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Textural Diversity

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Textural Diversity

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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Textural Diversity

The sculptures I create reflect the elements of the natural world such as trees, the lumpy bush, clumps of turf. They have imperfect yet fascinating textures, picturesque in form, seemingly fractal in design, working together harmoniously to serve the aesthetic. My sculptures, like these natural shapes, are heavy or thicker toward the bottom and lighter toward the top, like a tree or stone. I strive to echo the mercurial, the animated natural surfaces, and the enticing vignettes one would experience on a woodland stroll.
Textural Diversity

Introduction

My desire to grow as an artist and art educator has caused me to examine my role as artist. Through this examination process, I have been able to mature in aesthetic expectations, increase my technical knowledge, and implement new ideas for my designs. Graduate courses in varied media provided me the impetus for this growth and equipped me with experiences I can trust. There is proof of success in the form of finished pieces that a certain approach worked and could be incorporated into my classroom or studio. Flexible instructors and experienced, fellow graduate students, most of whom teach art, established a creative environment for artistic introspection and experimentation. This learning process was accomplished with the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) program in art.

An example of this growth occurred while I was experimenting with clay finishes. I discovered the application of watercolor over white or buff bisque pieces produced positive results. I found this approach particularly advantageous for certain sculptures. The light ceramic surface revealed itself through transparent layers of color creating a three-dimensional effect. Consequently, I now regularly apply watercolor or water base glazes to a variety of porous surfaces and teach this to my students. I also spend no small amount of time experimenting with different materials, knowing that I may come across another effective method. The examination process is as much an investigation of what is possible and practical with the medium as it is with critical progression.
Expectations

Before my MIS experience, I had what I believed were realistic views regarding artistic growth: improvement in technique, better understanding of materials, and possibly new sources of inspiration. My expectations were based on previously established suppositions that my perspective on art would not alter. Training during my youth, by a successful portrait painter, prioritized representation in my work. My painting focused on technique without application of expressiveness. Individual style was expected to develop with experience. Pains were taken to instill these techniques which my teacher acquired from his father and his father before him. Such instruction in accurate rendering has merit in improving technical skill but my early painting often seemed dull and lifeless. I began to ask myself if the suppression of expression had adversely affected my art. The techniques from my early training had augmented my artistic and instructional skills but I knew that expressiveness was also important to why I make art. If I failed to communicate meaningfully, the lack of expressiveness would be reflected in my work. I realized that the quality of my art could be affected without this expressive component.

I did not anticipate the examination process to be so expressly linked to my own creative interests, especially in the area of compositional development. Surprising also was my discovery of new media in sculpture. I did not anticipate that a different media could have rippling effects upon my familiar two-dimensional work in painting and drawing. During my MIS experience, clay, stone, and copper became relevant venues for
expression. The use of the new materials resulted in the development of a new style and focus on sculpture. So different was the new style from my painting that classmates and instructors regularly stated that my work seemed to be created by two different people. The reason for the difference can best be described in terms of what I emphasized. In my painting, I stressed realism with a strong linear quality; this was the way I learned to draw and paint. My sculpture prioritized shape, texture, and expressiveness. These elements composed my aesthetic ideas on which I focused in this program.

My first clay sculpture in the program, Traverse (Appendix, 1), was created to represent a castle carved from stone. I discovered that the application of certain kinds of texture made the work more interesting. Emphasis on detail and making the work interesting had not been a priority in previous work. I had always placed importance on depth in my painting but not surface treatment. In my sculpture, surface treatment became paramount. I proceeded on the work from the base to the top, adding clay as I went. The details of the piece were oriented around a miniature path which began at the base and then proceeded upward circumventing the small fantasy stone mountain. I discovered the effectiveness of using a pencil to create recesses and scratches, which resembled a rocky stone hillside. I formed small rocks by pinching the clay into shape and pressing them into the sculpture. Larger stones and objects like towers, bridges, and overlooks were blended into the clay hillside. I placed small caves and steep cliffs into the clay to create drama. The work, generated from my imagination, caused me to remain focused on compositional development as I attached so many small shapes. The
details and texture in this work created an effect and interest I wanted to apply to other sculptures. At this point, my sculptural goals still remained unclear but my experience was beginning to influence my ideas on composition and design, primarily on surface treatment. The experiences also gave rise to questions about what I wanted from my art and why I make it.

