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Loving You Saved My Life

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Loving You Saved My Life

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

by

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Artist Statement

When I create art it is as though I am building a metaphorical cathedral. Although there is serenity and faith within the process, there simultaneously exists an equal measure of frustration and mystery in the final outcome. At times I am like an ancient Chinese monk who, scrambling to please a merciless emperor, stumbles at last upon his pet cricket’s cage and using this accidental inspiration designs the perfect plan for the Forbidden City. My art then, at its best, possesses the rigidity of ritual, the flexibility of enlightenment and the joy of invention. I believe in the power of symbolism and in its ability to deliver a clear and consistent message throughout the ages. This concept has driven me to create a pastoral robe fashioned from men’s ties, a Lenten calendar derived from ancient Christian symbols, as well as a collection of clay cups paired with linoleum block prints in memory of a Finnish love affair. Perhaps what I strive for most in my artistic life is to produce artwork that attains spiritual truth accessible to the wisest of professors and the humblest of peasants.
Loving You Saved My Life

Introduction

I have come to understand that it is not a rare vision or the composed refinement of observation that has rendered my most memorable works of art. Instead, my greatest success and more importantly my ultimate satisfaction has stemmed from my ability to transform and be transformed by my surroundings. Indeed, eagerness and curiosity have proved invaluable to my growth as an artist because it is these qualities that have created the questions that fuel my artistic journey. Furthermore, the periods where I have sought refuge in a familiar style have only served to sabotage the progress of my work. Certainly then, my ideal fulfillment relies solely on my willingness to change and be changed, to question. If I am the sheep then I am also the shepherd and henceforth must endeavor to expose and explore the nature of paradox itself.

I began the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) program offered by Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) at the age of twenty-three. By the time my first painting class began, I was in my first month of teaching at Corpus Christi, a private Catholic school located in Falls Church, Virginia. Those days were marked by tremendous challenge and change. For the first time in my life I was no longer a student and was thrust into the working world, teaching kindergarten through eighth grade with no prior experience. To make matters more complex, I was immersed in the foreign culture and ancient practice of Catholicism with little religious upbringing for guidance. Soon, I would discover
that this adversity would lead to transformational opportunities able to nurture my spiritual growth and forever alter the course of my life and artistic path.

**Personal Aesthetics**

While I was sitting silently in Mass, my first breakthrough arrived as I began to understand more clearly my own aesthetic. As the scriptures were read I marveled at the concept of narrative truth and its ability to transcend forensic truth. Christianity itself is ripe with fantastic imagery of giants, angels, cherubs, seraphim and beasts. And, although I was not completely unfamiliar with biblical stories, I had never devoted serious consideration to the meaning of such imagery. This exploration took me first to Father Hanely, a neighborhood priest, who recommended I read G.K. Chesterton. Chesterton (1847-1936), like me, was not a lifelong Christian but he came to believe that “Nothing sublimely artistic has ever arisen out of mere art, any more than anything essentially reasonable has ever arisen out of pure reason. There must always be a rich moral soil for any great aesthetic growth” (Barlett, 618). Initially, I admired his courage to plunge so earnestly into the Bible, a text that is often too easily dismissed with common logic. As an artist I strive to replicate through image the structure of his prose. His writing, like the books of the Bible, is tangled with metaphor, signs and symbols and yet returns to a very simple message. Chesterton was an avid admirer of his predecessor Charles Dickens. In the preface to Dickens’, *Pickwick Papers* (1836) he states that, “The whole difference between construction and creation is exactly this: that a thing constructed can only be loved after it is
constructed: but a thing created is loved before it exists” (Barlett, 619). I was transformed by this direct comparison and straightforward concept. Suddenly, all the new challenges I faced became bountiful blessings rather than endless frustrations. Armed with a confidence in the infinite constructive power of fantasy never again would I struggle against my surroundings. Instead, I would approach the making of art without fear or reservations.

