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## A Brush With Nature

Laurie Hoen

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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## **A Brush with Nature**

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

by

Laurie M. Hoen

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May, 2010

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### **Artist Statement**

My work investigates both the objective and the subjective nature of my intimate relationship with nature. I explore my embrace of both art and science, the realistic and the abstract in my search for the immanence of goodness in creation. From a grain of pollen to a beautiful blossom to a decaying pod, the natural world celebrates life's insistence on recreating itself. All around me, nature is quietly dancing to a peaceful song of restoration and balance that offers me hope of a continuance and beauty in spite of the neglect I sometimes offer in return. My recent work, in paintings, prints, and mixed media, features the unassuming forms of plants from backyard gardens and neighborhood walks, both those that are cultivated and those that spring up as weeds.

## **A Brush with Nature**

### **Enrolling in the Graduate Program**

On a sunny September day I tore a calendar page off one of those little cube calendars that offers humorous or sage advice for each day of the year and posted it on our refrigerator door. In this case the picture was a dramatic aerial shot of a kayaker paddling against a strong current, struggling to make a dramatic turn against the flow of the river. The advice? "To change one's life: Start immediately. Do it flamboyantly. No exceptions!" These words, originally those of nineteenth-century philosopher and writer William James (1842-1010), added to a growing sense of determination to change my own course in life. Within a few months, I had applied and been accepted into Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) School of the Arts and was embracing what for me would be a third career path. I began paddling furiously, if not flamboyantly, towards a career in the arts.

My first two careers had in many ways been artistic. I had just never realized it at the time. My first college degree and consequent career was in communications. I worked as a journalist and documentary filmmaker for nearly fifteen years, shooting film and video around the world. While I now realize that years of shooting, writing, and editing provided invaluable training in composition, visualization, and making artistic decisions, at the time I thought it was all about education, persuasion, and documentation. My second career, quite a leap from my first, was in the culinary arts. For nearly a decade I worked as a professional chef. My conscious focus was not on the artistic side of the culinary industry but on nutrition, customer service, and business

success. It was during this second career that I recognized how much I missed the creative outlet filmmaking had offered me. I realized that I was putting more and more emphasis on the presentation of the food (the combinations of shapes, colors, and textures on a plate) and that I was turning food preparation into an artistic endeavor rather than a culinary one. When I started sketching food presentation designs on paper towels and setting out garnishing guidelines for the prep cooks working with me, I knew I was in trouble.

I decided to sign up for a drawing class at a community college just as a diversion. That class showed me that all those years with my eye to a viewfinder had trained me in composition and given me an understanding of how light defines form, clarifies space, and directs the eye. Much to my surprise, I was able to draw with little trouble and render things believably from the start. After a second art class at the community college introduced me to painting, I was hooked. So with the posting of a small calendar challenge to take the plunge, I decided to go to art school full time and pursue a career in the arts. Ever practical, I signed up for a degree in art education knowing that even artists need steady work and health benefits. Setting my sights on a job as an art teacher, I started working my way through all of the introductory classes. While the art education curriculum gives one a broad exposure to many media and techniques, in the end I felt as though I had become a jack-of-all-trades but master of none. I longed for the opportunity to take advanced classes, particularly in painting, which had become my first love of the media I had tried. So, as soon as I finished my undergraduate degree I applied to the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) Off-Campus Graduate Art Program at VCU with the goal of learning to paint in a more

professional way and to develop a personal voice for artistic expression.

