Coming Full Circle

Maripatricia Hyatt

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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Coming Full Circle

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

by

Maripatricia Griffin Hyatt
Bachelor of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, 1985

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
December, 2009
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Artist Statement

From my earliest memories pattern and repetition of the details in my surroundings were things that caught my attention. The patterns found in the living room wallpaper, the fabric of my mom’s dress, the texture in the buttons found in the sewing box were all fascinating to me. Figuring out the rules of the pattern and being able to predict what came next satisfied my need for order. More recently, I have found myself breaking the rules of predictability by disrupting pattern and combining unexpected materials.

With a focus on textiles, I am inspired by and drawn to processes that can be used to simulate the lines, pattern, repetition, and unexpected variety that is found in nature and architecture. There is whimsy in the multiple threads that make up the sights around us expressed in color and stitched line. I cycle through a process of identifying textures and patterns that attract me, then finding new ways to translate them in my art.
Coming Full Circle

Introduction

For the first eighteen years of my life my family moved every three to four years. My father was in the military and the moves were difficult for me. If not for the constants of family members and daily routines it would have been worse. One of the routine cycles of moving was cleaning out things that were no longer needed or had been outgrown. There was a weight limit when the military moved the family, so old stuff had to go.

There was one category of things that didn’t get weeded out, and that was the sewing materials. Fabric scraps, buttons, thread, and trims all made move after move. There was potential in these items. Mom made clothing, accessories, gifts, and household items. At the age of three or four, seated on the floor by her feet, I began sorting buttons from my great-grandmother’s ancient button tin. I loved to sort them by color, size, and unique features like shape or texture. My love of fiber arts began as I first touched and then worked with the contents of the sewing boxes that traveled with us everywhere.

Later, I wanted to be an art teacher, so I earned my Bachelor of Fine Arts in Art Education. However, when I graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) as a twenty-three year old I didn’t see myself as an artist. I was a teacher of art and I helped young people learn something about themselves and the world around them. In the years that followed I was also a young wife and mother without much time to pursue my own art.

As an elementary art teacher I was required to take classes for re-certification for
my teaching license. Eventually, I realized that all these re-certification credits were mounting up and that I could be using them towards achieving a master’s degree. My children were getting older and I was looking for a way to make art for myself. Soon, I began my journey of artistic self-discovery when I applied to and was accepted into the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) in Studio Art at VCU.

**Expanding My Aesthetics**

My aesthetic had always been connected to formalist issues of the elements of art and the principles of design. These features became a set of rules for me to follow when creating work. I liked it when art followed rules. When it came to fiber there were lots of rules to follow. For instance, when making clothing there were patterns to follow. For instance, when making clothing there were patterns to follow. For instance, when making clothing there were patterns to follow. For instance, when making clothing there were patterns to follow. For instance, when making clothing there were patterns to follow. Success was measured by how close the results were to the picture on the cover of the pattern. As a former button sorter, I loved repetition and patterns that were expected. As I learned to dye fabrics and construct quilts there were a lot of processes that had rules.

Eventually, I began to feel constrained with rules and expected results. I asked myself questions, such as: *What would happen if I didn’t hang a quilt in a traditional way? What would happen if I didn’t finish the edges and left them raw and unraveled? As I began to break rules, I found that interesting things were happening. I was finding my pathway as an artist.*

**Making Books**

Many of the same things that I enjoyed about fiber translated into making books.
The unique materials and stitching techniques I used created books that were meant to be held and enjoyed the same way fiber art could be. I used hand-dyed and commercial fabrics, hand-spun yarns, and tulle. The books communicated my ideas through their structure, texture, and presentation.

In *Handspun and Woven* (Appendix, 1) I took undyed white sheep’s wool and used a spinning wheel to spin a multi-strand, or plied, yarn. The yarn was not uniform and was irregularly spaced, with thin and thick areas running the length. Then, I wove this woolen yarn on a loom with a cotton warp. The pages are thick pieces of blank watercolor paper which are stitched to the spine using a simple book binding stitch. I used blank pages because my work was about the book form as art.

In making this book I was learning the stitched binding technique, so I followed those rules. However, the rules of spinning and weaving were disregarded. For example, the spun yarn appears to be less than skillfully created. The thick and thin areas are much too irregular to be considered a controlled form of bumpy yarn called boucle. I purposefully chose to spin and ply an irregular strand to add to the textural qualities. Also, I chose to use two very different fiber contents to make the woven cover. Usually, weavers choose fibers that are compatible with each other for woven fabric. Cotton and wool are not normally used together when constructing garments because their washing requires different treatments to avoid changes to the fibers. I chose to use the cotton warp because it would add strength to the woven book cover. It also added a texture and sheen that contrasted with the wool. The weave of the cotton and wool is not just horizontal and vertical, like most traditional weaving, but there are strands that also run diagonally. I
chose to add these diagonally woven strands to achieve an even greater textured result.

