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Reflections of Maturity

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Reflections of Maturity

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

by

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# Table of Contents

Artist Statement .................................................................................................................. iii

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1

Aesthetics .............................................................................................................................. 1

Influences .............................................................................................................................. 2

Media and Processes ........................................................................................................... 3

Mixed Media Painting ......................................................................................................... 7

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 10

Bibliography ........................................................................................................................ 11

Appendix .............................................................................................................................. 12

  List of Figures .................................................................................................................... 12

  Images ................................................................................................................................. 13

Resume ................................................................................................................................... 25
Artist Statement

My artwork is inspired by philosophical questions and personal experiences that are prompted from the colors and textures of weathered and worn metal, the changing scenery of the landscape, or from the recollections of childhood memories. The sum of these inspirations are unified by the concepts of growth and change, my own and that of the body of work.

The translation of my experiences provides the opportunity to discover new variations in theme, process, and media. For example, monotype printmaking allows me to present the often overlooked beauty of metal eroding, revealing its story layer by layer. Digital photography encourages me to revisit the places of my childhood and consider the effects of the passing years. Painting provides a playground for the exploration of line, shape, texture, and color in a symbolic and nonobjective manner.
Reflections of Maturity

Introduction

You’re really not a painter, five little words that defined me as an artist for more than a decade. Simple words spoken to a college undergrad that had a great impact. From that day on I changed how I saw my art and myself. Even upon completing my bachelor’s degree in Art Education and securing a position teaching high school art, those words would come back to haunt me. I turned down opportunities to teach upper level art classes that came my way, fearing I would do more harm than good by trying to instruct these young artists how to paint when I myself was not a painter. I felt inadequate in my ability to develop a solid foundation in painting for them. I began developing my professional focus as an instructor in classes where a solid foundation in drawing, direct observation, and color theory would serve them well. They would progress through the program and learn painting techniques from faculty members who I identified as painters.

For me, art became a series of explorations in every medium, technique, or process that caught my interest, every medium except for paint. That was until I began my graduate studies in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts (MIS-IAR) Program offered through Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). Here, I discovered that being an artist is defined by my intrinsic desire to reflect on or respond to my life experiences in a visual manner, and not by the medium I use.

Aesthetics

Once I began the program, I realized that I could develop my own methods and approaches to making art. I decided to combine materials to create mixed media paintings on my
own terms. My artwork is an expression of my personal journey as I have grown and matured. I use recollections from my past, such as the surface of the rusted metal glider on the front porch where I spent so much time sitting and drawing the world around me. This surface represents the wear and tear of time and experience. I also incorporate gridded patterns of spirals and circles in non-objective yet symbolic images telling an abstracted story of growth and development. I incorporate these images in a way that allows for a range of interpretations by the viewer. For me, the images symbolize my development both personally and creatively. I use techniques and approaches learned from printmaking, digital photography, and painting. I combine these media and layer images, textures, lines, and shapes.

Influences

I have long been attracted to the work of artist’s who employ bold use of color. I am also interested in work that combines the elements of line, shape, and form into complex compositions. For example, Austrian born Symbolist painter, Gustav Klimt (1862-1918), developed a style which included bright colors and intricate patterning. In my paintings, like Klimt, I explore the delicate curvilinear forms using bright, bold patterning of spirals and the incorporation of gold leaf. The spiraling branches from his painting Tree of Life (1909) were a direct inspiration for my own paintings where I developed tree forms from the layering of spirals.

In direct contrast to Klimt’s sweeping, organic forms, I have long admired Piet Mondrian’s (1872-1944) rigidly structured and gridded compositions. In his work he used the primary colors of red, blue, and yellow along with white and black. His use of a limited bright and bold color palette is void of blended values and is graphic in nature. These grids have provided inspiration for my own use of gridding in recent works, along with a limited palette.
Combining the elements of both Klimt and Mondrian is the work of Friedensreich Hundertwasser (1928-2000). He used bright colors and organic spirals but combined them into gridded and labyrinth-like imagery that one has to visually traverse. He was inspired by Klimt’s curvilinear forms but developed his own theoretical approach that he referred to as transautomatism. In this approach, he sought to strike a balance between conventional art which required directed thought and Surrealism which was based upon the subconscious or automatic response of the artist. He relied heavily on the participation of the viewer and how each person would interpret images from a unique perspective. Although my imagery is quite different, my layered spirals also allow the viewer to traverse the imagery taking in the variety of shape, color, and textures.