The first painting I completed in the program was *Rosary* (Appendix, 1) which was rendered in a style that was at once fresh, peculiar and perhaps most of all brand-new. This freshness blossomed from the rapturous delight and comfort I felt as an adventurous artist in uncharted territories. Almost effortlessly my style began to stress my singularity in the world and suddenly I felt more connected with humanity and history. My individuality was no longer a springboard for grander ideas or a beam supporting a canopy of broader ideals. Instead my art became more relevant as I realized my personal ability to communicate with all individuals. The painting was far from the cartoon style of my undergraduate training. Those comfortable layered patterns and crisp black outlines had vanished without a trace and been replaced by the hand of a stranger. The entire composition possessed a quality without space or dimension as objects floated about in a seemingly nonsensical orbit. Odder still was the monochromatic blood red color palette, relieved only by bits of electric blue and traffic cone orange. These colors harkened to past works inspired by pulp comics and old movie posters. These colors tied my past to my present and also allowed the viewer to engage in an ancient religious conversation through
contemporary means. Ghostly white figures with pale outlines rose forward from depths of the red, while traditional Catholic symbols appeared and contorted before my eyes. The mitre of the Pope transformed into an origami swan while a rosary bead necklace swelled into the shape of a dangling sausage. A pagan mobile of sticks and stones assumed the shape of a communion wafer while a woman diving into the depths of hell arose from the flames with trembling hands clasped in prayer. As I painted I remember feeling almost as though I was possessed, possibly even cursed. All of these images were simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. I had been absorbing them visually but had not yet made sense of their meaning. Perhaps the most powerful aspect of the painting appears in the lower right hand corner. Here a tiny blue cross is a delicate stamp conveying the beginning of a faith that would give birth to an entirely new way of thinking and painting. This shape, consisting of two intersecting strokes, is not simply one more brightly colored crucifix but instead serves as an abstract symbol of conception. And so life, death and eternal life can be witnessed in the orbital composition of Rosary as it mimics the infinitely cyclical rotation of a string of rosary beads.

Major Influences

Throughout my artistic life I have been equally influenced by literature and art. I use literature in a broad, conceptual spectrum as I strive to express and capture the underlying themes and atmosphere of a specific text. Flannery O’Conner’s (1925-1969) short stories and novels have greatly influenced my
work. O'Connor, a native of Savannah, Georgia, was raised as a Roman Catholic. The combination of an ancient religion and a deep Southern culture greatly influenced her style of writing and placed her works in the literary genre of Southern Gothic. Often her stories are filled with grotesque characters whose flawed souls direct the path of the narrative. As Robert Fitzgerald stated “She wrote ironic subtly allegorical fiction about deceptively backwards southern characters, usually fundamentalist protestants, who undergo transformation of character that to O'Connor’s thinking brought them closer to the Catholic mind.” (O'Connor, iv) Perhaps the prevailing theme of O'Connor’s work is the stark reality of sin and its uncanny ability to heal and stimulate spiritual growth. And yet, even her most deplorable characters still manage to attain some measure of redemption and grace, dignity. *Wise Blood* (1952), one of Flannery O'Connor’s two novels, has proved to be the most influential work on my style. The main character, Hazel Motes, returns from military service to preach the Church without Christ. Upon reading the novel I regarded its message as anti-religious expressing a somewhat humorous and mocking tone. It was not until I examined the text a second time that I realized how conventionally Catholic the tale truly is. Inarguably, the narrator Hazel Motes’ words are jaded and void of faith. However, his tormented actions reveal a character that desperately yearns for salvation. Throughout the course of the story Hazel finds different ways to punish and cleanse himself of his sin. He travels about with shoes filled with nails and eventually burns his eyes out with a potent solution of quicklime. This
thought of spiritual purging took center stage as Lent approached. It was then that I created *Lenten Calendar* (Appendix, 2).