As I continued to make books my pieces became more sculptural. In the piece *Checking My White Balance* (Appendix, 2) I used all white fabrics to construct a tunnel-style book. A tunnel-style book is one where the individual pages have open, cut out areas. The pages are then stacked and bound to accordion pleated side panels. A “tunnel” effect is achieved when each stacked page contributes to the total image. In my book the tunnel image created is a small pastoral landscape with a house. I chose to use all white fabrics as a way to challenge myself by limiting my color usage. By choosing to only use white I had to pay closer attention to the contour of the landscape layers in order to create a tunnel effect.

Next, I created a fabric box for the presentation of this book. The all white fabrics and the shape of the book reminded me of the old black and white television sets with the knobs to adjust the picture. I wanted to contrast the old black and white images on those TV sets with the color of the world around, so I chose colored fabrics for the box. I used the idea of the knobs as a metaphor for tuning in to my creative challenges. The title *Checking My White Balance* refers to the limited color challenge that I created for myself. In this piece I chose to only use white in the book to prove I could make art about something other than pattern and color. I chose to use some controlled color in the box to showcase the limited color in the book.

I continued to work with bookmaking and experimented with different materials. I made edible books from gingerbread and licorice, and used tulle netting and packets of seeds to make a book about my memories of childhood gardens. Each was an experiment
and a personal challenge to find a way to express myself as an artist, part of my journey to communicate a part of myself with others through my artistic vision. I became comfortable with the cycle of bookmaking and realized that I wanted even more challenges working with the fibers that I loved.

**Quilts**

One of the first quilts I made was a quilt called *Mom’s Button Box* (Appendix, 3). This quilt was an homage to my childhood days of learning about fiber. In this piece I machine appliquéd a variety of button-shaped fabrics to a simple background. These shapes represented the jumble of color that I remember when I opened that treasure chest called the button box. After appliquéd the quilt top, I used free motion machine stitching to attach the top to the quilt back. I stitched the words plain, fancy, shape, shiny, color, and holes to represent the ways in which I would sort the buttons. This more traditional piece represents a visceral memory of childhood and the beginning of my journey and love for the medium of fiber.

Next, I became interested in printing photographic images onto fabric. The chance to design my own fabric was new to me. Previously, I had always purchased commercial printed fabrics. I now had total control over the images and designs that appeared on the fabric. One of my favorite interior architectural spaces is the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. On a trip there I had taken some photos from the ground floor lobby looking up into the dome of the ceiling. Something about the curved spiraling lines of the building inspired my soul. I chose the circular shape of the ceiling to create *Guggenheim*
First, I took the photographic image of the ceiling and digitally manipulated the colors in Photoshop. I created a grid of repeated images with color variations, borrowing a compositional technique from traditional quilting. Using machine-quilting techniques I embellished the different areas of the image in each block using decorative stitches.

In *Guggenheim #2* (Appendix, 5) I focused on another area of the original photographic image of the ceiling. This section was of an Alexander Calder (1898-1976) mobile that was being exhibited. This mobile, constructed of small ovals and circles, was situated near the apex of the dome. In Photoshop, I captured the mobile and manipulated the hue and saturation levels to change the balance of the color from white and grey with splashes of red to a full range of colors. I wanted to take the main color of white and transform it into the full spectrum of color found in light. Next, I enlarged the image to create larger pixels. I found that this created interesting textures and wanted to use this in the plan of my quilt. I again borrowed from quilting tradition to make a gridded quilt using six of the most interesting squares from my experiments in Photoshop. I heavily stitched areas of the image using rayon thread that added sheen to areas of the quilt which contrasted with the matte nature of the printed fabric.

For my final piece in the series, *Guggenheim #3* (Appendix, 6), I took an image of the side of the spiraling museum walls. I made four copies of the image using its original color, and rotated them around a central point. To tie this quilt to the first two, I chose to use a small bit of shared color fabric to trim each of the squares. This quilt is also heavily stitched with machine-quilted lines that enhance the repetitive lines in the image.
Throughout the creation of this series I challenged myself to create my own fabric instead of using commercial fabrics. I challenged myself to use a computer program to manipulate images I had taken with a camera. I broke with my personal set of rules by manipulating and distorting my original photographic images. I tried new things with my sewing machine, experimenting with some of the techniques of free motion quilting, and tailoring techniques to fit my needs. On the other hand, in staying with tradition in these three quilts, I worked with the arrangement of repeating quilt squares. I also used traditional binding and hanging methods in these quilted pieces.