Before my VCU experience, sculpture was only important to me as a way to understand cultural history. Representational sculpture relayed to me an aesthetic reflection of Western history. The ideals and mores of the culture are revealed through marble and stone. These art forms communicate how people, both individually and as groups, perceived life. This was particularly true in cultures where social expectations directed artistic pursuits. Historically, powerful patriarchs and dictators maintained or created sculptural expectations. Artists had to create their works within a framework of prevailing ideas and customs. For thousands of years, Egyptian sculpture remained consistently similar. Progress toward non-linear forms during the Greek Classical and Hellenistic periods reveal a beauty directed by the culture. Venus de Milo is a marble goddess, acceptable content to the Greeks. Unlike artists of antiquity, I have the freedom to consider personal motives to expression. My place in the culture and to what degree I am personally influenced by it is relevant in the context of the creative act. To create the visual I must examine myself, outside of myself.

**Flemish Influences**

Of the artists involved in the examination of nature, few have affected my art more than those of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the Northern Netherlands.
Like me, they had predilections toward rendering nature. Their art struck against the dramatic Renaissance influences of Holland. I find inspiration from these artists because of their view of the world. They perceived life as one created by God in all of its natural beauty. They believed in modesty and in portraying life with honesty. These Puritan painters depicted their existence without adulation. Like the Baroque artist’s work, mine is representational in orientation. I find the beauty of the land and its vegetation need nothing dramatic, no symbols to make the art more pleasing or interesting. Nature can be presented as a valuable art subject in its own right.

One of the first Dutch painters to successfully present the landscape in his painting was Peter Brueghel (1564-1638). Brueghel’s images intended to reflect life as it appeared to him. He often focused on scenes of the everyday life of peasants, both indoors and out. Like Brueghel and other artists of the time, I believe in portraying the unrefined and beautiful. Brueghel’s The Harvesters (1565) is an integration of the secular and the natural. There is no moral instruction. The viewer is drawn to the activity of the peasants but the viewer is also attracted to beauty of the countryside. It is the presentation of natural beauty which effectuates this painting and pulls the composition together.

Without the details of the landscape, the work loses interest. I can identify with the artist as he painted textures, trees, bushes, and rolling hills, not as the subject of the piece but as an important aesthetic component. Like Brueghel, I emphasize organic elements with texture in my work to make it interesting. This organic element became the basis for me to create successful sculptures.

One of the most influential artists who created interest with detail is Rembrandt
van Rijn (1609-1669). Rembrandt is recognized for his honest realism. He created works of every day life but with considerable texture. Like Rembrandt, I want my work to be real and honest. He prioritized balance in his designs. Texture and balance of elements are important in my work as well. In Rembrandt’s work, The Mill (1645), the focal point sits on a hill, each blade of the mill is painted thick with yellow ochre. Dark clouds layered in gray and umber hover in a contrasting sky. I also created a mill in my sculpture, The Stream (Appendix, 2). I included a stream with the water, rocks, and bushes. Landscaping with bushes and rocks allude to a park like setting. Like Rembrandt, I want to keep the sculpture honest to nature and humble in presentation. On the building, I applied stippled texture to allude to a stone facade. I tried to create shadow effects with indentations and gouges recessed in the clay surface. True to his Puritan underpinnings, Rembrandt prioritized truth and sincerity above harmony. Textural and organic details are manifest in his work and in mine.

Textural Accommodation

Why and how I make art is directly influenced by my personal interests and also by the beauty of the natural world. I prefer balance to linear design in art and architecture. I am partial to color that is not too bright, like the muted tones of nature. My preferences are reflected and developed through my sculpture. I create architectural forms which interact with a natural environment.

