Visual Intimacy

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Visual Intimacy

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

By

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May, 2012
# Table of Contents

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

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

Aesthetics ............................................................................................................................. 2

Influences ............................................................................................................................. 3

Painting ................................................................................................................................ 5

Printmaking ......................................................................................................................... 7

Mixed Media ......................................................................................................................... 10

Conclusion .......................................................................................................................... 13

Bibliography ......................................................................................................................... 15

Appendix ............................................................................................................................. 16

List of Figures ....................................................................................................................... 16

Figures .................................................................................................................................. 17

Resume ................................................................................................................................. 26
Artist Statement

My work is designed to visually intrigue and excite while creating a sense of intimacy with the viewer. The inspiration for my paintings, prints, and mixed media pieces are derived from views of flowers and the female form. Sometimes the flowers and forms are presented separately, sometimes they are combined into single works.

I experiment with different media and supports, such as acrylic paint and gel transfers on canvas or Plexiglas, drypoint on Plexiglas, and chalk pastels on wood paneling. Compositionally, I often place light, transparent shapes against dark, opaque grounds to create dramatic contrast. I also use a wide range of values, a vivid and varied color palette, and fine detail to attract my viewer’s attention.
Visual Intimacy

Introduction

One of my favorite and earliest memories is of my grandfather showing me how to apply different layers of colored pencils to create slight variations in color and intensity. Being an artist is something that is embedded deep down inside of me, I have always felt it. The world is intense and I am in this impressively diverse world, I cannot ignore it and I feel the need to explore it. Therefore, I draw, paint, print, and use other media to be a creative contribution to our visual world.

My love of art is something I share with others. Working with and helping fellow students during college was the catalyst for becoming a teacher. I wanted to share my excitement of all art has to offer and to observe others as they explored their creative ideas. A student working with clay for the first time is exciting. They treat the lump of clay as if it were matter from a different galaxy, not sure whether to gently touch, probe, or punch the object in front of them. Collaborating with others to achieve a desired outcome is a rewarding experience and is how I approach teaching my middle school students today.

This cooperative experience is also one of the most important parts of the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), and why I chose to pursue this degree. Classmates and faculty working together in a system of critiques and feedback was essential to my growth as an artist. Immersion into my artwork during this program has allowed me to take a closer look at myself as an artist, as an observer of the world around me, and as a contributor to our visual culture.
Aesthetics

My work is a collection of images in which I reproduce, explore, or exaggerate visually impressive experiences I have had. The source of inspiration for much of my artwork comes from the graceful, intensely-colored, alien-shaped, and miniature world of flowers. I find the diverse and often peculiar colors, forms, and parts of flowers mysterious and intriguing. The beauty I see in a flower is in its arrangement of the petals and other components, and their size and proportion to each other. Some blossoms embody a soft inviting, sensual form, while others exhibit sharp, angular features. I see flowers as similar to the tropical bird of paradise. The male bird of this species uses its brightly-colored plumage, loud song, and provocative dance moves to entice the female of the species into a courting ritual. The outcome for the male is to mate with the female, preserve the species, and to propagate his genes. Like the bird, a flower is an advertisement in the pursuit of survival.

Many flowers also remind me of the graceful nature of the female body and like flowers come in endless variations. Texture, position, and proportion of one part of the form to another create an appealing design. These are the same characteristics I love about flowers. The process of a flower unfurling its petals and outer coverings to expose the beautiful inner elements prompts the image of a beautiful woman for me. I often combine flowers and the female form in images because they contain similar shapes. Often, I camouflage the female form amongst the flowers. Outstretched arms of soft female skin remind me of delicate petals which extend from the core of a flower. Long slender legs and torso mimic the stem and base of the flower.

My primary method of capturing the viewer’s attention is the use of contrasting elements. We begin life stimulated visually by objects or images with high contrast. Babies are drawn to objects with black and white images or positive and negative spaces. Street signs,
advertisements, and other forms of media utilize sharp contrast to initiate the interaction between the viewer and the image. I employ the same technique of using sharp contrast to activate the uncontrollable urge to look. For example, in a typical image I may use soft, light values of chalk pastels to distinguish the edges of a flower. Then, I may fill the surrounding negative space with a matte black acrylic paint. Rendering this space devoid of distracting elements further focuses the attention toward the depicted object.

