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Primitive Current

Joseph Dixon

Virginia Commonwealth University

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Primitive Current

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

by

Joseph W. Dixon II
Bachelor of Arts-Studio Art, University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Wilmington, North Carolina, 1997

Virginia Commonwealth University
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Artist Statement

The ocean is the common theme in my work. There is a calmness that comes over me when I sit on the beach and look off into the distance, over an infinite seascape peppered with gulls and shrimp boats. This is a safe place to be but it always leaves me wondering about what lies beneath the surface of the water, below what I can see and below what I know. Time and time again, I come back to the power and mystery of the ocean and all that it symbolizes. To explore the question what lies below?, I create surface tension in my artwork with exaggerated texture, and I juxtapose images of water with scenes from my life.
Introduction

I became an art teacher because I loved the creative process. When I saw students creating original works of art I was satisfied. It was that simple, all I wanted to see was students challenging themselves and willing to take risks on their art. Watching them become problem solvers and in the end having something to show for their effort was what kept me teaching. What they had was a piece of themselves laid out for all to see. I think this is beautiful and makes our world a better place.

The more I focused on teaching, the less work I produced for myself. I was teaching from remembered experiences instead of firsthand knowledge. I began taking graduate art classes at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) because I wanted to experience for myself the ideas and techniques I was teaching on a daily basis. After a couple of classes it became apparent that I needed to take more, so I decided to apply and was accepted to VCU’s Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts (MIS-IAR) program. I took classes in painting, sculpture, ceramics, computer art, printmaking, digital photography, and traditional photography. I wanted to experience what these disciplines had to teach me again. My focus areas in the MIS-IAR program were painting and photography because those were the areas that challenged my creative side the most.

Outside of my classroom I became an artist again. I felt I was among other artists who, like me, were teachers trying to stay connected to their craft. I became
productive through the support of my professors and fellow artists in the MIS-IAR program. I was given a place to grow as an artist and that made all the difference in my own classroom.

Ocean as Theme

My paintings and digital photomontages deal with the ocean and how it relates to my life. In my life the ocean has played a significant role. Some of my earliest memories are of the ocean and playing on the beach with my friends and family. Every summer, for as long as I can remember, my family would spend a significant amount of time at the beach. We would cook the seafood we caught and spend the evenings under the stars. It seemed to be a simple and joyful time in my life but there were things going on of which I was unaware. Relationships were strained and promises were broken and this created tension below the surface of what I could see.

The ocean, like our emotions and relationships, sometimes hides things from sight but they can be felt. It has a pull on you. The ocean can at times appear calm on the surface yet underneath lays a strong rip current. In my work I created literal surface tension between what lies on the surface and what is held within, below what can be seen. Using the ocean as inspiration I created multiple layers of imagery to symbolize the depth of the human experience and interpersonal relationships. Sometimes one enters into a relationship, by birth or choice, and at first the waters are calm but as you enter in deeper you are suddenly caught up in the current and pulled out to sea. If you fight it you will exhaust yourself, so you are left to let it pull you out.

There is also a nurturing side to the ocean, one that holds you afloat and
comforts you. Like a baby in the womb, I immersed myself in the water and floated around, only to be moved by the rhythmic pull of the waves. Knowing that I have always had a safe place to go is important in a life that can sometimes feel full of chaos and uncertainty. In my work I explored both sides of the ocean, the safe nurturing side and the powerful unforgiving side. Neither side is inherently positive or negative but our experiences and interpretation of events lead us to label things as good or bad. Like the ocean our relationships have parts that are seen and parts that are unseen. In my work I explored this idea and why the ocean at times concealed and at times revealed what had been held within.

Process

In my mixed media paintings I built up the surface by adding an exaggerated texture. To achieve this texture I experiment with non-traditional materials like caulk and spackle. In addition to paintings I also worked with digital photomontages. These were created on the computer and then printed out on digital photo paper. The digital photomontages have filled my need to have realistic and recognizable images while my paintings have evolved into textural and sculptural explorations.