A seasonal woodland stroll involves the experiencing of color, texture, and shape. Harmony exists between the larger and smaller. The experience is marked by beauty and
interest. Trees and plants of various kinds compete for light and space creating a network of patterns and designs at all levels of view. The forest spontaneously produces consistent proportion in design. Natural fractals are created. Fractals are geometric structures that have regular or uneven shapes which are repeated at all scales of measurement. Small leaves form clumps and then larger clumps and then larger still until they become trees or bushes. No one mass of growth takes greater dominance or visual weight to displace the natural composition. Overlapping leaves, twigs, grass, lichens, and stones work together with the larger clumps of leaves to create harmony. I have found that this organic idea can be transferred to sculpture. I sought to render this fractal feel in clay form.

I apply design elements to clay sculpture in the creation of the natural pattern. Scratches, holes, and minute recesses of varied shapes and sizes cover my work. In The Nest (Appendix, 3), texture creates the illusion of detail. Short overlapping lines on the side of a building produce a rustic mood. The tree shape is penetrated with hundreds of small shallow holes to create the illusion of leaves. The organic becomes not only a subject but also an expression through the surface treatment. No surface is left smooth. Strait and clean lines are avoided as the composition is filled with shapes and textures reflecting the fractal elements of nature.

The small buildings in my architectural sculptures are exaggerated in form. I wanted to create sculptures that are visually stimulating and look as if they are a part of nature. The forms communicate an appearance of the way architectural forms would be if they were to literally grow from the forest floor. Like a tree trunk, the bottoms of the buildings are wider, becoming narrower at the top. Miniature bushes, stones, trees, and
pathways are placed to complement the structure. The alterations in the buildings change the feel of the structure from something made by a builder to something formed by nature.

In *Shelter* (Appendix, 4), a small cathedral design, I moved away from the idea that a church must have symmetry and communicate strength. From antiquity to the present, mankind has often attempted to communicate power through his architecture. I believe religious architecture should not convey mankind's power but impart God's beauty through nature. In this piece, I placed small reliefs of clay, which protrude out in varying locations to reflect an imperfect architectural stone surface. I used a pointed clay tool to create the mortar lines outlining the stone on the sculpture's walls. Flying buttresses are slightly thicker and not built to proportion. I chose the oversized buttresses so they would be noticed and because they were less likely to crack. The base was created thin and flat so that it would not detract from the surface treatment.

In *Nonresident* (Appendix, 5) and *The Sister* (Appendix, 6), I created more texture with an organic feel. In *Nonresident*, I created a base with a small diameter. My thinking was that the small diameter would enhance the height of the piece. Unlike *Shelter*, the base became an important component to the sculpture. The idea was to slope the base upward to draw attention to the height. To the base of *The Sister*, I added more expansive tree shapes to create a greater sense that the form is emerging from the forest. Miniature vegetation and stone steps enhanced the overall effect. *Nonresident* and *The Sister* are my tallest architectural forms, each at thirteen inches. I wanted to examine the relationship of elongated shapes to organic textural treatment, specifically at the base. I discovered that
beyond a certain scale the importance of the plants diminishes and the building itself becomes more prominent.

In *Hill Side* (Appendix, 7), I attempted a different approach. Instead of making the structure tall, I made a shorter cottage encompassed by trees and plants appearing to grow above the rooftop and around the walls. I included similar elements around the cottage as I did in the previous taller sculptures, bushes, and rocks. The small house, encircled by nature, seemed more a part of a small natural environment.

**Organic Texture in Other Areas**

In addition to creating architectural forms, I ventured into three-dimensional portraiture. Expressiveness, compulsion, and technique merged in the creation of *White Girl* (Appendix, 8), a bust of one of my students. The work demanded hours of time in and out of the classroom. While working from the live model, I also worked from several photographs. A compulsion to render her likeness was paramount in my creative process. The model, a pretty girl of fourteen, volunteered for the class project. Portrait painting requires only one perspective for rendering the image but portrait sculpture demands a constant rotation of either the model or the artist to capture all sides of the subject. As I proceeded on the surface treatment, I made no plans but expected a texture to develop as the form came together. A successful texture developed but unlike my architectural forms there would be no holes or outcroppings. I was not working on a miniature but a larger than life size portrait. I discovered marks from tools and fingers enhanced the composition and created a sense of the organic. The recesses and protrusions carefully
placed, created the same kind of balance and surface interest I sought in my architectural works. The marks in the clay surface again revealed my penchant for the organic. I had captured her likeness and the texture was one of the salient elements. The organic and natural approach had become my sculptural style.