As a teacher, I determined to use the symbol of a dunce cap as a symbolic reminder of mistakes made and deeply considered. The calendar is constructed with forty individually painted dunce caps. Each one of these caps bears a shield of a classic Christian symbol. Within these shields the ancient symbol has been altered in order to take on the more contemporary form of a dunce cap. For example, in biblical iconography the image of the swan, whose pure white feathers conceal its black skin, has come to represent Judas’ betrayal (Whittemore, 27). Starting at the top and moving from left to right, the twelfth panel within Lenten Calendar displays my version of this ageless symbol by tweaking the beak of the swan into that of a dunce cap. Another more direct implementation of this concept lies at the heart of the work where the shields of the twelve apostles adorn a pale outline of evenly sized dunce caps. These shields can be viewed starting at the beginning of the third row and moving entirely across the fourth row. Certain details reinforce a distinctly Christian message, such as Peter’s upside down shield. Here the base of the dunce cap is seen at the top and the pointed tip stands at the bottom, referencing his humbling crucifixion. This subtle alteration draws attention to the universal practice of atonement and imbues the work with its purist meaning. The simplicity of the dunce cap is at once plain and complex in its ability to communicate the solitary confinement and redemptive contemplation of individual error. The choice to use a classroom dunce cap to convey the state of
ultimate forgiveness seemed at first childish and if not properly presented
boarding on disrespectful. However, where Mass and G. K. Chesterton helped
me acquire a firmer grasp on my own aesthetic, O'Connor broadened my
understanding of the artist as narrator. With each new work of art I produced, I
realized that I should hold myself accountable for how reliable, unreliable or
mysterious my voice should be.

**A More Personal Voice and Process**

The significant awareness that I could manipulate and control my own
artistic tone strengthened my sense of purpose and afforded me the bravery to
approach new media and concepts. Prior to such means of thinking my pieces
were ambiguous in content and therefore projected more universal themes. In
retrospect this quality rendered my work less passionate and approachable in the
sense that it lacked the intensity of specific reference or personal experience.
Naturally then, a true turning point occurred when I realized that my own art
work, very simply put, should be my own art work! Suddenly, I knew that all
future creations could be at once individual and universal. By using my personal
trials and tribulations as inspiration I gained the ability to tap into the universal
human experience. However, this is not to say that my art work emits the
unedited fullness of my inner self. In terms of the message I wish to deliver, my
process has evolved into a more open format and yet there still remains an
unfathomable privacy that has the potential to arouse curiosity in both the viewer,
and strangely enough, in myself as well. Furthermore, a stimulating equilibrium
is accomplished by what is revealed and what is concealed. In a sense, I want the process of viewing an art work to act as the catalyst that enables the viewer and the artist to communicate across the vast expanses of time. For between the ages there remains the human who created the work of art and the human who interprets the work art. At the core then this basic transaction incites a ponderous conversation between the two. *Forty Days* (Appendix, 3) is a sculptural series consisting of forty dunce caps fashioned from papier mache. The collection directly stems from *Lenten Calendar* and builds upon similar ideas regarding the nature of atonement. *Lenten Calendar* was a two-dimensional calendar that relayed the historical tradition of Lent through the contemporary altering of ancient Christian symbols. In contrast *Forty Days*, by virtue of the materials used, is literally a more tangible exploration of such themes. The craftsmanship is roughhewn, full of spindly distorted tips and patchy uneven surfaces. The process is purposely imperfect as it references the flawed nature of human character. *Forty Days* maintains a less precise method of addition and subtraction used to create the miniature canvases of *Lenten Calendar* which ultimately appear in equal value both in proportion and meaning. Alternately, the family of dunce caps presented in *Forty Days* differs slightly in size and structure. For instance, while the three classically shaped and evenly sized dunce caps are each marked with an ashen gray cross, in reference to Shrove tide, certain other caps are fastened to a church-like structure and thus resemble a crooked spire.