**Media and Processes**

When I began my coursework I rediscovered monotype printmaking and experimented with a variety of water-based inks, watercolor pencil, and etching inks. I had completed a series of images using multiple layers of ink on a rigid vinyl printing plate. *Memories Fade* (Appendix, 1) resulted while cleaning the printing plate. As the water ran across the surface, I began noticing the beautiful patterns and textures that revealed themselves as the ink washed away. I stopped washing the plate and set it aside to dry. I wanted to print it and see if the resulting print was as intriguing as the eroded ink looked on the plate. Those prints came out hauntingly beautiful, I had just found a happy accident. Now, I needed to see if I could recreate this process intentionally.

*Oxidation I* (Appendix, 2) is the result of my focused exploration to recreate this process. Rolling the ink in layers on the printing plate served as the foundation of the image. I began
utilizing stencil techniques to control edges. I also manipulated color placement which resulted in images that resembled the worn and aged look of metal that has weathered through the chemical and physical changes of oxidation. I found that this look reflected a sense of growth, maturation, and wear which I paralleled with my own maturity.

Next, I explored digital photography which was inspired in part by my printmaking experiments and my childhood memories. This awakened my desire to return home to Canton, Ohio and revisit familiar locations through the camera lens. This exploration of my hometown culminated in a photo story chronicling the visual effects of a steel mill centered city affected by economic down turn. It is a series of stark black and white photos where I used an infrared filter effect that highlighted the deterioration of buildings, and a community. Again, my work was a visual documentation of a story of wear and tear.

In order to develop this idea of change, evolution, and maturity, I decided to layer my photography with digital versions of my printmaking images that reflected similar ideas. I layered print images into the background or negative spaces of the photographs. However, the resulting image needed more depth and the images seemed like they were forced together.

About that time, I was introduced to a digital photography process that would recreate the look of an intaglio print without the cost or time requirement of the traditional methods. So, I selected images from my hometown of places such as President William McKinley’s National Memorial. Using the digital intaglio process, I transformed my photograph of The McKinley Monument into a high contrast black and white image. In Canton’s Legacy (Appendix, 3), this high contrast image became the foundation and focus of the overall image. On top of this image, I layered a larger intaglio-style, low contrast digital image of the monument. It appears to float behind the first image of the monument and details the dome architecture and fades into the tree line of the
foreground image. I then digitally layered one of my abstracted prints into the background of the image. The print fades from orange at the top down to a purple at the bottom and helps to emphasize the building and its architectural elements.

*Palace Theatre* (Appendix, 4) was my next work employing a similar process. I began with a digital photo of the Palace Theatre and recreated the same image in the intaglio process. I then took this one step further by creating separate intaglio layers based on the highlight, mid-tone, and shadows from the image. The highlight image is the foundation for the overall image. Next, I applied the mid-tone value layer on top while reducing the scale. I then applied what appears to be the background layer using the shadows of the intaglio image. The opacity was reduced so that the letters from the marquee are ghosted against the negative space of the sky. After manipulating the intaglio layers I applied the digital version of another print. In this print, the bright red-colored organic shapes mimic cloud-like structures. This layering of the imagery creates an aged look and emphasizes the architecture and the classic marquee.

After working with prints and photography, I desired a way to unify all of my interests and media. I decided to work with mixed media and incorporate symbolism into my artwork. I wanted to incorporate various experiences and document my personal journeys in a meaningful way. I began by looking at my previous works and noted that spirals, circles, and crosses surfaced often. I researched the meanings and historical occurrences of these symbols. Then, I began a visual exploration by beginning new works. This time, I decided to break out my paints which, of course, induced a fight or flight response in me. Since I was working in a mixed media setting, using paint as one media option provided a safety net for me.

I began working with acrylic paint by selecting a highly recommended book that walked me through the language of acrylics, materials, equipment, basic application, and contemporary
alternative approaches. I experimented on gesso-coated paper with various mark making exercises. I felt the movement of each brush stroke I made, saw how the paint moved on the canvas, and incorporated the acrylic mediums to understand their influence on the paint’s color, opacity, and texture. I was engrossed by the combinations and possibilities that I had at my disposal. I moved to canvases continuing my exploration of symbols, and in particular spirals.

Gold Orbs on Midnight Sky (Appendix, 5) is the first of my paintings. This painting was developed by building up a succession of thin, transparent layers by mixing in glazing medium to the fluid color acrylics. I applied a variety of spirals across the entire canvas using a primary palette of phthalo blue, quinacridone magenta, and indian yellow. This open, flowing spiral shape represents the ideas of extension, evolution, and continuity. I then gesturally applied a textured string gel medium to the canvas that would contrast with the thin paint application. At that point, I developed the three-dimensional illusion of the yellow orbs by using the magenta to create the shaded areas and translucent whites for the highlights. The ground was developed by layering a range of blues to create my version of a night sky. The circle is a traditional symbol of wholeness and the feminine, and I combined it with spirals to indicate the rhythms of life.