The second method I use to nurture the relationship between the viewer and my artwork is value. I use a wide range of values to increase the illusion of three-dimensionality on the two-dimensional surface. I achieve this illusion by using *chiaroscuro* techniques. This term refers to the manipulation of light and dark passages in a painting, usually for dramatic effect. In this approach to modeling, forms seem to emerge from a dark background while the highlights on objects seem to have a luminous glow. In my work, I adopt the use of chiaroscuro to exaggerate the undulating shapes of flower petals and to give depth and dimension to the overlapping flower pieces. Dark values push curved areas back while the highlights bring the crest of the curves forward. I want the viewer to feel as though they can run their fingers along the petals and feel the ripples in the edges or place a delicate transparent petal in their palm. Value allows me to compose these visual effects.

My body of work includes acrylic paintings, drypoint prints, transfer techniques, and a combination of media. Each type of media has its own characteristics and subtle interesting effects. No matter what media I use my work is descriptive of reality.

**Influences**

Many artists have influenced me over the years and new influences are added frequently.
One artist who particularly interests me is Andrey Avinoff (1884-1949). He was born in the Ukraine and was an entomologist and painter. Avinoff, who became the director of the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1926, traveled throughout the United States and other areas of the world documenting flora and fauna. He collected specimens and produced detailed watercolor paintings of different species he encountered. His attention to details and characteristics of different species of moths, butterflies, and wildflowers are widely recognized for their beauty and scientific accuracy. In addition to his botanical and entomological images, he also was a painter of fantastical, symbolic, and apocalyptic landscapes and scenes. He was a visionary in his combination of anatomically correct floral images and invented environments. The union of elements produces a feeling of sensuality in his artwork and illustrated his love of science and art in one cohesive package. These aspects of his work, accurate draftsmanship and imagination, are ones that I also use.

Edward Weston (1886-1958) is another artist that inspires my work. He was a photographer who captured images from landscapes to leaves. Weston’s photographs of peppers, cabbage leaves, and female forms are the most interesting to me. The wide range of values and contrasts give the illusion of three-dimensionality to these everyday objects. Pepper No. 30 (1930) and Pepper No. 35 (1930), both gelatin silver prints, are supreme examples of Weston’s ability to use dramatic value. In Pepper No. 30 a bell pepper is the subject. Its form resembles two bodies pushing against each other in a desperate struggle. The background is dark and the pepper is pushed forward with its lighter values as if the battle began in the shadows and has spilled over into the light. Weston’s expressive use of values creates a sense of mystery and romanticism giving his seemingly insignificant subjects character and importance.

Another important influence in my work is based on Surrealistic techniques and
approaches. Surrealism was an early twentieth-century movement that focused on the unconscious and its effect on creating art and literature. The Viennese psychoanalyst’s, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), work on the unconscious and dreams validated the Surrealists and their theories. Surreal images are full of imaginary landscapes, creatures, and forms in illogical combinations. Symbolism was often used to relate personal, social, or political issues. Similar to religious artwork, which often employs symbolic or allegorical scenes, the Surrealists inspired me to create and embed my own symbolism, meaning, and stories in my work.

Each piece of artwork or artist that captivates me in some way has affected the outcome of my own artwork, sometimes quite by accident and sometimes very deliberately. Whether it is the subject matter, the beauty I find in the technique, or the way a narrative is conveyed, all influence my artistic direction.

**Painting**

Several years ago, I switched from using watercolor to acrylics. I thought that acrylics would allow me to be more spontaneous and gestural in my execution. My approach to watercolors required more planning and careful handling. With acrylics, I was able to create washes as well as layers of thick, opaque paint. I was also able to more easily work on a larger scale. I used acrylic gel mediums applied with a palette knife to build texture and create different finishes. I painted on different supports such as canvas, Plexiglas, and wood panel.

