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Facing Faces

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Virginia Commonwealth University

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Facing Faces

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

I am a surrealist at heart. I enjoy the creative process of making a visual story that uses unusual imagery. Every work is a reflection of some part of my aesthetic belief: an outgrowth of my individuality. The art I produce is a direct reflection of my personality, beliefs, values, and experiences. I wear my emotions on my sleeve and I have a strong sense of identity. My work exhibits intense colors and strong contrasts. Each has its own underlying subtleties that express the inner depth of the concept.

A little attention-deficient and a little bipolar, I am an erratic person who rides the ebb and flow of my chaotic mind. I leap from one idea to the next, often splitting off onto tangents never to return to the original idea, or I simply start at a run from some illogical concept. I spend an enormous amount of time in self reflection, research, and planning before creating a piece. I have to explore each concept in a variety of ways before I am satisfied that I have infused enough of myself into the concept to start. Without that dedication I do not have the focus to finish the task. A piece is not successful until I can live with it a long time and still have it spark my imagination and make me think.


Facing Faces

Introduction

As a third generation teacher from a family of highly educated teachers, I understand the importance of postgraduate work. Earning a master’s degree has been one of my goals since I was in high school. Needing to earn the certification points to renew my teaching certificate, I enrolled in one of the classes from the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) program that Virginia Commonwealth University offers as an off-campus opportunity for teachers. Originally I wanted a Master of Fine Arts. After comparing the two programs I felt that the MIS program offered a wider range of education that best fit my profession as an art educator.

Portraiture

Portraiture comprises the majority of my work. The human face captures my imagination and speaks to my sense of identity. Portraiture is not simply a rendering of a person, it should capture some vital essence of that person to help the viewer see that the subject is (or was) a real person. Working with portraits allows me to empathize with the person’s humanity. The bulk of my work is concerned with capturing that timeless reference to the human condition. For example, Instinct (Appendix, 1) is a four panel colored pencil piece. The vibrant colors and the quick pencil strokes are intended to suggest a potential power held within the two separate eyes. The image is designed to invoke the feel of being threatened. When this large scale piece (60”x36”) is exhibited the viewer is just below the eye level of the large face with a mismatched pair of eyes
staring intently back at him or her. The top left panel depicts the intensely staring eye of a person. The eye on the top right is that of a leopard. The large scale of the work is intended to add to the powerful focus of the eyes that mirrors the same instinctual response a person has to a threatening situation. The top right panel is the only one of the four that is part of the leopard’s face. It is my desire to remind the audience that no matter how “civilized” we become we all have this primitive instinct within us. That instinct is part of our human condition.

Considering that I am the most readily available subject, and have the greatest knowledge of my personality and experiences, I became my own model to explore the human condition. Exploring my own image allowed me to branch out into the broader scope of humanity. Breaking (Appendix, 2) is a portrait of an emotional response to a negative part of my life. The surrealist imagery of the face breaking apart is designed to reflect the stress of our human lives. I intended it to be a starting point for the viewer to explore the subtleties to the response of negative experiences.

**Process**

The first impression of a viewer is vital to the way I design artwork. It determines if the viewer will stay to consider the art. Once a viewer is captured by that first impression, I believe it is the job of the artist to give him or her something meaningful and (or) thought provoking to consider. To that end I spend more time in reflection and exploration of my ideas than in the actual drawing or painting. I write journals, then explore the various concepts with sketches, then come back to the journal to reflect again.
I repeat this process until I have the concept as concrete as possible before I go to the drawing board or easel to begin creating a work of art. Once I have developed a plan, the rest of the time is taken over by the mechanics of the physical creation process. This first structured part focuses my thoughts and ideas to only those I feel have the potential for success. The second more organic part of the process allows my skills to combine with my instincts to allow spontaneous creative sparks to be interjected into the final work. Lastly, I evaluate the finished piece for several days to see if it meets my own criteria as an observer.

Influences

I have been exposed to a large variety of artists and art styles. In my undergraduate years, being trained to teach art to others, I adopted the concept of eclecticism. I take the best ideas from a variety of sources and combine them to form a unique and effective system for me to work and to teach others. This allows me to customize ideas and methods to best fit separate situations, from how to start a piece of art to teaching methodology in the classroom.