My experiences and philosophic priorities influenced me to create works of a natural subject with an organic surface treatment. Such considerations were present during the creation of my first soapstone sculpture, _Beginning_ (Appendix, 9). I created this work in my second sculpture class where I was encouraged by my teacher to proceed with my stone with singular focus. My intention was to highlight the three-dimensional qualities of the stone. I was directed by my instructor to pursue a non-representational form. I developed no preliminary sketches but began to visualize a nonrepresentational natural form. As I began to carve, I discovered that stone requires not only the removal of small amounts of material with each action but the subtractive approach provides little room for error. I would work with the awareness that once material is removed it could not be replaced. This constraint was not present with my clay works. I first began removing small amounts of material with a pneumatic chisel, then with smaller hand chisels, and then smaller still with a file. With the last steps I used sandpaper and polish. Though I worked areas from the large to the small, the removal of the material was always in small amounts. The pneumatic chisel was effective in roughing the surface and in forming the general shape of the piece. Hand chisels and files were applied to the more fragile areas. I was reluctant to risk any breaking so progress proceeded carefully.

The small diameter of the sculpture's base extends upward creating a dramatic
effect. The design developed like flames or tree branches. I had prioritized compositional balance as I sculpted. A subtle texture began to appear as I proceeded to final stages. Varied patches of grey tones created depth and interest just like my other works. The inconsistent surface tones were reminiscent of the fractal. With different tools and different materials, the textural element was again apparent in my work. I would continue this experimentation process into another media.

**Relief Design**

With my first copper sculpture, I again sought a subject in nature as I created a copper moth, *By Moon Light* (Appendix, 10). I would experiment with new tools and materials I had never before used. The instructor showed us several samples, an armadillo like creature, a fountain, and several non-representational forms. I preferred the representational examples and so after acquiring a book on insects, I began preliminary drawings of moths. It was necessary to sketch a detailed plan because the sculpture would require many detailed pieces. The sketches enabled me to organize and measure the sections that would later be soldered together. We were given directions on how to use acetylene and propane torches, hammers, punches, cutters, and other tools to form the copper to desired shapes. Of course, the tools were just as important to me for creating texture as they were to forming the shapes. Some earlier experience benefited me, because the process of bonding sculpture sections was similar to that of soldering copper pipes. I began the sculpture by cutting copper sheets to size, smoothing the sharp edges to avoid being cut. I then used my hands and pliers to bend the pieces to the desired shape. I
was able to form the abdomen area of my creature by layering small copper pieces, one over the other like shingles on a roof. This created a textural effect. I pounded the wings with a hammer creating a bumpy surface on the reverse side. Additional texture was added to the wings by cutting and soldering small hair-like slithers of copper. I wanted to create the feathery texture found on many moths. This took considerable time as I attached each piece individually. Propane flames brought quickly over the surface of copper resulted in an array of oxidized purple and maroon tones.

All of the individual pieces were soldered together to form the final moth design. The underside of the piece remained untreated as I focused only on the area that was to be viewed. The sculpture surface continued the textural feel I had created on my previous works. The impressions and holes on the wings created a dramatic shadow effect. My intention was to make the moth appear realistic while maintaining a fantasy feel. This approach to surface treatment, now applied to an insect form, was effective in achieving my goal of incorporating textural elements.

Conclusion

My growth as an artist has involved looking at myself, outside of myself, and examining the methods I implement in the studio. The techniques I have learned have been beneficial to my creative process but I have learned that self-expression and individual creativity are necessary to be successful. The success I refer to is one of actualization, where I know the work has achieved the desired end. Sculptural and ceramic studies in the program at VCU have helped me to implement the expressive
quality my work needs. The freedom of implementing art elements that I want, and not simply those of learned technique, have resulted in success.

The creation of sculpture in my studio courses has allowed me to see surface treatment as an important part of visual expressiveness in art. Whether in architecture, portraiture, or other forms, identifying the organic component as textural treatment to the surface of my sculpture has helped me see art in a new way. The process and the final product are both important to my art as I look at art from a new, nonlinear perspective.
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