In painting, I turned my attention to floras. I experimented with media and supports and I created a series of six works using acrylic on Plexiglas. The series illustrates the growth of orchids from buds to flowers. *Orchid Buds #3* (Appendix, 1) and *White Orchid* (Appendix, 2) are two works in this series. In *Orchid Buds #3*, I painted a stem and three buds of an orchid.
horizontally across the middle of the format. Part of a white and iridescent blue petal monopolizes the space in the upper right-hand corner, a glimpse of what the buds will become. I painted the ground solid black to create high contrast, focusing the viewer’s attention on the stem and flower buds. The dark stem of red, brown, and green alludes to the healthy fertile condition of the plant. The robust buds share the same colors as the stem but in lighter values, creating a stronger contrast with the background.

In *White Orchid*, one fully opened flower is presented frontally on a large rectangular piece of Plexiglas. Thin washes of white, yellow, and blue make up the symmetrical petals and sepals of the flower. A different approach to painting was required in this series. I wanted the viewer to see these pieces from the smooth, unpainted side of the Plexiglas. I wanted it to read similarly to stained glass. So, I painted these images in a reverse glass painting approach. I used the protective film on the Plexiglas as a mask for the flower, which I cut and removed. These areas were painted with a thick black acrylic paint leaving the stem, buds, and white flower petal untouched. The thick black paint also acted as a barrier to restrict the spread of the thinner washes I applied to the flower. The small, central details of the flower were painted first and allowed to dry. Then, washes of colors were painted on top allowing for the details to be visible from the unpainted side. I allowed the paint to dilute, mix, and pool into swirls of colors to reinforce the organic nature of the image.

Painting in the MIS-IAR Program has taken me in a direction I had never planned. Producing several series of paintings allowed me to alter my style and techniques to suit different moods and experiences. Throughout my experimentation and that of my classmates I have discovered an array of open ended possibilities.
Printmaking

Printmaking was my second concentration in the MIS-IAR Program. Fueled by a desire to learn new processes and expand my methods of creating artwork, I was eager to start. Pulling a print is like opening a kiln of glazed ceramics. Although you have a rough idea of the outcome there are always subtle deviations. I experimented with different ink colors in one image, multiple images on one sheet of paper, and overlapping impressions. The fact that I could revisit the plate in the future made me an instant fan.

The drawback to the printing methods was that I could not at first create prints which looked like the drawings I made, full of smooth value changes and fine details. However, when I discovered the solarplate process I knew I had found the remedy to my dilemma. I could finally create an edition of prints where each image could have all of the tonal values that I desired with one pass through the printing press.

*Joan of Arc* (Appendix, 3) was my first solarplate print. Drawing on frosted Mylar, I included all the illusionistic details I had imagined about this woman. I positioned the faithful and obedient Joan of Arc in a profile view, from her chest to the top of her face. Her head is lowered and her eyes are closed. I wanted to present her in a meditative pose. Again for contrast, the dark value of the ground contrasts the smooth and volumetric appearance of the armor. The curves of the armor follow the contours of her upper body and a sharp piece projects from the neck of the breastplate. The plate covering the upper arm contains a cross signifying her allegiance to God.

The process of making an intaglio print using a solarplate begins with a drawing on a transparent or semi-transparent material. I used frosted Mylar because it had some tooth to grab the graphite I drew with. A solarplate is a sheet of steel which has a layer of photo emulsion on
one side. I cut a plate to fit the size of my drawing on Mylar. Then, I removed the metal solarplate sheet from a special envelope for light sensitive material and place it inside an ultraviolet (UV) light emitting box. My drawing on the Mylar is added next, drawing side down. Next, a semi-transparent aquatint film layer is added which gives a little darker tone to the final image. The aquatint film imprints, on what would be a smooth printing plate, a matrix of tiny dots which accepts more ink and therefore transfers more ink to the printing paper. A vacuum seal is the top and final layer. The vacuum ensures the layers are in intimate contact with each other for a crisp accurate transfer of the drawn image to the solarplate. The UV light box cover is closed and the set up is exposed for a predetermined amount of time. After exposure, the aquatint film is carefully removed and then the plate and drawing are exposed a second time, again determined through prior testing. Finally, the plate is removed from the UV box and placed in a bath of water. Gently scrubbing removes the photo emulsion from the darker areas of the plate left by my drawing. This leaves recessed areas which will accept the ink in the intaglio process. The plate is removed from the bath and allowed to harden. Ink is pressed into the valleys and depressions while the top surface is rubbed and buffed almost clean. Damp paper is placed on the plate and then run through a press where the pressure of the press forces the paper into the recessed areas picking up the ink. Many variables along the way can change the final product, such as the drawing materials used, the amount of exposure time in the UV box, how long the plate sits in the bath, ink consistency, and the amount of pressure produced by the press. No print is exactly the same.