My next piece was designed as a triptych and entitled Gold Orbs on Red (Appendix, 6). In this piece, I used many of the same processes of layering shapes yet still revealing aspects of each layer. I used a primary palette and black and white. For this piece, I again added the string gel medium creating a textural layer along with the layers of paint. Taking this painting a step further I varied the scale and the illusionistic depth of the orbs. I arranged the orbs in spirals over an implied infinite series of larger orbs. These symbols represented a personal growth and progress that I was experiencing as I became reacquainted with painting. At this point, I expanded my organization of imagery and media.
Mixed Media Painting

I have always had a love of textural and patterned papers and chose this as a starting point for building my mixed media imagery. I began *Entangled Beauty Growing* (Appendix, 7) by selecting a textured mulberry paper that was applied across the entire surface of a foam core board. Then, I selected another textured paper that was half the size of the original and began cutting circles from it in a gridded pattern. The paper was then attached to the lower portion of the panel, while the circular cut-outs were attached in the same order to the upper portion of the panel. I applied washes of warm yellows over the entire panel to unify the surface and imagery. Once the foundation was set I applied spirals of varying shapes and sizes. Patterns and colors began developing as I alternated light, bright spirals with darker, dense almost tree-like spirals placed along the left edge. I employed a complementary color scheme of vibrant yellow-oranges and subtle blue-violets. This image is significant because it introduced the rectilinear form to my artwork as part of the foundation of the image. This geometric shape symbolizes permanence, security, and balance which is what I was beginning to experience in my artwork as part of my growth.

*Ascension & Maturity* (Appendix, 8) began as a diptych that continued my exploration of textured paper to define the central space of the panels. In this piece, I again used the string gel medium developing a textural quality on top of the papers. About this time, I discovered a painting product that creates the look of a patina of oxidized metal. This product helped produce an aged feeling in my mixed media pieces that I had earlier achieved with my printmaking images. I applied this product, which is comprised of metal flakes suspended in paint, to the support. As the spray catalyst was applied, the patina emerged quickly and instantly appeared to
age the piece. I could continue to manipulate paint into the patina and use the string gel which repelled the patina creating a cracked and worn appearance.

As much as I enjoyed my non-objective explorations of line and shape, I wanted to paint a real thing. I went in search of images of trees as artists had depicted them through the years. I rediscovered Gustav Klimt’s *Tree of Life* (1909) and found my inspiration. In *Reaching Maturity* (Appendix, 9), I took a panel and covered it with mulberry paper. I then developed my tree using Klimt’s idea of branches that spiral up from a trunk. In contrast to Klimt, I used my layered, organic style of patterning and mark making. I developed my spirals in the background with muted, more subtle color variations to push the tree forward in space. I wanted to honor the tree and it felt too contained and trapped on the panel. So, I layered the original panel onto another larger panel where the larger spirals serve as a framing device for the tree.

*Maturely Balanced* (Appendix, 10) developed from a grid created by applying five rectilinear paper shapes onto the panel. These shapes are intended to be read as windows. I decided that with my personal and creative maturity came a sense of balance that I wanted to relay in this image. I painted the tree spiraling up and symmetrically placed on the panel. The limbs of the tree expand to the edges of the format and imply that they continue past the border of the painting. In the rectangular windows I painted subtle spiral shapes reminiscent of the tree forms. They are veiled beneath layers of string gel medium and copper metallic paint. This mixed media painting was a turning point in my artistic development, I finally felt secure in my painting abilities.

With this sense of security I contemplated my next move. While enjoying what I had achieved, I felt the desire to reconcile myself with how I had once identified myself. I often go back through my work and search for new points of inspiration. It was during one of these times
of reflection that I reevaluated my digital prints. I selected my intaglio images of places like McKinley Monument, the Palace Theatre, and the Canton Cultural Center where I took my first private art lessons. These places had encouraged my growth and exploration as a child, and where influential to my early artistic development. I thought it fitting to use these images as a starting point for my next exploration.

In *Icons of Childhood* (Appendix, 11) I wanted to honor these places that inspired my love of art. I did not want to collage the printouts directly to the canvas. So, I researched emulsion transfers and selected one that utilized gesso. In this process, gesso is applied directly to a laser-printed copy of the reversed image which is then transferred to the canvas or support. When the gesso is completely dry, the attached paper could then be rewetted and rubbed off, leaving the pigmented image. The panels employed for this piece were larger than the 8” x 10” printouts, so I centered the images directly on the canvas panels. Then, I began applying transparent layers of glazes and paints to these transferred images, slowly building up a rich and aged appearance. Finally, I applied gold leafing to my imagery to express the value I had for these places.