The crooked spire itself has become a prominent symbol throughout many of my works. In the rural town of Chesterfield, England, I encountered The
Church of Saint Mary And All Saints, a sanctuary that is most reknown for its legendary crooked spire. The Church is the largest in Derbyshire and boasts many fascinating tales explaining the warped state of its spire. While visiting England as an undergraduate, I learned a tale of how the devil climbed on top of the spire and twisted it with the weight of his evil. Oddly, some scholars support a theory that, although much more plausible in a historical context, asserts a similar dark theme. These historians suggest that the Black Death eradicated the experienced craftsmen responsible for building the church and when the spire was left in the novice hands of the surviving workman its design suffered. Both explanations reveal the crippling effects of death and sin and this is very much what *Forty Days* is about. Within the work there exists the idea that each one of us must recognize not only our own mortality but the weight and effects of our sins.

When I created these dunce caps my process was ritualistic in the sense that I built a single dunce cap in daily accordance with the forty days of Lent. Inside the hollowed form of each dunce cap I contemplated a personal sin. Although my moral errors remain invisible to the viewer it is my hope that the empty shells of these plain white vessels provide onlookers with the opportunity to reflect upon their own human weaknesses.

**One in Many, Many in One**

The idea that one’s individuality with its components of both good and evil, continued to transform and shape my work. I began to comprehend the power of
a collective voice when I visited The Frick Collection in New York City. Henry Clay Frick (1949-1919) was an American industrialist and art patron, once known as America’s most hated man (Bailey, 16). In 1910, Frick purchased a property on 5th Avenue and 70th Street to construct a mansion which now houses The Frick Collection. After visiting this collection I was impressed by the beauty of the individual pieces as well as the calming atmosphere that Henry Frick’s choices and overall taste provided for the visitor. Certainly his sensitive aesthetic hardly projected the ruthless reputation of a “hated man” but revealed a softer and more ponderous gentleman.

After visiting this temple of artistic serenity I began to view my work as a whole. The various images I produced worked together as a unit because each singular piece possessed an individual meaning and the meaning behind each separate piece linked with the next to formulate a collective thought. This awareness allowed me to once again study not only the symbolism present in my artwork but also the order in which each image occurred. Gradually, these observed patterns would shed light upon the universal statement of my collection.

Directly after completing Forty Days I zeroed in on a more solitary depiction of sin with Lapse of Faith (Appendix, 4). This image produced in acrylic and wax on wood is further enhanced by various collage elements. With its midnight blue under-layer and dripping acid yellow surface, the painting embodies the quality of a rotten fruit squeezed of its juices. The blank face of a clock hangs in the nightmarish sky while emaciated phantom figures clad in
ragged attire stare listlessly in opposing direction. In the lower right hand corner the dark-eyed profile of a man vacantly observes the madness of his surroundings. This chaos is illuminated only by the frayed noose-like comets that spiral in a blackened sky. In the upper left hand corner a pale white woman with disheveled hair, resembling a deathly halo, kneels without expression. In her knotted bone fingertips she dangles plastic doves from scruffy yarn leashes. Above her head the crooked spire of Saint Mary And All Saints bends near her. The image of a clock with an empty face is perhaps the most telling element within *Lapse of Faith* because it implies a lapse in faith or a momentary lack of judgment where steady time is interrupted by the error of sin. The other symbols, skinned horses, crooked church spires and fallen doves, represent the possibility of vast nightmares born from even the most miniscule separation from faith. Hence, a lapse of faith has the capacity to permanently alter the course of the future however brief that break may be. The clock void of hands and numbers literally conveys the momentary and perpetually timeless nature of sin.

**A Healing Transformation**

Throughout my years of artistic study I have determined that the creation of art has the ability to not only transform but heal the inner self. Throughout my years in the program my intense investigation of Christianity, and more specifically Catholicism, led me to cleanse my spirit by daily religious study and ritualistic commitment. Naturally then, my work within this time frame, most specifically *Lenten Calendar, Forty Days* and *Lapse of Faith* expressed and even
dissected the nature of spiritual cleansing. In a sense these works were visual notes that made order of what I had uncovered, discovered and gathered from the process of atonement through Christian practice. Once this understanding was in place my works became clear visual references, similar to a map that could guide me in my next direction.