### **A Celebration of Nature: Developing a Personal Aesthetic**

My earliest sensual memories were formed out-of-doors. My family moved to a new house almost every year, and while I remember very little about the interiors of these homes, I can tell you with great detail about the brilliant colors and musty smell of autumn raked into mountains of leaves. I remember the beautiful sparkle of icicles forming on the branches in the winter and their songs as they “clinked” together in a wind. I still search out the intoxicating smell of lilac and welcome the reassuring yellow of forsythia in the spring. I remember the prick of the thorns protecting the velvety red blooms of a summer rose bush. I grew up in a time when kids played outside year round until they were forced by nightfall, bad weather, or school work to come indoors. My days were filled with exploration, my nights were lit by fireflies and starlight. So, I grew up with an intense sense that I was a part of something special, a wonderful system of birth, growth, decay, and regeneration. Nature provided me with stimulation, sustenance for life, and serenity of spirit. I developed a true belief in its power, its beauty, and in our responsibility to be good stewards of it. Now, as an artist, I am drawn to the forms and reflections of nature in my work.

As I have gotten older, I find that I and many others around me have lost some of that very important contact with the physical world around us. I detect echoes of the turn of the twentieth-century when the Industrial Revolution pulled people from the rural countryside to the urban centers resonating now at the turn of the twenty-first century. People today are being pulled away from contact with the natural environment that

surrounds us into a digital world of both work and recreational experiences. We are bound electronically and seem to be building a virtual community devoid of a relationship with the grittiness and grace of our precious ecosystem.

My artistic aesthetic is informed by my belief that our modern society has a need to log off, unplug, and hit the “refresh” button by re-establishing a relationship with nature. It is through a relationship with nature that we can escape to find inspiration, meditation, solitude, and intimacy. We need to recognize and embrace our role as good stewards of this life giving system of regeneration and sustenance. My work provides a screen onto which the viewers project their own complex belief about the “nature of nature”. Whether the viewers find beauty and affirmation or finds confusion, even menace, making the work gives me a private experience of contemplation and reverence or worship.

### **Reconciling the Interests of Art and Science**

I deal with a constant struggle between the engrained characteristics of my previous career as a documentary filmmaker where the emphasis was on truthful journalism and reporting or documenting only the facts that could be proved, and the more liberating role of an artist who can change things or completely make things up, manipulating them for expressive purposes. I still find myself compelled at times to render things in accurate detail even when I know that I'm going to completely paint over that section later. Although no one will see the detail that was covered over, for some odd reason I find it satisfying to know it was there and that it was accurate.

There are three recurring issues that challenge my making of the images. First,

in combining the botanical elements that are the subject of the images, I must juggle the creation of both a still life and a landscape. I focus on the character of the objects themselves, making almost portrait-like portrayals of the plants and deciding how they are to be arranged. However, I also focus on creating a sense of place that blends classical and modern perceptions about space and perspective, creating parallel images of place and time in a single work.

I call this series of botanical paintings *A Brush with Nature*. Inspired by the worn advertisements painted on historic brick buildings that peek through years of subsequent surface treatments, my early works create the illusion of paintings layered into a plaster-like ground. In *Inkberry and Compass Plant* (Appendix, 1) the image of the inkberry plant is rubbed out and layered over with the image of inkberry seeds floating across the picture plane. This layer is then washed over with a thin gesso before the stronger, more present form of the compass plant is painted on top. The reference points more to the passing of time and a description of the actual plants as objects than it does to the creation of a definitive space.

As the series matured, the creation of the illusionary space became more and more important. In later works, I experimented with limiting the pictorial content to a single plant in its various stages of development. I began to layer images of the plant rendered in arbitrary scale, disrupting the notion of classical perspective while creating the impression of spatial depth and evoking a sense of mystery. In *Chestnut* (Appendix, 2) the subject became less about the whole plant as an object and more about the various stages in its growth cycle. In this painting there is a tension between the strong, almost masculine forms of the seed pods breaking open, in comparison to the delicate,

feminine looking blossoms reaching out for pollination. In the muted background I depicted the decay of leaves at the end of the season.

The second issue I try to address is balancing both the objective and the subjective in the work by creating a balance between documentation and interpretation. Again, this represents a tension between journalistic integrity and artistic liberty. In *Sweet Gum* (Appendix, 3) I celebrate the great beauty in the botanical form of the gum balls themselves as well as the lesser noticed leaf and blossom structures of this complex plant. I allow myself to eliminate some details and magnify others. I select parts of the plant or the plant's life cycle to emphasize, and in doing so, invite the viewer to see this ordinary organism in a new way.