Etchings and engraving have also always interested me. I like the quality of the lines and the fine details that can be achieved. Without the technical resources to produce either, I found myself turning to an alternative. Drypoint is a printmaking process producing similar
characteristics of an engraving or etching. A Plexiglas plate is cut to size and the sharp edges beveled to protect the printing paper from tearing in the press later. I use an X-ACTO blade to cut the image into the plate. Value gradations are achieved by scoring the surface using a crosshatching technique. Even the finest of lines can register to the printing paper.

Next, I turned from the figure back to a floral subject. Pointed flower (Appendix, 4) is a drypoint on Plexiglas plate. In this print I drew a grouping of three imaginary flowers, each atop a stem which slants down and disappears from view. The two flowers which were placed lower on the picture plane are immature and closed. Their cylindrical shape tapers towards the bottom as they join the stem. The third and largest flower, which extends towards the upper left-hand corner, is mature and open. The thin, angular outer petals separate above the mid-section of the flower and fold down, creating a curled ring of petals. In the middle of these curled petals a spike extends almost doubling the length of the flower. The features of this flower suggest a strong masculine appearance. The dark gray tones in the background were intentionally left during the buffing phase to create some atmosphere. The splatter of iron oxide ink, representing dirt, was added just before printing the plate.

I explored other printmaking processes such as relief printing, monotype, and collagraphs. Combinations of processes created a layered look which paralleled my work in other media. To emphasize the layered effect I used different types of papers in a process called chine colle. Chine colle is a printmaking technique where a thinner paper, often handmade, is glued to the heavier printmaking paper. The glue, which is normally a corn starch powder, is sprinkled on the back of the damped chine colle paper. Running the layers of paper and inked plate through the press bonds the papers and prints the image onto the chine colle paper. Thistle with chine colle on black (Appendix, 5) was created in this way. Here, the printing plate was a
drypoint on Plexiglas which was first loaded with white ink and printed on black Stonehenge paper. Next, I prepared my chine colle paper by planning the placement of the pieces. I washed my plate and inked it in the areas where I knew the chine colle paper would be. The pressure of the press fused the papers together and the dark green and violet ink was transferred to the chine colle paper. The white ink on the black paper and the dark inks on the lighter paper joined at their borders and created contrasts. The light color of the rectangular chine colle paper also contrasted to the black printmaking paper. I chose the image of the thistle to further emphasize dissimilarity in form. The sharp, defensive-looking leaves which protect each stem and the spines on the unopened buds may dissuade a passerby from touching this plant. However, the open flowers at the top reminded me of a soft, bristled brush used to apply shaving cream.

Printmaking has become a valuable tool for me. I have experimented with new processes, papers, and inks which produced inspiring results. I am able to achieve the look of an etching’s fine line quality to create details for my viewer to inspect more closely. In the same print, I can create a spontaneous, dramatic, and more painterly ground. I am able to create an image which closely resembles my drawing style which gives the objects in my prints the same illusion of three-dimensionality found throughout my artwork.

**Mixed Media**

Combining different media became an important feature in my artwork. I layered, through transferring processes, computer-generated images with photographic or drawn images. The images I used were printed on computer paper with an inkjet or laser jet printer. The process involved using acrylic gel medium which is applied to the surface of the image to be transferred. Then, I placed a drawing image side down onto the support. The gel medium
absorbed the ink and then dried. Next, the back of the paper was dampened and carefully removed leaving a reversed image in the gel on the surface of the support. Throughout my exploration of gel transfers I used such supports as canvas, Plexiglas, and copper and aluminum sheeting. I rearranged the elements to create a desirable composition. I also added paint or other media between the layers of acrylic gel transfers.