Although I was pleased with my new grasp of things, as I reviewed my work, I found them to be mildly stark in atmosphere. Even though the layered symbolism and recurring imagery present in Lenten Calendar, Forty Days and Lapse of Faith all preached the idea of self cleansing, the rewards of such purging was less evident. In a sense, I felt that I had lost touch with the hopeful excitement of my first painting Rosary. Once again my thoughts drifted back to the start of my artistic journey in the MIS Program. In the beginning my religious curiosity steered me toward Father Hanely whose simple words imparted a deeper message. One concept that flooded my heart with magic was the idea that the most hardened sinner could become the greatest saint and such accomplishment could not be reached without true joy. This memory, joined with my artistic works, allowed me to realize with “true joy” that my future works could express the “true joy” gained through sincere atonement. Suddenly, the realization that I could rejoice in the healing aspects of art making allowed me to move forward in my artistic journey with an air of peaceful happiness.

A Little Lapish Love Song (Appendix, 5) is perhaps my most serene and gleeful work of art. The piece composed of six linoleum block prints, four clay carvings and a wooden cross and cup was inspired by a real life Finnish love
affair. When I look at A Little Lapish Love Song I am reminded of the renowned writer and playwright Dorothy Sayers (1893-1957) who believed that “all Language about everything is analogical: we think in a series of metaphors. We can explain nothing in terms of itself, but only in terms of other things” (Steffler, ix). In Symbols of the Christian Faith (2008) Alva William Steffler reveals that “we rely on the language of metaphors and symbols because they help us to comprehend the truths of our faith and to understand the mysterious God, who cannot be described or known through the limited range of propositional statements we have” (Steffler, ix). Indeed, it is my creation of personal symbols that have helped me share my most unforgettable adventures and touching human experiences. This gentle wisdom is so easily described in the modest pictures printed in earthy mud-colored ink and the hand-carved cups of clay and wood. I believe the imagery, including a man in a far away ship, a woman peering out to sea, the cross of Finland, primitive carving tools, a traditional wooden cup and finally a bent church spire are as private as they are open. These images are memories that flow onward; like the tune of an ancient love song they are universal, timeless and require no translation. Although the crooked spire of the church looms above the other more peaceful elements of the work, it is clear that love prevails as A Little Lapish Love Song plays on into eternity.

There is no piece within my collection that more accurately imparts my core message than The Reverend, the Lady and the Robot (Appendix, 6).
This triptych, a three-paneled screen, was salvaged from the roadside. It has been restored through the delicate application of tracing paper adorned with vibrant painted human characters and gold leaf. The materials used and overall format of the work is similar to an ancient religious scroll painted on fragile parchment with a clear beginning, middle and end. The artwork, inspired by a short story I wrote, recounts the tale of a troubled woman who after experiencing a lapse of faith ends her own life by driving her car into the very same river where she was baptized. Below the water she experiences the false rescue of her physical body by a robotic creature, the devil in disguise. In the end her soul is spared and by the mystery of faith she is granted salvation.

The first panel on the left shows a joyful and ultimately, peaceful image. An elongated lady similar to one of El Greco’s (1595-1600) saints appears in flowing attire. Her hands are gently pressed together in prayer as she kneels in a bluish patch of grass. Behind her there is a straight white church spire, the cross at its tip surrounded by a golden sun. Visually, the middle panel is the most disturbing of the three. A spindly rust-colored robot has arms resembling chains and shackles. His neon yellow eyes look like two splattered egg yolks with pupils made of dangling bird heads. At the bottom of this panel a backdrop of red illuminates a line of three small white figures. The first of these is a more detailed rendering of the robot. The next in line is an elegant man clad in a top hat smoking a slender pipe. The final figure is a seated boy playing the flute. This progression shows the versatility of the devil’s disguise in his ability to tempt souls to sin. In stark contrast the final panel shows a series of ghostly cars
reminiscent of white hearses tumbling downward toward the river. At the very bottom a pool of water engulfs the car by surrounding its tail end with electric blue ripples. In the lower left hand corner, two small figures of a reverend and lady perform a baptism. These figures are isolated both literally and symbolically from the disaster at hand. I believe that these three panels, ripe with symbolism, reveal my artistic progression and ultimate spiritual transformation while pursuing my MIS at VCU. This transformation is easily observed in the tumbling car wreck alluding to the catastrophic affects of sin and the graceful salvation witnessed in the final panel with its renewed church spire standing straight and tall at last.