The final issue raised by this process of elimination and emphasis is how far to take the progression. In *Hellebore* (Appendix, 4) I began in the background layers with almost hidden images of monumental grains of pollen. I covered over this with a close-up view of the anther of a stamen spewing forth its pollen, which in comparison seems very small. I have repeated these pollen forms again in the top, more immediate foreground layer which is dominated by a blossom. On this layer the grains of pollen are enlarged and seem to be moving towards the surface of the painting. This repetition of the pollen form creates an emphasis on a part of the plant rarely considered. In focusing on both accuracy and expressive qualities, realism and abstraction must be successfully balanced in the same piece. The arbitrary scale of the pollen in each layer and its partial masking by subsequent layers causes the form to be abstracted, even though it is rendered with realistic detail. Abstraction exists along a continuum and by parallel argument, so does realism.

These works are replete with images of buds and blooms but also feature prickly pods, dried grasses, bug eaten leaves, bare branches, and thorny vines. It is not uncommon for people to compare them to seventeenth-century Dutch *vanitas* paintings and look for references to the transience of life, the futility of pleasure, or the imminence of death. I am always a bit surprised by this interpretation. The images do suggest transitions and cycles of time but they also refer to constant regeneration. Pollen or seeds burst forth in a promise of new birth. Both feminine and masculine forms dance through the compositions. The thorny vines or pods are not meant to be menacing but to symbolize nature's ability to protect itself. The layering of images is not meant to suggest nature's remote or fleeting beauty but it's resiliency through the ages. In *Trifoliate Orange* (Appendix, 5) the intimidating thorns shield the fragile blossoms that look both backwards to a previous fruiting and forward to one just starting. This body of work is not a *vanitas* warning against earthy pleasures but an invocation of *veritas* and the renewal of life.

### **Looking Back: The Influence of Others**

Growing up, our home was filled with books and music but not artwork. The only pictures I remember on the walls were reproductions printed on cardboard that came as promotional gifts from the grocery store once you'd purchased enough laundry soap or cereal. While I remember what they looked like, I've never recognized them in art history books, so I can only imagine that experts would describe them more accurately as "festive" than "fine art." We did however have many, many children's story books and family Bibles that presented romantic illustrations, imprinting my childhood with

aesthetics of beauty and imagination.

Our home was alive with music, much of it religious, and again my musical memories include images of nature and gardens: “I come to the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses....” (Miles, 428); “Fair are the meadows, fairer still the woodlands, robed in the blooming garb of spring....” (Gesangbuch, 48). An introvert at heart, one of my favorite poets was Carl Sandburg (1878-1967) who penned an intimate description of fog coming in “on little cat feet,” watching silently over the city (Mandelbaum, 522). His contemporary, Robert Frost (1874-1963), affirmed my appreciation for solitude and exploration, reminding me that “One could do worse than be a swinger of birches....” (Mandelbaum, 501). In all of these musical and literary works I was drawn to the private retreat of the experiences described and this influenced the contemplative character of my artwork.

My exposure to painters and photographers who ultimately influenced my current work came later in life. In 1999, I visited the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC and discovered for the first time the work of artist Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986). *Georgia O’Keeffe: The Poetry of Things* was an exhibition that focused on O’Keeffe’s combined spirituality and aesthetics as portrayed in her paintings of objects. It was a retrospective of her work from 1908 to 1963 with discussions of the people, experiences, and aesthetic concepts that influenced her. In one afternoon I learned more about the making of art and the personal development that informs artists’ work than I could imagine, and realized for the first time that being an artist was an intellectual pursuit, not just one of personal expression or technical skill. This is perhaps her greatest influence on my work.

I believe that O’Keeffe might also have been influenced by photography through her relationship with Alfred Stieglitz, as she helped to pioneer modernism and struggled with the conflicting characteristics of realism and abstraction. A study of her work, her close cropping, sharp focus, and use of space has helped me in my synthesis of abstraction and representation in a single work.

I also find inspiration in the work of Karl Blossfeldt (1865-1932). Blossfeldt was a German art teacher and photographer who captured close to 6,000 black and white photographs of plants initially used in drawing exercises designed for his students. Like O’Keeffe in her paintings, he was drawn to the extreme close-up in his photography. His emphasis on the graphic qualities of pattern and form in botanical compositions, and the portrait-like nature of his photographs of plants in various stages of development or decay, have prompted the inclusion of strong structural elements in the foregrounds of my paintings. I have appropriated some of his historic black and white photographs, combining them with photographs and digital scans of plants that I have made, as reference for images that come to life with color and texture in my mixed media paintings.

The final group of artists who have influenced my work with their masterful handling of light and atmospheric effects include Casper David Friedrich (1774-1840), Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851), and Martin Johnson Heade (1819-1904). All three created mood by abstracting light and color in their visions of nature. Their paintings glow with light, conjuring a sense of majesty and mystery. While there may be little in common visually with my work, I identify with them conceptually in the creation of visual spaces that call us to reverence and mysticism.

## **The Techniques and Processes I Use in my Work**

The processes I use as an artist draw heavily upon my background in filmmaking. When I work in film or video, I have the opportunity to create many layers of sight, sound, movement, and transition, deciding with each shot and each edit which of these will play the predominant role. I bring those same design concepts to my paintings and prints. My work in the MIS program has been key to helping me reshape this artistic attraction to complexity and address the challenge of manually rendering what I used to be able to capture through the lens of a camera.

Beginning with photographs and digital scans of live plants or sketches of plants, I use my computer to explore the idea of things in transition, being brought in and out of focus, and layered to show stages of growth that may not be visible in the environment at the same point in time. I design on the computer, generating my initial ideas for a composition in a digital collage. Using a design program, I can put each of my forms or images on a different layer which I can resize, rearrange, bring forward, or send to a background position a dozen times over. I use the computer program the way others might make thumbnails in their sketchbook, saving versions of the design as it develops and is reconsidered, until I find what seems to work best.

In this design process, I manipulate luminosity and transparency, scale, and replication to invite an interaction between layers of imagery. For each design, I can determine the role that light, color, form, space, and motion will play in the work. I render the forms using ambiguous scale. I break traditional rules of linear perspective that dictate changes in size and position on the picture plane to create the illusion of three-dimensional space and instead use transparency, light, and shadow to create

layers that imply spatial depth. In *Virginia Bluebell* (Appendix, 6) I painted the leaves in a monumental scale in the background, creating a curtain for the flowers to dance in front of. In *Nigella* (Appendix, 7) the scale of the various blossoms, pods, and leaves are left natural in relation to one another, but the translucency of the images is manipulated. These various disruptions of logical perception and perspective help to create a mental space where impressions and memories can float in parallel planes.

Once this digital choreography is completed, I return the images to the more tactile world of the studio, developing it as it moves through the painting or printing process. Experimenting with a variety of media to translate the digital design into a painting or print affects the delicate balance between my self-imposed compositional plan and the organic process of creating on the actual panel or paper. For example, in my paintings I use chalk pastels and powdered pigments in a tinted gesso mixture for the ground layers to establish a soft look, avoiding hard edges. Next I create images that are painted over and then washed into the shadows to suggest echo and resonance in an ambiguous space. As things are muted or erased, layering the imagery creates interaction and movement both formally and conceptually. Sometimes, I activate the surface with embedded pumice to reflect the grittiness of the actual ground that gives life to these botanical elements. In the foreground I use oil paints to create a more detailed and immediate image, shifting focus between highlights and shadows.