I began my paintings by building up texture on wood or canvas with lines of caulk or layers of spackle. The caulk was applied with a caulking gun, while the spackle was applied with different types of putty knives. These textures were laid down intuitively on the wood or canvas and then covered with gesso in order to seal the caulk and make the surface easier to paint on. Once the textures were created I would then decide what the image would be. It was important to me to get a texture that created a relief so that
the painting created its own shadows and highlights. In addition to the surface quality of the pieces, I often added sculptural elements like old computer motherboards, pieces of soldered and hammered copper, and pieces of foam core board with spackle on them. These elements were usually added after most of the painting had been completed. The three-dimensional elements were glued or fastened to the artwork with screws. Any elements that were added beneath the top layer of paint were made visible by cutting a window or hole in the layers of media. I sometimes added a piece of Plexiglas to the window that could be seen through. I sometimes scratched or partially painted the Plexiglas in order to obstruct the view of what laid beneath the surface. The three-dimensionality of the work gave it a literal presence which forced the viewer to share their space.

The photomontages were a natural progression from my first forays into painting. I was always drawn to Surrealism and the strategy of mixing multiple images into one new and completely unique image. Various narratives are possible in surrealistic images based on the viewers’ associations with the objects or people rendered. I chose images from my life and began layering them. The next step, which was similar to my painting process, was to cut parts of the top layers away so that the surface images visually connected with the bottom layers. This manipulation and cutting was done digitally on a computer. Once a single image was created from multiple photographs, I then began to adjust the lightness and darkness of the images as well as make color corrections. It was important to me to maintain the realism of the individual images while at the same time combine them in a way that created a surrealistic image.

Photography became my way of appropriating images from my environment and
creating something new, while my painting had become a way of creating abstractions and non-representational work. I do not think I would be able to do one without the other. The freedom I felt when working on my mixed media paintings was a result of the voice I could express when I created my digital photomontages.

**Textured Paintings**

In my mixed media paintings I wanted the viewer to wonder what was underneath the surface. I began to pose this question by laying down thick texture and painting on top of it. In some cases I painted a recognizable image on top of the texture and other times I painted an abstract image. I think the exaggerated texture makes the viewers question what they are seeing. In constructing these pieces, I used texture and the illusions it created on the surface to contrast with the image itself, to develop surface tension. Using latex products, like spackle and caulk, gave me flexibility and surface quality that I could easily manipulate.

Along with a focus on texture I also focused my images on the ocean and what lies beneath its surface. As I developed these works, I added the texture to the surface and cut out holes in the support. The viewer literally looked through the surface to what lay beneath. *Water Portal* (Appendix, 1) was my first experimentation with cutting through the surface of my paintings. I cut through the foam core board and glued a piece of Plexiglas on the back of the board. I painted the Plexiglas with the same colors as the surface of the painting. I then scrapped through the paint so the viewers see an obscured view of what physically lay beneath the painting, which would be the wall it is hung on. In addition to cutting the hole and adding the Plexiglas, I took the foam core
board I cut away and glued it on top of the surface of the painting so it looks like it has been moved away to expose what lies below the surface. This process led me to add objects below the Plexiglas window. In *Receding Waters* (Appendix, 2) I added a computer motherboard and pounded copper plates. I also expanded on the idea of attaching foam core board to the surface by adding ceramic tiles, copper plates, and computer parts to the surface as well. *Receding Waters* became more of a sculptural piece.

With *Water Portal* and *Receding Waters* I used spackle to create the exaggerated textures. Now, I wanted to explore the addition of the computer parts further so I began working on wood panels. The wood gave me the ability to secure the motherboards with screws. When I moved to the wood I also began to experiment with caulk in addition to spackle. In *City by the Sea* (Appendix, 3) I used a caulking gun to apply raised lines of caulk. Then, I painted the left side blue to indicate water and the right side tan to reference the shore. Once all the paint was laid down I attached a motherboard with screws to the wood. The motherboard had been spray painted the same color as the shore and represented an abandoned city by the sea. The caulk was symbolic of life that survived below the surface of what is seen. Next, I wanted to explore the linear quality of the caulk in *City by the Sea*, so I created *Pamlico Sound* (Appendix, 4). This time I focused on the relationship of the lines of the caulk that constituted the image of the water and the shore, leaving out the reference to a city. By emphasizing the two natural features of earth and sea through linear marks, a sense of movement and tension was implied.

Through my exploration with texture I developed a theme in my mixed media
paintings that looks at life below superficial appearances. This idea holds my work together and pushes me forward to produce similar work. I translated this idea as a calm surface or exterior that can sometimes mask underlying tension or emotion. In personal terms, I often appear on the surface to be calm and collected but underneath lays a strong current of emotions that are kept concealed.

**Digital Photomontages**

In my digital photomontages I also worked with images of the ocean. I superimposed photographs I had taken of the ocean with photographs I had taken during important moments in my life. These works were intended to create a surreal narrative of moments frozen in time. The digital photomontages have a dreamlike quality that is peaceful and calm. Again, the layering of the ocean with other images relates to the idea that on the surface the ocean may seem calm but what lies below may be different. The images I juxtaposed with the ocean are full of emotion for me. Scenes of my family on a beach spreading the ashes of a deceased pet, as seen in *Without a Sound* (Appendix, 5) and *Drift Away* (Appendix, 6) are full of personal meaning. To the viewer, the combined photographs create a sense of mystery and are open to interpretation.

I combined photographs using computer software because I wanted to create surrealistic illusions. The overall work is presented more like a dream or memory. In a dream I often remember the individual parts but not exactly how they all fit together. The montaged images leave out part of the story so they are open to multiple readings. *Wall and Dunes* (Appendix, 7) was my earliest work in this fashion. Here, I combined
images of photographs I took while on two separate vacations. One trip was to Cape Cod, Massachusetts and the other was taken in Palestine in the Middle East. Initially, I drew a contrast between the people lying on the beach with an image of an old market by the sea. The sand in the dunes and the texture of the stone wall seemed to fit together well, so I explored the blending of textures and developing new meaning by using seemingly unrelated images. I stayed true to the theme of the ocean and started layering images from my life with images I had taken of the ocean. In *Without a Sound* (Appendix, 5) I created an image of people walking through a sound at low tide. I replaced the sky with an image of the water. In the water are the ashes of my dog, Bailey, who passed away earlier that year. My family went to one of her favorite places on the beach and spread her ashes. The ashes in the water appear as clouds in the sky. The image looks peaceful and uneventful but there is a layer of overwhelming emotion associated with that memory. For the viewers my personal associations may not come across but other stories and scenarios are possible. The viewers can only see what is on the surface, they are unaware of the meaning that lies below what is seen. I hope that they question and wonder what lies beneath the surface.

I continued to work in this manner in *Homecoming* (Appendix, 8). I layered the ocean with images of my daughter Layla and my wife Hanan, while she was pregnant with Layla. The images of Layla and Hanan are recognizable to those who know them, and the photomontage captures more of my personal experience but the meaning of the images (mother, baby, birth, and water) can resonate with a broader audience. In *From Within* (Appendix, 9) I abstracted the figures so they are not recognized as specific individuals. The figures are presented as any baby and any woman, which allows the
viewers in to experience the artwork. They can begin to relate to the overwhelming emotions that come with the birth of a child. *Homecoming* and *From Within* both deal with the whirlwind of emotions I felt before and after Layla was born. On the surface I remained calm but inside I experienced a full range of emotions. Some days I was extremely excited and other days I was uncertain and fearful. I was able to use my art to express these emotions even if on the surface they appeared calm and nurturing.

My digital photomontages reflect important moments in my life. By layering real images I attempted to create an abstraction of moments that speak of a universal human experience. The ocean continued to be the theme that bound my experiences together and added a layer of depth to my artwork.

**Conclusion**

In both the mixed media paintings and digital photomontages, I used themes important in my life as a basis for exploring new artistic ideas. The process of creating these pieces was as important as the final products because I ventured out beyond my comfort zone to try dimensional and layered techniques. While I did not deliberately set out to use the ocean as a theme, it quickly emerged as the unifying element in my work. The experience of creating these pieces has been uniquely personal, both because of the subject matter and because my relationship with the ocean added metaphor and mystery. This consistency in production reignited my creative spirit which bled over into my teaching.

Through the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies program in Interdisciplinary Arts I became the artist I wanted to be and the teacher I needed to be. Being an artist was
something I wanted to do for myself and my family, and being a teacher was something I wanted to do for my community. I now understand that without one the other does not exist.
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Joseph W. Dixon II

Education:
1997  Bachelor of Arts in Studio Art, University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Wilmington, North Carolina. Emphasis in Painting.

Other Education:
2004  Teacher Licensure Program in Art Education, University of North Carolina at Asheville, Asheville, North Carolina.

Teaching Experience:
2006-present  Visual Arts Teacher, W.T. Woodson High School, Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax, Virginia.
2000-2001  Teacher of Video Production, Leesville Road High School, Wake County Public Schools, Raleigh, North Carolina.

Related Experience:
2006-2008  Painting Instructor, Summer Institute for the Arts, Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax, Virginia.

Exhibitions:
1997  *Senior Show*, Claude Howell Gallery, University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Wilmington, North Carolina.
1996  *Annual Student Show*, Student Union Gallery, University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Wilmington, North Carolina.