**Conclusion**

I chose the title “Loving You Saved My Life”. Undoubtedly it is a very simple title but one that conveys the honest complexity of rediscovering truth and beauty in a world filled with sin. I believe that my love of religion and the healing aspects of artistic expression have renewed and refreshed my spirit and will continue to guide my artistic progress, today, tomorrow and forever.
Bibliography


Appendix
List of Images

Figure 1. *Rosary*, acrylic on canvas, 37” x 30”, 2004.

Figure 2. *Lenten Calendar*, acrylic and ash, 46” x 52”, 2009.

Figure 3. *Forty Days*, Installation, papier mache and acrylic paint, 22” X 72” X 7”, 2008.

Figure 4. *Lapse of Faith*, acrylic on wood with wax, yarn and paper, 37” X 30”, 2007.

Figure 5. *A Little Lapish Love Song*, linoleum block print, clay, shoe polish, wood, 60” X 22” x 4”, 2007.

Figure 6. *The Reverend, the Lady and the Robot*, acrylic on wood with gold leaf and paper, 60” X 48”, 2007.
Figure 1. *Rosary*, acrylic on canvas, 37” x 30”, 2004.
Figure 2. *Lenten Calendar*, acrylic and ash, 46” x 52”, 2009
Figure 3. *Forty Days*, Installation papier mache and acrylic paint, 22” X72” X 7”, 2008.
Figure 4. *Lapse of Faith*, acrylic on wood with wax, yarn and paper, 37" X 30", 2007.
Figure 5. *A Little Lapish Love Song*, linoleum block print, clay, shoe polish, wood, 60” X 22” x 4”, 2007.
Figure 6. *The Reverend, the Lady and the Robot*, acrylic on wood with gold leaf and paper, 60" X 48", 2007.
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EDUCATION:

2009 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies, School of the Arts, Off-Campus Program, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

2002 Bachelor of Fine Arts (With Honors), Corcoran College of Art + Design, Washington, DC (studied abroad for two terms at Goldsmiths College, University of London, England)

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TEACHING EXPERIENCE:

2008-Present Principal Art Teacher, Arlington County Public Schools, Randolph Elementary School, Arlington, VA

2006-2008 Art Teacher (Itinerant), Arlington County Public Schools, Served as art Instructor at Jamestown Elementary School (.4), Oakridge Elementary School (.4), and Barrett Elementary School (.2), Arlington, VA

2005-2006 Summer Instructor, Arlington Art Center, Arlington, VA

2003-2006 Art Teacher, Diocese of Arlington, Corpus Christi School, Falls Church, VA

2003-2005 Instructor, ESL Living and Working in English at Arlington Forest United Methodist Church, Arlington, VA

2003 Art Teacher, Washington Very Special Arts, Washington, DC

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2009  Loving You Saved My Life, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies, Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, at the Arlington Education Center Building, Arlington, VA

GALLERY PRESENTATION:

1998-1999  Thistletree Forge Gallery, Culpeper, VA.

HONORS AND AWARDS:

2002  Distinguished Studio Practice Award, Corcoran College of Art + Design, Washington, DC

1999-2002  Academic Scholarship (all terms), Dean’s List (all terms), Corcoran College of Art + Design, Washington, DC