Many of my larger paintings have been created as triptychs which I group in an individual frame. I am drawn to this format for a couple of reasons. First, the division of one image divided into multiple panels or frames refers back to my roots in filmmaking. It is almost a revival of looking at film footage, and the movement that is suggested by

this horizontal progression of the image across individual panels. More importantly, I think the triptych format reminds me of altarpieces created by Italian Renaissance artists to illustrate biblical stories or morality tales. The first of my paintings to take the form of a triptych was *Ginkgo and Lotus* (Appendix, 8). This work combined in one landscape ginkgo, lotus, and bamboo which are all plants symbolic of longevity, hope, and peace in Eastern religions. My view of nature as both a gift and a trust is very closely tied to my personal religious beliefs and my view on environmental stewardship. So, it seems somehow natural to create altarpieces that pay tribute to the sanctity of nature.

When making monoprints on paper, more of the design process happens at the press. Using real foliage, flowers, vines, and grasses I create the design as I place the actual plants onto an inked plate and run them through the press. *Red Bud I* (Appendix, 9) is an example of how this technique makes a negative impression of the plant, often creating interesting tonal qualities as moisture is pressed out of the plant, staining the paper or moving into the surrounding ink or even the print margins. In some cases, this first print becomes the finished product. In other cases, I embellish the prints with paint, ink, or colored pencil after it has dried. In *Red Bud II* (Appendix, 10) the pressed plant was removed from the plate which was then reprinted. This created a ghost image of the print on a piece of paper that had already been printed with another arrangement of plants, using a different plate and color of ink. In making prints, I am able to manipulate the translucency of the ink to create either strong graphic statements or ethereal impressions, creating an ambiguous perception of space and time that is similar to the effects achieved in the paintings.

## Conclusion

When I entered the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies program, I knew that I would be required to specialize in one or two disciplines that would provide me ample opportunity for skill development and intellectual challenge. In my first classes I started with portraits and very small still life paintings. When asked why I was painting them and what I wanted to accomplish, my only answer was that I wanted to learn to handle paint and mix color. I had no more lofty goals than that in the beginning. Thankfully, the MIS program led me to put words to a personal aesthetic and to develop a visual vocabulary of both style and subject matter that resulted in a progressive series of works, improving my skills, and stretching my conceptual constructs. For me, my best works hold hidden nuances, degrees of subtlety that seduce the viewer into looking deeper into layers of imaginary space. I also want the viewer to make an intimate connection with the beauty of the ordinary. When this happens, I know I have met the challenge of rendering something pleasing to the eye and satisfying for the soul. I am building on a strong foundation and letting each work I make lead me to the next.

I once heard an interview given by Nobel Prize-winning poet Seamus Heaney (1939 - ) in which he compared writing poetry to creating stepping stones in one's own sense of self. He said:

Every now and again you write a poem that gives you self respect and steadies you—going a little bit farther out in the stream. At the same time you have to conjure the next stepping stone because the stream, you know, keeps flowing. The challenge for the writer, book by book, is to conjure the stepping stone that carries you forward. (Heaney, 2008)

The MIS program at Virginia Commonwealth University has helped me to develop skills, self respect, and a steady determination to continue to step out into the flow and to

enjoy navigating and contributing to the currents of contemporary art. It has equipped me to conjure up my next stepping stone.

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## Appendix

### List of Images

- Figure 1. *Inkberry and Compass Plant*, tinted gesso, pumice, and oil paint on panel, 16"x16", 2005.
- Figure 2. *Chestnut*, tinted gesso and oil paint on panel, 32"x48", 2008.
- Figure 3. *Sweet Gum*, tinted gesso and oil paint on panel, 32"x48", 2009.
- Figure 4. *Hellebore*, tinted gesso, pumice, and oil paint on panel, 32"x48", 2008.
- Figure 5. *Trifoliate Orange*, tinted gesso and oil paint on panel, 32"x48", 2009.
- Figure 6. *Virginia Bluebell*, tinted gesso and oil paint on panel, 32"x48", 2009.
- Figure 7. *Nigella*, tinted gesso and oil paint on panel, 32"x48", 2009.
- Figure 8. *Ginkgo and Lotus*, tinted gesso, pumice, and oil paint on panel, 32"x48", 2008.
- Figure 9. *Red Bud I*, monoprint on paper, 20"x10", 2007.
- Figure 10. *Red Bud II*, monoprint on paper, 20"x10", 2007.



Figure 1. *Inkberry and Compass Plant*, tinted gesso, pumice, and oil paint on panel, 16"x16", 2005.



Figure 2. *Chestnut*, tinted gesso and oil paint on panel, 32"x48", 2008.



Figure 3. *Sweet Gum*, tinted gesso and oil paint on panel, 32"x48", 2009.



Figure 4. *Hellebore*, tinted gesso, pumice, and oil paint on panel, 32"x48", 2008.



Figure 5. *Trifoliate Orange*, tinted gesso and oil paint on panel, 32"x48", 2009.



Figure 6. *Virginia Bluebell*, tinted gesso and oil paint on panel, 32"x48", 2009.



Figure 7. *Nigella*, tinted gesso and oil paint on panel, 32"x48", 2009.



Figure 8. *Ginkgo and Lotus*, tinted gesso, pumice, and oil paint on panel, 32"x48", 2008.

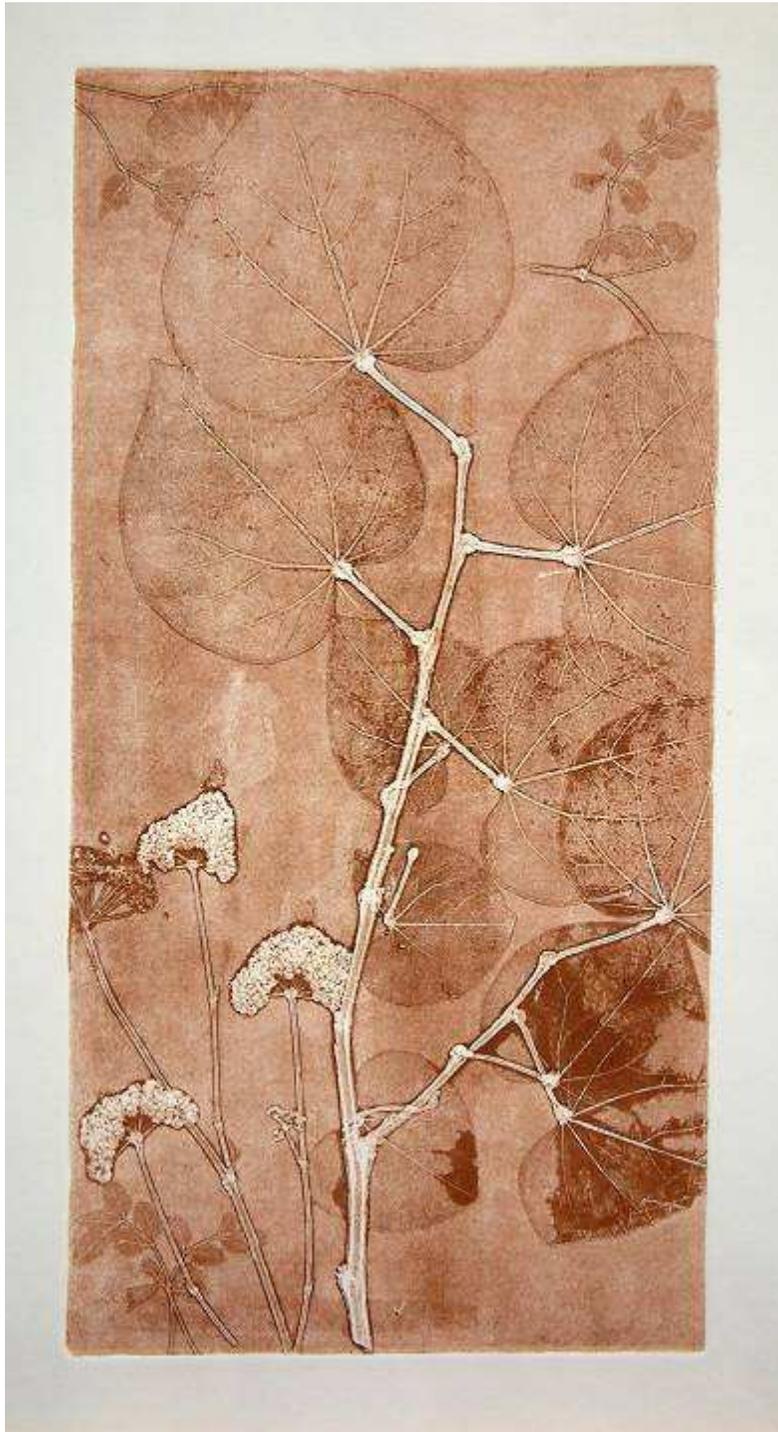


Figure 9. *Red Bud I*, monprint on paper, 20"x10", 2007.

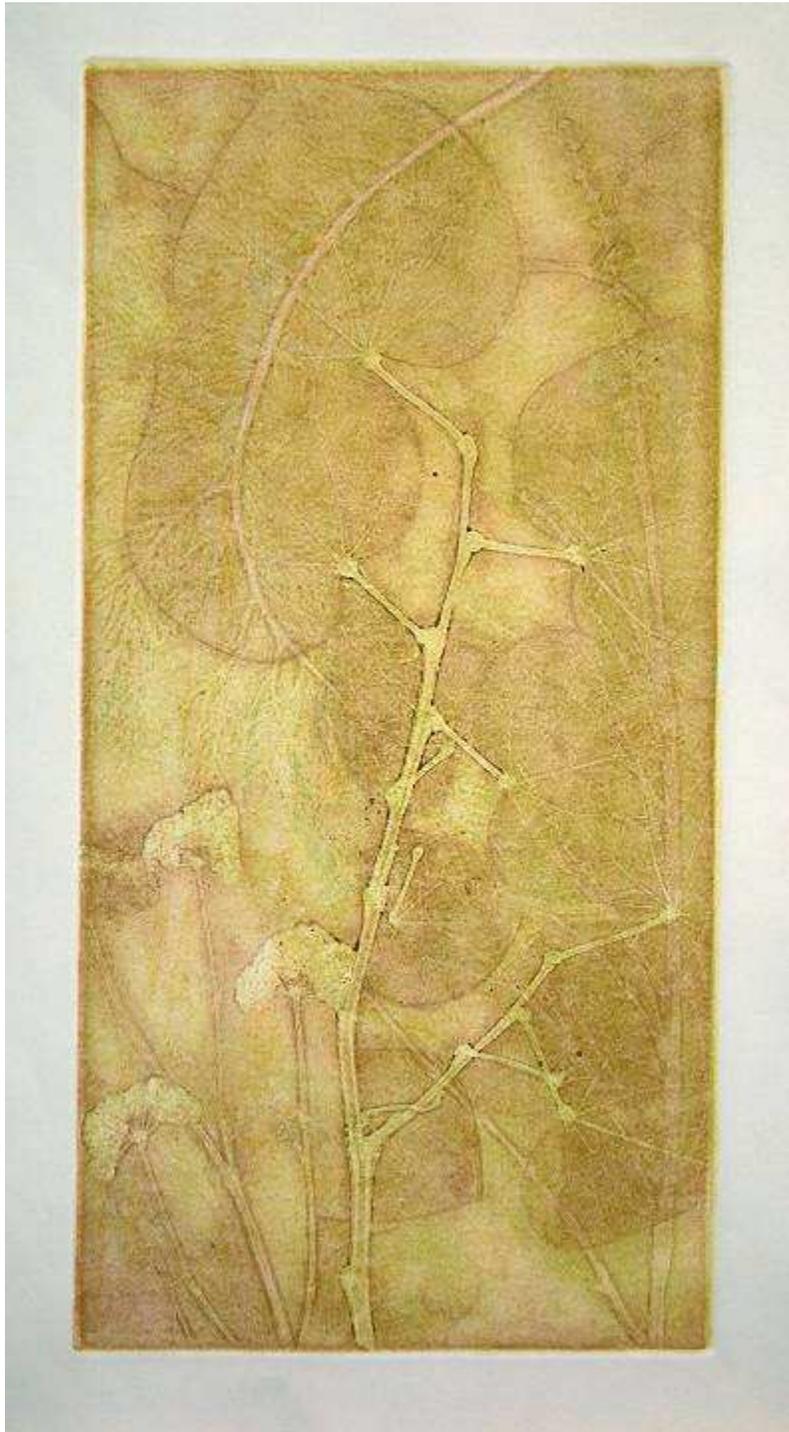


Figure 10. *Red Bud II*, monprint on paper, 20"x10", 2007.

## **Laurie M. Hoen**

### **EDUCATION:**

- 2010            Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA. Specialization in Painting and Mixed Media
- 2002            Bachelor of Fine Arts, Art Education, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, Magna Cum Laude
- 1981            Bachelor of Arts, Radio/TV/Film Communications, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

### **TEACHING EXPERIENCE:**

- 2003-Present    Art Teacher, Mills E. Godwin High School, Henrico County Public Schools, Richmond, VA
- 1983-1984      Adjunct Professor of Communications, Howard Payne University, Brownwood, TX

### **RELATED WORK EXPERIENCE:**

- 1996-2002      Chef, Virginia TasteBuds Incorporated, Richmond, VA
- 1994-1996      Chef, Executive Mansion, Office of the Governor, State of Virginia, Richmond, VA
- 1989-1994      President and Film Producer, Phoenix Productions, Inc., Richmond, VA
- 1984-1988      Film/Video Producer, International Mission Board, Southern Baptist Convention, Richmond, VA
- 1981-1984      Minister of Media, First Baptist Church, Brownwood, TX

### **SELECTED PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS or MEMBERSHIPS:**

- 2002-Present    National Art Education Association, Reston, VA
- 1994-2000      American Culinary Foundation Chefs Association, Richmond, VA
- 1984-1989      International Television Association, Richmond, VA

## SELECTED EXHIBITIONS:

- 2010            *Places on Earth--A Brush with Nature*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA. artspace, Richmond, VA
