focal area, and in the same composition create an expressive environment from within of the surrounding area.

*Red Boat in Mykonos Port* (Figure 9) is an example of my matured painting style using a multi-focus approach. It is one of several paintings created from photographs taken while touring Greece. My intention with the painting was to create a serene depiction of a passing day. I started with a blue-toned ground to unify the entire canvas with a calming color. I was impressed by the blueness of the Aegean Sea, so I intensified the blue more than what I saw in the reference photograph. I painted the mountains and distant town in orange, the use of complementary colors would be visually stimulating but not detract from the red boat, the focal point of the painting.

The boat and it’s reflection in the foreground are painted with clarity of detail that draws the viewer in closer. The mountains and town in the background were painted quickly and with the same energetic stroke found in my earlier paintings of animals. The line and brushwork are directed horizontally to emphasize the feeling of tranquility.
Compositionally, *The Red Boat at Mykonos Port* is symmetric, a kind of balance that has become more prominent in my recent paintings. An understanding of nature’s design of beauty has moved me to present more symmetric designs for emotional and aesthetic effect. In nature we find symmetry that is the same on both sides, like the face, in bilateral symmetry; and symmetry that is the same from all angles of a dividing line, as in radial symmetry.

With the intention of constructing an environment that is beautiful, inviting, and soothing, I have started constructing evenly balanced symmetric compositions. Several of my recent works use symmetry for it’s aesthetic and calming appeal. I use it to entice the viewer’s inherent nature of seeing beauty in perfect balance.

My recent paintings provide environments that are relaxing, have mirror-like symmetry, a harmony of tone, and focal points that catch and hold the viewer’s attention with detail. For example, the environment in *Garden Rendezvous* (Figure 10) is a symmetric view down a path to a sitting space in a Grecian garden. Flowers, shrubs, and trees offer a loose play of brushwork and color, while the path leads to seats under an archway. Here, a table is set with a bottle of wine, two glasses, and a place for two to sit.

Figure 10. *Garden Rendezvous*, oil on canvas, 18” x 24”, 2005.
Including chairs in my work is a recurring theme in my artwork. I use chairs in my work to offer an extended stay to the viewer. As a gracious host would pull out the seat for his guest at a dinner party, I present a chair for the audience to sit and stay a while.

Figure 11. *Tranquility*, oil on canvas, 23” x 36”, 2006.

My work, in the MIS program, has progressed from a writhing restlessness, as seen in *Bull* (Figure 3), to a beautiful and relaxing calm, as seen in *Tranquility* (Figure 11). This is due to how my artwork has reflected my frame of mind over the course of time. The large animals I painted were bold, powerful, and commanding when I had not painted in so many years. As these large animals sprang from the canvas, so did my expressive ability. By the time I had refined my drawing skills and color usage, my life and my aesthetic focus had moved on to more ethereal realms. Pulling inspiration from animals moved to pulling inspiration from my family.


**Conclusion**

During the MIS program, I have experienced the early years of my marriage and the birth of two beautiful children. My wife, Lisa, has not only modeled for several of my paintings and sculptures, she is the light of my life. My frame of mind has become very positive because I have the joys of love and family. As a result, this satisfaction with life moves me to create works that share this pleasure and tranquility. Each composition offers a mini vacation from the stress and toils of everyday life.

The work I created in the MIS program reflects a man comfortable in his own artistic skin. I feel I have reached a point as an artist where I need not apologize for a lack of creative input, as in the past. My desire to consistently create works that fulfill my own definition of art with meaning has been realized. The act of creating art has since become much more natural and enjoyable as well, and I find myself wanting to return to the canvas more urgently than ever before. I am pleased not only with how my work looks, but more importantly, how it feels to me.
Bibliography


Appendix

Figure List


7. *Whimsy*, stoneware, 7.5” x 3.5” x 8.5”, 2001.


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2002 Photography Teacher, Contemporary Art Center of Virginia Virginia Beach, Virginia

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2003-present Art Department Chair, Cape Henry Collegiate School Virginia Beach, Virginia
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1993  Graphic Designer, Ad Techniques, Virginia Beach, Virginia

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2006  *Frame of Mind*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, The Phillips Family Gallery, Cape Henry Collegiate School, Virginia Beach, Virginia

2003  *Art Safari*, Beach Gallery, Virginia Beach, Virginia


2001  *A New Wave*, Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, Virginia Beach, Virginia

1992  *Chesapeake Bay Watercolorists’ Juried Exhibition*, Lawyer’s Choice Award, Law office of Huff, Poole, and Mahoney, Virginia Beach, Virginia

1992  *Stockley Gardens Art Show*, Norfolk, Virginia

1991  *Anderson Gallery Student Show*, Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia