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Mental Space

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Virginia Commonwealth University

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Mental Space

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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Artist Statement

I create process-oriented, mixed media work in an intuitive manner. I develop compositions by choosing from a wide range of materials and media. I have established a visual vocabulary that I use formally and, on occasion, symbolically to express my personal thoughts.

My prints are primarily collagraphs pulled from plates that are constructed using foam, rope, sticks, cardboard, or screen prints. My fiber works are mixed media and often combine soft and stiff fabrics, dyes, pigments, embroidery, quilting, and screen printing. At times I find ways to integrate hard, rigid materials such as kiln-formed and sandblasted glass into my fiber pieces. My pieces tend to be intimately sized and detail oriented, requiring an up close and personal look from the viewer.
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Introduction

Creating art has served as an outlet for me since my teenage years. When all else seemed grim and hopeless, I could draw or paint and know that no one would judge my private creations. When I arrived at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) for undergraduate schooling, I decided to major in art education. I chose that path because I loved working with children and still had an interest in art. However, I never took art classes in grade school and my style was rigid and untrained. This made for challenging experiences in my studio art classes, my classmates were always ten steps ahead of me, technique-wise. Students in art education were taught to be jacks-of-all-trades in order to teach a broad range of art history and studio techniques to children. This curriculum didn’t leave much room to perfect skills in any one area of art.

I graduated from VCU with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Art Education. I had been hired as an elementary art teacher two weeks before commencement. I was comfortable in my new position and enjoyed exposing inner city kids to different types of art. However, something was lacking in me creatively. I felt as if I had no identity as an artist because I only made prototypes to use as examples for lessons taught to my students. There was no time to create for myself.

After a few years of teaching, while at a Virginia Art Education Association Conference, I ran into a former instructor from VCU. She told me about the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program which was geared toward teachers. It sounded interesting, particularly the idea that I could teach during the day and attend classes in the evenings. After my first class I decided to apply to the degree program.
Taking courses in the MIS-IAR Program changed my life for the better. I was given opportunities to explore media I had never dreamed of using before. I found joy in dedicating creative time for myself. The Program also gave me the confidence to join a non-profit art organization and enter my work into several juried shows. I jumped hurdles that I once thought were impossible and gained artist friends that are irreplaceable.

**Imagery and Subject Matter**

As an artist who created with processes and techniques as my motivation, finding subject matter was a challenge. In the beginning of the MIS-IAR Program, I chose two focuses based on *how* I wanted to create, the *what* never really seemed important. However, I needed a thematic approach to complete my coursework. That requirement felt monumental to me, like a restriction or a distraction of sorts. Not only did I have to consider my processes but I needed to have a conceptual focus as well.

My first few pieces had a generic theme. I chose to use geometric shapes because they were easy to render and did not require much thought. As time went on, I narrowed the geometry down to circles and orbs. These shapes reminded me of cycles or bubbles, things that implied entrapment to me. As a person who thought the worse of situations, and generally gave up when times became hard, this theme seemed appropriate. I began incorporating these circular images into my prints, fiber works, and paintings using them as structural devices in abstracted compositions. These were the shapes that laid the foundation for my imagery. Soon, I added other forms for variety, such as lines, curves, and patterns.

As I worked with these shapes, I positioned them to appear as if they were floating in mid-air. These images led me to the concept of developing implied spaces for these forms. For
instance, my fiber pieces became dimensional with elements that protruded, such as sandblasted glass. The viewer can peer through the translucent pieces into the space behind the quilted, hand-dyed fabrics. Here, I implied a fictive space in the fiber piece and referred to the space outside of the piece, therefore, expanding the actual boundaries of the work. In another instance, I implied a confining space by piecing fabrics in a way that shows hard-edged borders and restricting boundaries.

In essence, my work is about the visual outcome from the processes that got me there. First, I begin by choosing from my collection of materials and media. Then, I select a motif or idea and manipulate the materials. At times, I allow the forms to become abstracted and dimensional, creating illusions of actual or imaginary space.

**Media and Processes**

As part of the MIS-IAR Program, I chose mixed media (combining printmaking, painting, and quilting) and crafts as focuses of study. I enjoyed printmaking because I was able to produce the same image several times but with the freedom to change the colors of the prints. Collagraph plates, a printing process that incorporates objects, could be worked and reworked or transformed for a variety of results. Undesirable areas on woodcuts and Easy-cut plates could be carved away. In addition to that, the process of carving the actual printing plate was therapeutic.

The versatility of printmaking allowed me to make changes in anticipation of the finished product. For instance, to create my collagraph plates I preferred using foam core and cardboard. These materials are thick enough to give me a raised edge but thin enough to cut with an X-Acto knife. I often started by cutting pieces into shapes, later transposing and repositioning them into abstract compositions. These pieces would be glued to a cardboard surface and
covered with layers of varnish or latex paint to preserve the printing plate during washes.

My silkscreen prints were composed by attaching stencils to the underside of a screen or by drawing directly onto a screen with block-out or drawing fluid. Working with block-out fluid was useful because I could create reduction prints. A reduction print is made by printing an original image then blocking out a section of the image, and printing it again. This process could be repeated numerous times resulting in different outcomes and coloration. Using drawing fluid allowed me to print with more controlled line quality. This method allowed me to draw the actual image without the imperfections of using block-out which involved drawing the negative of the intended image.

I chose crafts as a focus with the intent to further my studies in ceramics. However, on a whim, I decided to try quilting. Quilting was my most surprising decision. I instantly became fascinated with all I could do with fabric. I soon discovered that quilts are not just bed covers created mostly by women as a past-time. Quilts can be large or small, wide or narrow, bound or stretched, and even hung on a wall. As an added bonus, I felt calmed by the sound of the sewing machine as I ran layers of fabric through it.

My preferred processes for quilt construction include piecing and crazy quilting. These methods of construction are process-oriented but the results are unique and diverse. As a way of incorporating an element of chance in these processes, I would chop random pieces of fabric into hand-sized pieces and sew them together. Then, I would repeat this step several times, each time cutting the previously sewn pieces into smaller pieces. The results were newly constructed pieces of fabric compiled from bits of different fabrics. These new pieces of fabrics were then incorporated into mixed media works. This gave my compositions an element of surprise and complexity.
Fiber arts processes were ideal for me during the MIS-IAR journey. The repetitiveness of the sewing and embroidery put me in a state where I felt at ease. Adding running stitches or back stitches was soothing because it felt like comfortable assembly work. I had one task I was doing over and over again. Though the process of adding these stitches was repetitive, each work was unique as a result.

**Influences**

I have long admired Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) for the geometric qualities of certain of his works, and for his development as an artist. Like me, Kandinsky initially lacked confidence in his abilities as an artist. In a monograph on his work, author Ulrich Becks-Malorny states that, “He saw art as something exalted and unattainable, and considered his own abilities still too inadequate to be able to express his feelings in pictures.” (Becks-Malorny, 8) Over time, Kandinsky persevered and produced an influential body of work and contributed important ideas to critical art theory. He is an artist that I looked to for inspiration and guidance.

I was intrigued by the way Kandinsky composed his works. Circular, triangular, linear, and rectangular forms can be seen in many of his works. He felt so strongly about the way these forms and shapes interacted, that he said, “The contact between the acute angle of a triangle and a circle has no less effect than that of God’s finger touching Adam’s in Michelangelo.” (Becks-Malorny, 141)

One particularly influential piece by Kandinsky was *Composition VIII* (1923). In this abstract composition, the dominant circles have halo-like radiations emanating from behind, simulating the feel of orbs floating in space. He incorporated checkered grids that draw your attention from one side of the work to the other. The angles and lines imply movement from top
to bottom, and left to right. I have borrowed from these compositional strategies, placing forms and objects in such a way that requires the viewer’s eye to move across my work.

Another artist who inspires me is contemporary artist Andy Goldworthy (b. 1956). The simplicity of his works and his ability to use materials for his site-specific installations that are readily available are aspects of his approach that I also strive for. The snake-like imagery in Goldworthy’s museum installation ‘Végétal’ (1995) was created using fern branches. This meandering line appears again in Capenoch (1996) in the form of ice on a tree in a winter landscape. Everything was from the earth and left to return to the earth once it had melted or disintegrated. The processes were just as important as the final product.

Another factor that influenced my work was the Quilt Art Movement of the 1980s. This was spawned by the new Crafts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Traditionally, quilts were hand-made by women using scraps of fabric from garments and other materials collected over time. These quilts were then used as bed coverings or throws to keep warm. Eventually, artists questioned the purpose of quilts as solely functional, and the concept of quilt art was born. Quilt art has more in common with fine art than traditional patterning. They are based on imagery and ideas. Today, quilts come in many colors, shapes, and sizes and are made by both men and women. Some are wall hangings, hanging loose from a bar or stretched on a wooden frame. Sewing machines allow for quicker quilting, though some people still quilt by hand for aesthetic purposes. In my quilts, I try to find ways of addressing implied and actual space. It is a way for me to explore conceptual ideas in fiber work.

All of these influences are evident in my works. Some have inspired me to try new techniques and processes. Others played a role in my development of ideas and motifs.
Prints

In printmaking, one of my favorite techniques was collagraph printing. In this technique, I was able to use found objects and recycled materials in a repurposed way. For instance, in *Broken IV* (Appendix, 1), I began by cutting circular forms from leftover sheets of foam. These forms were glued to a piece of cardboard in a composition that slightly resembled planets in orbit. One of the orbs appeared to be gridded with longitude and latitude lines that imply a dimensional, global form. I used the irregular shapes and strips that were leftover foam pieces in the composition as well. They were arranged to resemble ribbons and rays. The entire print plate was covered with a coat of varnish to seal the plate and allow for easy washing when switching ink colors. The stiff-bristled brush I used to apply the varnish left strokes which added layers of visual and literal texture.

In keeping with the motif of orbs and free flowing forms, I created *All Together Now* (Appendix, 2). This print features several dark blue ribbon-like forms that appear to reach for and surround dark blue circular shapes. Some of the circles are so small they read like dots or specs on the paper. Other slightly larger orbs have holes in the center to represent voids. In this piece I introduced new curved, rectangular, and checker-patterned elements. *All Together Now* is a combination of two silkscreened prints. The second print is an overlay of a cluster of curvilinear squiggles, which are a reference to controlled chaos.

*All* (Appendix, 3) was created by scratching into a 1/8” thick sheet of foam. Once the design was drawn I cut around the composition and eliminated any extra foam. *All* was modeled after *Broken IV*, featuring a gridded sphere and includes spheres with implied texture and a ribbon. With this work, I added a hard-edged trapezoidal form into my library of shapes.

These simple, graphic prints offered me the opportunity to expand my visual vocabulary
of forms and symbols. The shapes and motifs used were carried into my fiber works.

**Fiber Works**

The first few quilts I created were works that allowed me to practice certain piecing, embroidery, and quilting techniques. As time went on, I began focusing on colors and designs. Some of my quilts were dimensional. In *Serpent* (Appendix, 4), I specifically set out to create a quilted piece that contained protruding parts. To accomplish this I used a stiff interfacing called Peltex, made by Pellon. With this material, I could fill and flex fabric to hold many shapes without using a stiffener. This allowed me to retain the softness of the material as opposed to changing *the hand of the fabric* (causing the fabric to lose its natural softness). The dimensional, protruding parts were quilted, as was the ground. The entire work was stretched onto a sheet of plywood with the intention of hanging on a wall. Protruding parts gave this piece dimension and created bold shadows when lit.

I eventually returned to two-dimensional quilting techniques, though I still stretched the pieces on wooden frames. I presented my fiber pieces this way so that they would read as paintings. I also continued to explore compositional arrangements of my imagery. In *Spool Series #1* (Appendix, 5), I pieced irregular square and rectangular shapes together in a landscape orientation. Some of the fabric was digitally printed with dye from a scanned image of a spool of thread. This thread pattern can be seen in the upper and lower horizontal sections that stretch three-fourths of the length of the work. I also placed parts of the pattern in two sections of the checkered area on the right-hand side of the work. The center strip in the piece is cut from a digital print of embroidery floss digitally altered in a computer program. The orange and light blue sections are pieces of fabric painted with acrylics. In the last step, I stitched golden
embroidery floss in the central horizontal band from the right-hand side to the left-hand side of the work.

Mixed Media

As I worked my way through the Program, I switched my focus from printmaking to mixed media. Working in mixed media allowed me to make prints but use other processes as well. This paved the way for a trailblazing experience for me. I had recently taken a glass fusing course and decided to make a few sandblasted pieces of glass to be used in quilts. Next, I sketched ideas for mixed media quilts featuring glass. Construction was my number one nemesis during this process. A lot of fabric was sacrificed trying to perfect measurements and incorporate the glass in a safe, archival way. Once I figured out how to secure the glass, I pulled out my sketchbook and set out to create the works previously designed.

Window Quilt #1 (Appendix, 6) was the first in the glass and fabric combination series. This was created using hand-dyed, pole-wrapped Shibori fabric (an Asian process of tie-dye), and a rectangular piece of sandblasted glass. The only quilting featured in this work is around the glass in the form of a machine satin stitch. I stitched black, commercial fabric around the perimeter of the piece to serve as a visual frame before the piece was stretched. Stretching the quilt around a wooden frame helps strengthen the work and provides stability for the embedded glass. In addition to that, the piece no longer reads like a quilt but as a painting.

Once I became confident in the technique of incorporating glass into quilts, I added kiln-formed, slumped glass that had an asymmetrical, almost organic perimeter. My Plans (Appendix, 7) features an impression of a wrench in the fused glass, a symbol for my personal road blocks and obstacles. This form protrudes ½” from the fabric surface. The fabrics used to create this
piece were cut from other fabrics that had been dyed, painted, and printed. They were quilted by using a foundation piecing technique. A layer of interfacing, Peltex, was sandwiched between these fabrics and a backing to provide stability for the glass. I added irregular rectangular shapes of patterned, dyed fabrics and I incorporated circles, orbs, and now numbers.

After a few months of incorporating glass into my fiber works, I decided to revisit printmaking. In Monoprint Series #1 (Appendix, 8), I gathered sheets of Plexiglas and began covering random areas of the sheets with squirts of fabric screenprinting ink. Then, I took pieces of scrap fabric and placed them on top of the Plexiglas. I pulled a print and used a second piece of fabric to capture the ghost print. (A ghost print is a second or subsequent print made from the original inked plate). These steps were repeated six times. When all of the fabric was dry I heat set the ink by pressing the print with a hot, dry iron. Then, I selected three monoprints and sliced them into angled strips. These strips were rearranged and randomly sewn together. I placed this rhythmic abstraction on a piece of navy blue cotton fabric. For visual accents, I sewed cubic pieces of orange cotton fabric and navy blue corduroy into stacked columns on the right and left sides of the work. In the last step, this piece was stretched on a wooden frame.

I have created prints and fiber works. Using these media ultimately led to the combining of the materials and techniques to form mixed media works. I use geometric and organic motifs throughout the body of work. However, I allowed for transformations and additions of new elements as my work progressed. Though the works have different outcomes, they are all process-oriented.

Conclusion

The greatest lesson I have learned through my graduate journey is how to be a practicing
artist. Before the MIS-IAR Program, I was determined not to share my art with the world. I created for myself and occasionally to give works to close friends or relatives as gifts. During my undergraduate studies in art, I had been afraid of feeling inferior to classmates and colleagues who had studied art for the majority of their schooling.

In this program, I was treated like an adult learner and expected to develop personal goals, statements of intent, and an artistic approach of my own. The courses were designed to provide studio time, and the critiques were placed strategically throughout the semesters. The feedback I received from my instructors and classmates during these critiques played a critical role in my development. I no longer feared sharing my work with the world.

As a result of the Program I have hung exhibitions, entered pieces into shows, and curated an exhibition. If not for the MIS-IAR Program, I would not have been motivated to take the necessary steps to be a practicing artist.
Bibliography


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Education:
2012 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art
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2005 Bachelor of Fine Art
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2005–Present Art Teacher, K-5
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Professional Memberships:
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2009-Present Teacher Advisory Council, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia
2005-Present National Art Education Association, USA

Professional Positions:
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2009-2010 Treasurer, Central Region Virginia Art Education Association
Honors:
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2010 Recipient of Supply Grant, Donors Choose, USA

Exhibitions:
2012 *Mental Space*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art
Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, At
Artspace Gallery, Richmond, Virginia

*Push, Pull: A Collection of Paintings and Prints*, Art Works Gallery, Richmond, Virginia

2011 *ThinkSmall 6: 6th Biennial International Miniature Invitational Exhibition*,
Artspace Gallery, Richmond, Virginia

*Artspace New Members’ Show*, Artspace Gallery, Richmond, Virginia

*Art Works May 2011 All Media Show*,
Juried Exhibit, Art Works Gallery, Richmond, Virginia,
Juror: Mike Dulin

*Art Works April 2011 All Media Show*,
Juried Exhibition, Art Works Gallery, Richmond, Virginia,
Juror: Durwood Domissee

*Art Works March 2011 All Media Show*,
Juried Exhibition, Art Works Gallery, Richmond, Virginia,
Juror: Matt Lively

*Central Region Virginia Art Education Association Educator as Artist Show*,
Juried Exhibit, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia,
Juror: Ginger Pennington

2010 *Central Region Virginia Art Education Association Educator as Artist Show*,
Juried Exhibit, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia,
Juror: Jeffrey Allison

2009 *Central Region Virginia Art Education Association Educator as Artist Show*,
Juried Exhibit, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia,
Juror: Amanda Robinson