In my next pieces I used a blend of traditional and non-traditional materials to create a series called *Matisse in a Box* (Appendix, 7-10). In this series I used hand-painted watercolor paper, nylon screen, embroidery floss, and various fabrics. The inspiration was Henri Matisse’s (1869-1954) cut-outs. I began by experimenting on paper that I had hand-colored with acrylic paint. In the first piece, *Matisse in a Box #1* (Appendix, 7), I overlapped large shapes and stitched them onto white Tyvek (a synthetic and durable fiber used in home construction). I used large stitches in colorful floss to tack the shapes down. Then, I removed the excess Tyvek. This much of the piece hung on my working wall in the studio for weeks. It was only after some of the other pieces evolved that I decided to sandwich the shapes between black fabric and black nylon screen. I cut out and stitched squares of screen to the top as a reference to the quilting grids.

After working on the first large organic hand-cut shapes I began to work smaller. This evolved into *Matisse in a Box #2* (Appendix, 8), a collection of nine 3”x3” hand-colored organic cut-paper shapes that I mounted onto nylon screen with the same
embroidery stitches used in *Matisse in a Box #1*. I used the repeat of the square in a grid pattern to refer to quilting compositions. The next piece, *Matisse in a Box #3* (Appendix, 9), had even smaller organic paper shapes that were sandwiched between paper and screen in a grid formation and then mounted onto a hand-stenciled fabric with a white nylon mesh overlay.

The final piece, *Matisse in a Box #4* (Appendix, 10), was a combination of layered paper, hand-cut organic paper shapes, and stitching on nylon screen. Each of these four individual 20”x20” panels can be mounted alone or be presented together to form a grid. When hung alone each square was a complete work but by choosing to hang them together they echoed the grid used in each piece of the series.

In the first piece of this series, *Matisse in a Box #1*, I introduced the organic shapes used throughout the series. In each of the other pieces I explored different ways to layer the materials with the organic shapes. The grid was the major theme throughout the series, from the floating squares in *Matisse in a Box #1* to the arrangement of the shapes in *Matisse in a Box #2* and *Matisse in a Box #3*, and finally the repeat of four pieces to make a large grid in *Matisse in a Box #4*.

**Mixed Media and Presentation**

As I continued to work in fiber I was constantly challenged by the method I chose to display or hang the work. Traditional quilts are typically laid over a bed. However, my work is not utilitarian and I wanted it to be seen as fine art, so with each piece I made I had to decide which presentation method worked to showcase the piece. In my early
quilted pieces I worked on making hidden pockets for flat wood strips, which allow the
quilt to hang against the wall, as seen in Mom’s Button Box (Appendix, 3) and the
Guggenheim Series (Appendix, 4-6) I also learned to make mitered corners in the fabric
borders. I bowed to the women before me who could make those perfectly for I struggled
with them. Afterwards, I was unhappy with the way the fabric would hang against the
wall. I didn’t want to frame the pieces under glass because I believe that fibers invite the
hand to touch. In quilt shows gloved assistants display the back of the quilts for a
spectator’s inspection; the eye can experience the feel of the fibers even if the hand
cannot. Glass hinders this experience. My next idea, implemented in the Matisse in a Box
Series (Appendix, 7-10), was to stretch the fibers over a frame the way that a painter
stretches his canvas. After experimenting with this option I found that the pieces lost their
layered textures in the tightness of being stretched. With each new project I continued to
search for a way to present the finished product. Then, my final series presented me with
a solution.

In the mixed media series Motherhood to Menopause (Appendix, 11-13), I was
experimenting with pieces that have no bound edges. The ten to twenty layers of fiber are
left unrestrained, inviting the viewer to look beyond the front face of the piece to the
layers of fabric that compose it. I considered several methods for displaying, such as
pinning to the wall with tacks and using magnets. My solution was to invisibly stitch the
work to a smaller pre-stretched canvas. The unseen canvas gives the fiber stability and
allows the piece to float away from the wall. This gives the piece added dimension and
allows inspection of the layered edges
An interesting thing happened while I was making the pieces in *Motherhood to Menopause*. I thought I was making art that experimented with surface. I wanted to combine ceramic pieces with fabrics. I thought the contrast between the softness of fiber and the hard nature of the clay would be interesting. What I found out was I was also telling my personal story.

I have two beautiful and talented grown daughters who make me very proud. As a forty-six year old I am beginning to experience the changes in my body that come with age. I am cycling from that motherhood phase of birthing and raising children to the menopausal phase of being the mother of adult children. I found myself recording my experiences in terms of these life events.