There are four artists that have made direct influences upon my work. They are M.C. Escher (1898–1972), Salvador Dali (1904–1989), René Magritte (1898–1967), and Frida Kahlo (1907–1954). Escher’s incredible ability to illustrate concepts with such tremendous technical skill has been an inspiration for many years. His illusions cause me to trace each step and each line to uncover the manipulation of perspective or transformation. While not considered a Surrealist, his dream-like and bizarre imagery
dominates his work. His subject matter includes such images as hands drawing hands, towers and steps that do not go where they should, simple grids transforming into a wide variety of animals, and tessellations that Escher created to have their own unique imagery and meaning. *God is in the Details* and *Ribbon Tree* (Appendix, 3 and 4) are works inspired by Escher’s work such as *Rind* (1955), *Bond of Union* (1956), and *Sphere Spirals* (1958). In *God is in the Details*, the twisting and spiraling organic forms became a vehicle for an expression of my personal faith. I manipulated the ribbons to form a portrait within the trunk and limbs of the tree. As icons of faith, the face and the tree are used as religious symbols. The tree also has seven fruits and seven flowers. The fruit represents the seven deadly sins and the flowers the seven holy virtues. Found on the interior side of the ribbon are inscribed the many names of God found in the Bible, and used by other cultures in the world. I consider the ribbon trees to be my signature image.

In the fantastical and bizarre imagery of Dali’s *The Persistence of Memory* (1931), the landscape appears somewhat alien with flimsy clocks draped over objects. Dali’s work fascinated me and inspired me to accept the eccentric images that formed in my mind’s eye. Dali’s bizarre landscapes, drawn from his own environment, became the inspiration for my own works in the *Glacier Series*. One part of the series is depicted in *Trail of Cedars* (Appendix, 5) where the wonders of the natural world are recreated from my own imaginative point of view. The Trail of Cedars is a popular boardwalk area on the west side of Glacier National Park. It is a pristine cedar (and hemlock) forest. The ancient trees reminded me of the Greek and Roman idea of The Elysian Fields, similar to modern Christians call Heaven. The three self-portraits are shown together. I present the
images through the contrast of realistic imagery and my own surreal visual response to this location in Montana. Eventually, however, Dali’s extreme tendencies in pieces such as *Soft Construction With Boiled Beans: Premonition Of Civil War* (1936), that I found too grotesque and disturbing for my personal endeavors, pushed me towards other artists. In this way, he influenced me to turn away from extreme nightmarish imagery.

Magritte’s work is much less shocking than Dali’s work. *The Big Family* (1963) is a calming and serene image with the illusion of a bird in flight. This was designed by contrasting images of the same landscape in two different weather conditions, one bright and sunny and the other more prominent, dark and cloudy. The double imagery inspired me to work towards much more subtle imagery within my art. For example, in *Glacier Series*, as demonstrated in *Trail of Cedars*, I employed the same concept of using contrasting images to make each drawing both a landscape and a self-portrait. These drawings are my response to three separate areas of Glacier National Park in Montana. Each piece is divided by contrasting areas of color and areas of black and white. I also created a separation by contrasting the real and surreal. Each of these is a naturalistic rendering of a location in the park drawn from personal photographs. It is my intention to portray this place of majestic landscapes in a way that shows the viewer the impact it had on my imagination. It is Magritte’s paintings that helped me gain an understanding of how to create visual illusions through the juxtaposition of imagery and techniques of rendering.

Frida Kahlo’s work falls between the artistic extremes of Dali and Magritte. Although not technically a Surrealist, her work was recognized by the Surrealists due to
her use of fantastical visual imagery. “They thought I was a Surrealist,” she said “but I wasn't. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality.” (Lucie-Smith, 209) In The Two Fridas (1939) Kahlo paints a point of time in her own life. Here, she depicts a double self-portrait of her sitting on a bench, holding her own hands. The figures are situated in a dark, turbulent environment. The two Fridas are also connected by their hearts, which are depicted on the exterior of their bodies in different anatomical detail. She creates vivid, surrealistic, autobiographical portraits. They are allegories of her life shown in fantastical visual imagery from her conscious and subconscious mind. These are aspects that I wish to capture in my portraiture.