Using the transfer process allowed me to build up multiple layers and combine my imagery of female and flower features. I drew, painted, and layered parts of each in which I saw a relationship. Some relate because of similar shapes and forms and others because of characteristics like mystery or innocence, which I perceived in each. In a single work, I combine images to emphasize an association I see visually and conceptually between a woman’s physique and a flower. A flower can look enticing, open, and alluring. I find a woman’s body can portray all of those same characteristics sometimes with similar shapes and forms and sometimes just in the overall gestures of each.

_African Daisy Collage_ (Appendix, 6) is one mixed media piece where I used acrylic gel transfers. The first layer transferred to the canvas was the image of abstracted, tubular forms which was placed on the surface of the canvas. The images were of an organic Dale Chihuly (b. 1941) glass installation piece. The second layer of gel transfers was comprised of four African daisies, and a female figure that is just left of center. The figure sits leaning on her right leg. Her left leg is drawn up close to her body by her left arm and crosses over her right leg. She peers through the petals as her form is veiled by the flowers. The negative spaces on the canvas were painted with a wash of yellow acrylic paint. A coat of amber shellac seals and protects the piece but more importantly it heightens the colors in the transfers.

_Lilies and faces_ (Appendix, 7) is another mixed media piece created using layers of
acrylic gel transfers. My first layer features a very organic pattern of shapes taken from a photograph of a glass bowl, also by Dale Chihuly (b. 1941). The image was altered on the computer and divided into four sections and then transferred to the canvas. The second layer is of women’s faces, one in the upper left-hand corner and another in the lower right-hand corner. These were drawings which I had scanned into my computer, altered, and transferred to the canvas. I transferred images of lilies in the corners opposite the women. My goal in this piece was to emphasize the flirtatious nature of a flower by placing them with women’s faces.

After many small scale mixed media experiments, I found a very simple but effective way of achieving some dramatic contrast on a much larger scale. Using bright luminous colors of chalk pastels on black paper was a favorite assignment of my students. During a classroom demonstration I realized this was the general approach that I needed to explore myself. However, black paper had its limitations. Instead, thin wood flooring underlay fit my requirements. Extremely smooth and only ¼” thick, a huge 48”x96” piece could be cut to any size I would need. I primed the surface with clear gesso which worked well with the natural color of the wood. Through the lighter values of the pastels, the natural wood was complemented.

In this series of work, I again shifted from incorporating the female form to focusing on single flowers. However, I began to imbue the flowers with more symbolic qualities and conceptual features. Water lily (Appendix, 8) is a 36”x48” piece combining chalk pastel and acrylic paint, inspired by a photograph I took. A water lily dominates the frame. The petals’ light values of yellow, green, blue, and violet pastels contrast the solid matte black finish of acrylic paint in the surrounding negative space. The majority of the petals stand up as though they are protecting the glowing yellow center of the stamen. Five large outer petals lay
perpendicular to the stem joining it at the darker base of the flower. Water lily is a large work and demands the attention of the viewer. I wanted the viewer to be able to feel a connection with the flower from wherever they were in the room regardless of the size of the room. The stark contrast between the flower and the negative space enforces this relationship.

Yellow Orchid (Appendix, 9) was inspired by a visit to an orchid display. The work of individual orchid enthusiasts showcased their most exotic, rare, and dramatic plants. Some looked like science fiction movie props. Here, on a large 48”x24” wood panel, my imaginary species of orchid seems to have a sinister agenda. Like a nocturnal predator on the prowl, it emerges from the darkness. Large rippled, yellow petals stretch out of the frame on the left and right side as another one points up. Two smaller sepals twist and cascade down like ribbons. The central part of the orchid slopes down from a hood with tentacle-like attachments. At the center there are red stripes which point to curled lips which end at a spout. Behind the yellow orchid another impatient one lies in wait. The drama in this piece, created by dark shadows and peculiar shapes, was intended to confront the viewer with a beautiful but possibly dangerous flower. A wide range of values creates a believable scene, placing the viewer into an intimate relationship with the orchid.