In *Motherhood* (Appendix, 11) there is the reference to the birth cycle, in the center of the work an oval child’s head is crowning. In *Flowing* (Appendix, 12) there are the bumps of clay that the river of fabric flows around. These elements represent the changes and unexpected surprises that my body has been handing me as I experience the menopausal cycle. In *Emergence* (Appendix, 13) small clay mounds emerge from the surrounding texture, which represent the birthing of new ideas and adventures in this new phase of my life. I realized through this experience that just like in dreams, my artwork speaks to me if I am listening.

**Conclusion**

As I have completed each semester of work I have experienced more confidence in my choices as an artist. I have realized that making art isn’t just about following
someone else’s rules of design or following a formula for success. I have learned that it can be a painful but rewarding cycle of self-discovery. I have developed a language through dialog with fellow students and instructors that has helped me to reach deeper within myself. It seems fitting that so many of my pieces feature the circle. I feel that I have returned to a fuller understanding of myself, essentially coming full circle, completing the graduate program, and achieving the lofty goal of seeing myself as an artist.
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**Maripatricia Griffin Hyatt**

**EDUCATION:**

2009 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA (Crafts and Mixed Media)

1985 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA (Art Education)

**CERTIFICATION:**

2004 National Board Certification, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, Arlington, VA (Early Middle Childhood Art)

**TEACHING EXPERIENCE:**

1988- Present Art Educator, Henrico County Public Schools, Henrico, VA

2005- Present Art Educator, Visual Art Center of Richmond, Richmond, VA

2000- 2004 Art Educator, Hand Workshop Art Center, Richmond, VA

**RELATED EXPERIENCE:**

1988- Present Participant, Virginia Art Education Association (VAEA) Annual Conference, Various Locations in VA

2006- Present Elementary Division Director, VAEA, VA

2006- Present Quarterly Elementary Division Article, VAEA Newsletter, VA

2009 Southeast Elementary Division Director, National Art Education Association (NAEA) Annual Conference, Minneapolis, MN

2008 Southeast Elementary Division Director, NAEA Annual Conference, New Orleans, LA

2007 Participant, Clinical Faculty Training Seminar, Virginia Commonwealth University Center for Teacher Leadership, Richmond, VA

2007 Southeast Elementary Division Director Elect, NAEA Annual Conference, New York, NY

2007 Presenter “Tantalizing Textiles”, VAEA Annual Conference, Williamsburg, VA

2006 Southeast Elementary Teacher of the Year, NAEA Annual Conference, Chicago, IL


2005 Participant, NAEA Annual Conference, Boston, MA

2005 Presenter “Empower Yourself, Become a National Board Certified Teacher”, VAEA Annual Conference, Williamsburg, VA

2004 Virginia Elementary Art Teacher of the Year, VAEA Annual Conference, Falls Church, VA
RELATED EXPERIENCE (continued):
2001, 2003 Presenter “Tantalizing Tiles”, VAEA Annual Conference, Richmond, VA, Portsmouth, VA
2000 Participant, NAEA Annual Conference, New York, NY
1998 Presenter “Wild and Wacky, Personalizing with Polymer Clay”, VAEA Annual Conference, Virginia Beach, VA
1997 Presenter “Foils and Powders and Stamps, Oh My!”, Making and Using Molds with Polymer Clay”, VAEA Annual Conference, Falls Church, VA
1995 Presenter “Surface Embellishment of Sculpey III”, VAEA Annual Conference, Richmond, VA
1989-1991 Elementary Art Curriculum Writer, Henrico County Public Schools, Henrico, VA

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND MEMBERSHIPS:
2008- Present Southeast Elementary Division Director, NAEA
2007- Present Surface Design Association
2007- Present Clinical Faculty Member, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia
2006- Present Elementary Division Director for Virginia, VAEA
1988- Present National Art Education Association (NAEA)
1988- Present Virginia Art Education Association (VAEA)

EXHIBITIONS:
2009 Coming Full Circle, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, Art Works Gallery, Richmond, VA
2008 Central Virginia Art Educators Show, St. Paul’s Church, Richmond, VA, Katie Ukrop, Juror, 3rd Place
Henrico County Public Schools Art Educator Show, Henrico County Public Schools Central Office, Henrico, VA
2007 All Media Show, Art Works, Richmond, VA, Jeff Hall Juror
Central Virginia Art Educators Show, St. Paul’s Church, Richmond, VA, Todd Hale, Juror
Henrico County Public Schools Art Educator Show, Henrico County Public Schools Central Office, Henrico, VA
2004 Central Virginia Art Educators Show, Richmond VA
2003 Hand Workshop Faculty Exhibit, SunTrust Bank, Richmond, VA
Hand Workshop Faculty Exhibit, Hand Workshop Art Center, Richmond, VA