The strange, extraordinary, and eccentric imagery of the Surrealists has always fascinated me. These artists seem to hold the keys to unlocking the truths of the human condition. The subtle details, the symbolism, and the allegory show me their world through their eyes with a great clarity. Escher’s ability to see and manipulate the smallest detail to create illusions drives my pen and ink works. Dali’s religious beliefs and his love of the landscapes found in his homeland gave me the starting point for creating work incorporating landscapes from my own environment. Magritte’s ability to place images within images, to define them by what is around them, inspired me to make the Glacial Series as a running dialog of subtle self-portraits. Kahlo’s tortured life comes to me in its raw purity reminding me that portraiture is about the story of that person, not just her image.

The faces that dominate my work are a natural outgrowth of the Surrealists’ influence. I often speak about my work as if it has a life of its own. Each work is a part
of me and is a reflection of who I am. Surrealism is a liberating and challenging concept. It allows me to express what I choose in the most effective way, through the fantastical visual imagery imagined by my subconscious mind. This challenges me to be constantly reflecting and imagining ways to convey my subject to the viewer.

**Getting Big**

It was my graduate coursework that introduced me to the idea that the size of a work needs to be considered as a part of its overall aesthetic. In an early painting, *Ben’s Grave* (Appendix, 6), I tell the story of Ben who sits upon his own gravestone to play his favorite guitar. Ben is not dead, this portrait of him is a metaphor of how I saw his attitudes and life style when I painted it. The portrait was intended to have a strength from its symbolic imagery. However, the message is crippled by its small size. In contrast, that strength is emphasized in my work *Surrounded* (Appendix, 7). In this large scale work (60”x48”) the observer can be physically encompassed when viewing the forested environment. Here, I depict myself as a small tree with small budding leaves at the tips of the branches surrounded by the forest. The large, intensely colored forest surrounds and oppresses the small, neutral colored tree in the center. The bright buds growing from the tips of the small tree are meant to symbolize life and growth, intended to suggest that I have hope to be able to stand with the rest of my artistic peers. This design is meant to pull the viewer in to study the figure to consider the imagery and symbolism of the piece.
Closing

The MIS program filled gaps in my artistic education allowing me to become not just a better artist but a better teacher of art as well. Through the process of reflection, I came to understand that the images created by Surrealism give me an outlet for self-expression. I want to share this approach with my own students, and the opportunities that continued learning brings to artists. Being with other educators and artists allows the free exchange of ideas and experience so that individual artists can take the best ideas and methods they are exposed to and integrate them into their own eclectic process. I have designs to expand my use of other media into my future drawings and paintings. I discovered that taking classes is a new source of knowledge and inspiration that opened up a different aspect of my personal aesthetic. This experience has reminded me of my love of learning, exploration, and art.
Bibliography


Appendix

List of Images

Figure 1. *Instinct*, colored pencil on four panels, 60”x48”, 2007.

Figure 2. *Breaking*, conté crayon, 18”x24”, 2007.

Figure 3. *God is in the Details*, pen and ink, 24”x18”, 2009.

Figure 4. *Ribbon Tree*, pen and ink, 30”x23”, 2009.

Figure 5. *Trail of Cedars*, 3 of 9 images, colored pencil, graphite, and conté crayon, 13”x24”, 2008.

Figure 6. *Ben’s Grave*, oil on canvas, 24”x18”, 1995.

Figure 7. *Surrounded*, oil on canvas, 60”x48”, 2007.
Figure 1. *Instinct*, colored pencil on four panels, 60”x36”, 2007.
Figure 2.  *Breaking*, conté crayon 18”x24”, 2007.
Figure 3. *God is in the Details* pen and ink 24”x18”, 2009.
Figure 4. *Ribbon Tree*, pen and ink 30”x 23”, 2009.
Figure 5.  
*Trail of Cedars*, 3 of 9 images, colored pencil, graphite, and conté crayon
3 pieces in the series each at 13”x24”, 2008.
Figure 6. *Ben’s Grave*, oil on canvas 24”x18”, 1995.
Figure 7.  *Surrounded*, oil on canvas, 60”x48”, 2007.
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**Education**

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**Group Exhibitions**

2007-2009  
*Artists Who Teach: Newport News Public Schools Teacher Exhibition*, Annual, Christopher Newport University, Newport News, VA

2002, 2003  
*Charlie Russell Art Auction*, 706 Artists Guild, Great Falls, MT

**Work Experience**

2003 – Present  
Art Teacher, Newport News Public Schools, Kiln Creek Elementary, Newport News, VA

**Public Collections**

First Presbyterian Church, Great Falls, MT