- 2009            *Women and the Arts*, art6 Gallery, Richmond, VA
- 2009            *MIS 605*, Project Space Gallery, Plant Zero, Richmond, VA, Curator: Sally Bowring
- 2009            *All Media Show (July)*, Crossroads Art Center, Richmond, VA, Juror: Chris Wynn
- 2003-2009      *Artist As Educator Exhibition*, Annual, Henrico County Public Schools Central Office, Richmond, VA
- 2000            *Get Surreal: Reviving the Exquisite Corpse*, 2nd Street Gallery, Charlottesville, VA

## GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS:

- 2008            Artist In Residence Grant, On-site Coordinator, Virginia Commission for the Arts, Mills E. Godwin High School, Henrico County Public Schools, Richmond, VA
- 2002            Glenn B. Hamm Award for Academic Achievement, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
- 2002            Dean's Scholarship, Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts, Richmond, VA
- 1993            Development Grant, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, in support of *Not Our Children*, a documentary on School Closings in Prince Edward County, Virginia
- 1992            Research Grant, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, in support of *Not Our Children*, a documentary on School Closings in Prince Edward County, Virginia
- 1992            CINE Golden Eagle, for *Meninos De Rua: Eles Tambem Sao Nossos*, produced by Phoenix Productions, Inc., CINE International Film and Video Competition, Washington, D. C.