With *Childhood Building Blocks* (Appendix, 12), I revisited a variety of images from previous work and recycled them into this piece. Using acrylic semi-gloss gel medium, I transferred remnants of images onto the canvas in an angled, gridded pattern. I applied washes of browns to soften the edges of the transfers, removing the feeling of newness from the canvas. In this grid pattern, I began imagining the streets names of my neighborhood, and the relation of my house to those of my friends. I decided to give way to this vision, and in loose script I wrote street names in the spaces between images. Once the streets were identified, I began placing gold leaf squares where my house was and where my friends’ houses were. With the houses
marked out I began to make linear connections from one location to another by tracing the routes we ran between homes hundreds of times. I added a glazed outline around the gold leaf sections to emphasize their importance. As a final touch, I added a light, ghosted, and stenciled zip code to the lower left corner of the composition. With this piece, I felt like I had come full circle in my artwork because I traversed the span of personal and creative growth from the neighborhood of my youth to the person I am today.

Conclusion

What I thought would be a way to improve the skills I had to offer my students really turned out to be so much more. From the MIS-IAR Program I emerged a stronger, more self-confident artist and I have developed a love of painting. I have used my creative voice to reflect on my life, maturity, and development as an artist in a multitude of ways. With maturity comes growth, and for me that growth has opened many doors. My work continues to develop with every new painting and inspiration. I no longer fear painting and that is a freedom that continues to push me to try new things in my work every day. I now know that I can be the artist I want to be with or without anyone else’s approval, and now I really am a painter.
Bibliography


Appendix

List of Figures

Figure 1. *Memories Fade*, monotype on paper, 4”x6”, 2008.
Figure 2. *Oxidation I*, monotype on paper, 8”x10”, 2008.
Figure 3. *Canton’s Legacy*, digital photograph, 10”x8”, 2008.
Figure 4. *Palace Theatre*, digital photograph, 10”x8”, 2008.
Figure 5. *Gold Orbs on Midnight Sky*, acrylic on canvas, 36”x12”, 2009.
Figure 6. *Gold Orbs on Red*, acrylic on three canvases, 36”x36”, 2009.
Figure 7. *Entangled Beauty Growing*, mixed media acrylic on board, 30”x20”x1/2”, 2009.
Figure 8. *Ascension & Maturity*, mixed media acrylic on two canvases, 30”x40”, 2009.
Figure 9. *Reaching Maturity*, mixed media acrylic on board, 30”x20”x1/2”, 2009.
Figure 10. *Maturely Balanced*, mixed media acrylic on board, 24”x36”x1/2”, 2009.
Figure 11. *Icons of Childhood*, mixed media acrylic on three canvas panels, 14”x33”, 2010.
Figure 12. *Childhood Building Blocks*, mixed media on canvas, 30”x24”, 2010.
Figure 1. *Memories Fade*, monotype on paper, 4”x6”, 2008.
Figure 2. *Oxidation I*, monotype on paper, 8”x10”, 2008.
Figure 3. *Canton’s Legacy*, digital photograph, 10”x8”, 2008.
Figure 4. *Palace Theatre*, digital photograph, 10”x8”, 2008.
Figure 5. *Gold Orbs on Midnight Sky*, acrylic on canvas, 36”x12”, 2009.
Figure 6. *Gold Orbs on Red*, acrylic on three canvases, 36”x36”, 2009.
Figure 7. *Entangled Beauty Growing*, mixed media acrylic on board, 30”x20”x1/2”, 2009.
Figure 8. *Ascension & Maturity*, mixed media acrylic on two canvases, 30”x40”, 2009.
Figure 9. *Reaching Maturity*, mixed media acrylic on board, 30”x20”x1/2”, 2009.
Figure 10. *Maturely Balanced*, mixed media acrylic on board, 24”x36”x1/2”, 2009.
Figure 11. *Icons of Childhood*, mixed media acrylic on three canvas panels, 14”x33”, 2010.
Figure 12. *Childhood Building Blocks*, mixed media on canvas, 30”x24”, 2010.
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Bibliography:

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2010  Traps and Transmissions, Adam Lister Gallery, Fairfax, Virginia.
2008  Artist…Teacher…Student, The Congressional Schools of Virginia, Falls Church, Virginia.
2005  7 Lively Artists Living Gallery, Midtown Art Center, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.