Most of my artwork employs the same use of dramatic contrast and wide value ranges, regardless of subject matter or media. Different media changed my approach of working but my goal of creating a work which captures and nurtures the relationship between viewer and artwork is unchanged. I want my viewer to stop, move back, then, inspect more closely.

Conclusion

Throughout history, artists have joined together in groups to produce, critique, and
inspire one another and to form common bonds in thinking and technique. This type of collaboration was a feature of the MIS-IAR Program. My graduate work in the Program involved painting, printmaking, and mixed media techniques and allowed me to pursue and achieve my conceptual goals many times over. However, for as many pieces of artwork as I created several more ideas were spawned. My materials have changed and my process is evolving. Personal sources of inspiration and those who influence me continue to affect my artwork.
Bibliography


Appendix

List of Figures

Figure 1. *Orchid Buds #3*, acrylic paint on Plexiglas, 14”x14”, 2011.

Figure 2. *White Orchid*, acrylic paint on Plexiglas, 22”x36”, 2011.

Figure 3. *Joan of Arc*, solarplate intaglio print on paper, 7”x5”, 2009.

Figure 4. *Pointed Flower*, drypoint print on paper, 14”x8”, 2011.

Figure 5. *Thistle with chine colle on black*, drypoint print on black paper with chine colle, 13 ¾”x9 ¾”, 2011.

Figure 6. *African Daisy Collage*, acrylic gel transfers, acrylic paint, and shellac on canvas, 14”x11”, 2011.

Figure 7. *Lilies and Faces*, acrylic gel transfers, acrylic paint, and shellac on canvas, 14”x11”, 2011.

Figure 8. *Water lily*, chalk pastel and acrylic paint on wood panel, 36”x48”, 2011.

Figure 9. *Yellow Orchid*, chalk pastel, acrylic paint, and polyurethane on wood panel, 48”x24”, 2011.
Figure 1. *Orchid Buds #3*, acrylic paint on Plexiglas, 14”x14”, 2011.
Figure 2. *White Orchid*, acrylic paint on Plexiglas, 22”x36”, 2011.
Figure 3. *Joan of Arc*, solarplate intaglio print on paper, 7”x5”, 2009.
Figure 4. *Pointed Flower*, drypoint print on paper, 14”x8”, 2011.
Figure 5. *Thistle with chine colle on black*, drypoint print on black paper with chine colle, 13 ¾”x9 ¾”, 2011.
Figure 6. *African Daisy Collage*, acrylic gel transfers, acrylic paint, and shellac on canvas, 14”x11”, 2011.
Figure 7.  *Lilies and faces*, acrylic gel transfers, acrylic paint, and shellac on canvas, 14”x11”, 2011.
Figure 8. *Water lily*, chalk pastel and acrylic paint on wood panel, 36”x48”, 2011.
Figure 9. *Yellow Orchid*, chalk pastel, acrylic paint, and polyurethane on wood panel, 48”x24”, 2011.
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Education:

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1998-2005 Courses in computer graphics and AutoCad Design
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Certification:

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Teaching Experience:

2000-Present    Art Teacher, Rippon Middle School, Prince William County Schools,
                 Woodbridge, VA.

1997-2000       Art Teacher, Potomac Senior High School, Prince William County Schools,
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1997-1998       Art Teacher, Lake Ridge Middle School, Prince William County Schools.
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Professional Committees:

2008-Present    Art Department Chair, Rippon Middle School, Woodbridge, VA.

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Professional Associations:

1997-Present    Prince William Education Association

1997-Present    Virginia Education Association

1997-Present    National Education Association
Exhibitions:

2012  
*Visual Intimacy*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA at Verizon Gallery, Annandale, VA.

2011  
*Faculty Exhibition*, Prince William County Schools, Edward L. Kelly Leadership Center, Manassas, VA.

1992  
*Student Art Exhibition*, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA.