2012

Influenced and Altered

David Didra
Virginia Commonwealth University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd

© The Author

Downloaded from
https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/2680

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.
Influenced and Altered

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

by

David S. Didra
Bachelor of Science in Art Education, Kutztown University, Kutztown, Pennsylvania, 2001

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May, 2012
# Table of Contents

- Artist Statement ........................................................................................................iii
- Decision.........................................................................................................................1
- Abstract Distraction .......................................................... ........................................................................2
- Influences .....................................................................................................................3
- Manipulating the Earth ................................................................................................5
- Process on Canvas ........................................................................................................6
- New Beginning ...............................................................................................................8
- Bibliography ................................................................................................................10
- Appendix .......................................................................................................................11
  - List of Images .............................................................................................................11
  - Images .......................................................................................................................12
- Resume ........................................................................................................................................20
Artist Statement

My work is about finding a balance between the natural environment and the challenges of our man made environment. A sunrise may spark my inspiration during my morning commute but then an intense flow of traffic disturbs the tranquil setting. I explore these contrasting and conflicting elements of harmony and discord in my work.

To address these conceptual issues, I create visual tensions between form and color. The evidence of my physical process is recorded in my work. Harmonious elements are referred to through my use of complementary color and form. I use pure hues, gestural line, and texture to refer to the discordant features in my environment.

I begin by intuitively applying color and line to create abstracted shapes and visual relationships. Then, I apply textures using gestural and impasto techniques. My application of pigments and marks allows some of the underlying layers of paint to be revealed. These layers refer to struggle between harmony and discord that I see in my environment.
Influenced and Altered

Decision

There was a time in my life that I questioned my creative spirit. I wondered why and occasionally asked myself if I created for acceptance or for personal achievement. It has been an ongoing process to find out why I create my work. Over time and with experience, I have arrived closer to an answer but the question still lingers.

As a child, my passion for drawing in my sketchbook, building plastic car models, and painting objects was at an all time high. I looked forward to spending hours over the weekend sitting at my desk doodling and painting while listening to the local radio stations. As I grew older, this activity diminished. At one point I did not do anything creative. I wanted to rekindle my creative spirit and decided to pursue art in college.

I earned an Art Education degree in college and began painting again. I began my teaching career, and I painted in my free time. I enjoyed conveying emotions through my work but I was at a standstill. I was copying images from my sketches but something was lacking. This went on for several years until I enrolled in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program at Virginia Commonwealth University. I took my first graduate painting class and I was hooked but at the same time the coursework was a big commitment. I now had a family and wondered how I would manage my time. Luckily, classes were once a week and it allowed me the opportunity to explore my creative spirit, refresh my thinking, and develop a new body of work.
Abstract Distraction

One afternoon I was driving home without realizing that my subject matter was right in front of me. The sunset produced great contrasts with the influx of color, contour line, and visual texture. There were no two sunsets the same and the variation in color inspired me to create work based on my observations. I stopped and stared for a few minutes to observe all that was happening. There were colors that popped from the sky, while other colors seemed to recede. All of the colors and shapes melted into one another to create a harmonious balance but then a flow of speedy traffic dampened my observation. It was this duality of experiences that impressed me.

I have been attracted to the natural environment for many years and my work became an observation of colors found in nature. However, with the barrage of digital devices, intense flows of traffic, and hurried lives, my thinking was distracted away from the elements of nature. So, I decided to combine and refer to both of these experiences in my work. In other words, I attempted to balance my focused observation of nature with the ever-present daily distractions. Complementary color and form represent the natural, harmonious elements in my work. Pure hues, gestural line, and texture represent the distractions, or discord in my work. I felt overwhelmed with the use of digital devices and by including bright colors, gestures, and lines, in my work, I am suggesting that these elements were now an integral part of my environment and experiences.

I used color as my primary means of expression. The colors I chose reflected my perceptions of the clash of our natural and technological worlds. In addition to color, the physical application of pigments often created abstract passages. These passages represented the unique and subtle features of nature that I observed. Then, to represent the distractions of our
contemporary world, I applied superficial lines and gestural marks. I began each work by perceiving my works as a symbolic landscape. As I developed my pieces, distractions directed my focus towards chaos and imbalance and I then added marks and textures. In other words, my process starts with an observation of nature but ends with nature being affected by a technological distraction, in what I call an abstract distraction.

Influences

Many artists have influenced my work and I have gravitated toward the expressionistic styles of Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890), Hans Hofmann (1880-1966), and Jackson Pollock (1912-1956). I am drawn to their abilities and techniques in using colors and textures to evoke an emotional experience.

I appreciate Van Gogh’s late works for their bold colors and rough textures. As I learned more about his career and sickness, the more I understood the emotional impact of his work. Van Gogh used color to convey emotion, which differed from his Impressionist forefathers and their attention to the effects of light. To relay emotion, he lightened his color palette, combined several brush stroke techniques, and explored the use of complementary colors. The viewer is first attracted by his bold use of color. It is this power of color that I want to harness in my work. Like Van Gogh, I often applied paint in an intuitive process of layering and juxtaposing complementary color. I created forms with the application of paint in order to instill a sense of harmony in my work. In contrast, hard-edged and scraped lines reflected discord. These applications of paint and marks helped me produce asymmetrical balance within my work.

Hans Hofmann, known for his groundwork in Abstract Expressionism, was also an important innovative teacher for many years before deciding to paint full time. He taught his
students how to create a sense of fictive space with the use of contrast in color and shape. He referred to this as the \textit{push and pull theory}. This theory was characterized by how colors can affect the perception of the illusion of space and depth. Like Hofmann, I composed my paintings as \textit{landscapes} of tensions between space and form. I relied on his theory when creating and manipulating negative and positive space.

Jackson Pollock was a major figure of the Abstract Expressionist movement in the 1940’s and 50’s. During that time he developed his \textit{action painting or drip style}. He would tack very large canvases to the floor and drip, fling, and pour paint onto his canvas using sticks, trowels, and knives. He felt he was more physically involved with his process by challenging the Western traditions of using an easel and brush. In my paintings, I also manipulated the paint with different tools and media. I used palette knives and found objects to spread my paint across the canvas and used tools to scrape into the surface. Like Pollock, I discarded the use of brushes and an easel. I became more physically involved with the paintings and incorporated marks that resulted from quick arm gestures and body movements. My paintings became larger and my canvases were an influx of hurried paint. My shapes and lines became more abstract and texture became an important feature of my paintings.

Expressionistic painting also inspired my techniques and processes in my ceramic work. I realized that the surface of the clay could be treated like a painting. The clay became my canvas and I could manipulate the surface with my bare hands or tools. Like Pollock, I relied heavily on tools to scrape into the clay surface. I employed Van Gogh’s approach to texture and Hofmann’s theories on the manipulation of space and form through color. These elements have also defined my clay vessels.
Manipulating the Earth

Several of my hand-built clay forms were altered in a way that represents natural deterioration. For instance, in Raku on Wood (Appendix, 1), I began by rolling out a slab of uneven clay onto a piece of weathered wood. After the clay had absorbed the contours of the wood grain, I shaped the clay by hand to mimic the overall contours of the wood. Over time wood tends to bend, warp, and split under different weather conditions. I incorporated these types of effects by manipulating the clay with my hands and using different armatures to support the gravity of the clay. Once bisque fired, the piece was glazed with an orange underglaze. Sometimes, during the firing process the color of a piece may be affected by changes in kiln temperature and reduction atmosphere. Then, I applied a clear crackle glaze on top. Finally, I raku fired it at a quick rate and then placed it into a container full of combustible materials. The carbon dioxide produced from the combustible materials was absorbed into the clay body and the crackle of the glazed area. This process allowed me to produce pieces that mimicked the signs of wear, which represents discord. Finally, I attached the orange clay form using a nail to a piece of weathered wood that was painted blue. The form of the clay and the complementary colors that were used represents harmony. The nail was used not only as a way of attaching the piece but also as a symbol of irony. The clay form was fragile and delicate while the wood was dense and strong. I perceived the nail as having both a delicate and bold presence with its application.

In contrast to focusing on disparities, I focused an individual piece on harmony. I perceived porcelain as delicate and highly decorated with ornate patterns. In Pinch Pot (Appendix, 2) I wanted to construct something simple. I rolled a ball of porcelain and pinched and formed the pot to give it an organic, natural feel. After bisque firing, the piece was glazed with a crackle glaze and then raku fired. This allowed the form itself to become the focal point
and not any superfluous treatment of the surface.

In Treepot (Appendix, 3) I cut an uneven slab of earthenware clay and rolled it onto a piece of weathered wood. Then, to represent a tree trunk, I formed the clay around a cardboard poster tube. I added a spout and handle to keep the function of the piece intact. The surface of the piece was then scraped and altered with tools to produce a texture. After bisque firing, I glazed the piece to enhance the contours and textures of the wood. This allowed the piece to be both sculptural and functional while incorporating the elements of form, color, and texture.

My wheel thrown pieces became a balance of geometric and organic forms. Vessel (Appendix, 4) is a wheel thrown piece yet has an organic feel through the addition of texture and glaze. I formed the shape through the throwing process and added surface treatment with the use of objects and clay tools. After bisque firing, it was glazed to enhance the rough surface texture of the piece. The idea behind this piece was to maintain the form as a functional piece while incorporating the elements of texture.

Clay became a serendipitous medium for me. It realigned my perception of the world by providing me with insight, while allowing me to maintain focus. My appreciation for the medium was twofold. First, I appreciated the elasticity of the clay body and being involved in the physical process of forming the clay. Second, I was able to bring some of my conceptual painting ideas into the treatment of the clay surface.

Process on Canvas

My painting involves the use of complementary color, line, and texture to convey the opposing elements of harmony and discord. For instance, in Direction #1 (Appendix, 5), I introduced cold wax to my oil painting technique. The wax was easily manipulated and made the
paint more transparent while allowing me more gestural movements during application. At this point, my paintings became a textural achievement. I relied on the texture to control my assessment and the outcome of the finished piece. I began to add more color and would scrape away some of the texture with a palette knife to expose underlying color and create a relief surface. These techniques helped me to convey my ideas of harmony and discord.

Recently, after completion of my new studio, I had a plethora of leftover scrap plywood. The siding I used had a simulated wood grain and I found that it was a perfect surface to paint on. I decided the simulated wood grain texture would be the visual foundation for my work. In Balance #3 (Appendix, 6), I painted on this uniquely textured wood. First, I applied orange paint with a brush following the wood grain to completely cover the surface. After allowing the surface to completely dry, I applied a complementary blue with a palette knife to the relief part of the surface. The relief surface became the departure point in a painterly, additive process. In this painting, the use of complementary colors represented the abstract features of nature, and the simulated wood grain and linear markings represented the features of distraction.

Using the simulated wood grain inspired me to paint directly on plywood. In Attraction (Appendix, 7), I did not prepare the surface with gesso before painting because I felt it would mask the natural surface features of the wood. This time, I used the wood grain as a metaphor for the natural abstraction in the environment and the pure hues (although complementary color) for the distraction. The knots in the wood gave the surface a natural feel and an area of focus. The application of the color created a relationship with the contours of the wood. I used a wash of oil color and mineral spirits to thin out the paint and made the grain of the wood prevalent.

In my next piece, Family (Appendix, 8), I allowed the most dominant contours of the wood to be at the forefront of the composition. I painted this piece with the idea of using the
vertical wood grain forms as abstracted figures in a family portrait. In my process, I minimized the amount of color in the abstract figures to relay the idea of simplicity. By using the knots in the wood to represent heads, the taller orange figures became symbolic of my wife and me. The smaller figures represented my two children. The figures were created as elements of harmony. As a contrast to the figures, I developed the blue background to be an area of unrest and distraction. Although complementary in color, this area was painted gesturally to portray a sense of movement or blurriness. Each stage of my painting process, and my observations, allowed me to achieve a relationship with the natural environment by using different materials.

I enjoy the process of painting and pottery equally. My painting started on canvas and as my work changed, my painting support changed. I used different surfaces of wood for my painting to achieve various results. I relied on my inspiration from the natural environment and chose to paint directly with the contoured grain of wood. The abstraction, color, line, and texture defined my painting. Those ideas began to meld with my pottery.

During my clay process, I found that its elasticity would absorb simulated and natural textures of wood. The idea that I could mimic a natural texture in clay was something I developed and incorporated into my technique. I also applied earthen-toned and complementary colors to my clay forms. I also used my gestural painting techniques and surface treatments on canvas and wood in the clay building and glazing. The clay became a similar surface to canvas and it began to absorb my ideas.

**New Beginning**

When I started my classes in the MIS-IAR Program, my goal was to expand my conceptual thinking. I had spent many years doing the same thing repeatedly. As I learned about
and experienced different media, techniques, and processes my thinking changed. I felt that I had reinvented myself through the guidance of my instructors and my own determination. The MIS-IAR Program gave me the confidence and insight to pursue my passion as an artist. Now, I assertively rely more on my imagination and creative impulses to determine the outcome of my work.
Bibliography


Appendix

List of Images

Figure 1.  *Raku on Wood*, mixed media, 8-3/4” x 7-1/4” x 2-1/8”, 2010.

Figure 2.  *Pinch Pot*, porcelain, raku, 3-1/2” x 5-1/8” x 5-1/8”, 2009.

Figure 3.  *Treepot*, earthenware, 8-1/4” x 9-3/4” x 9-3/4”, 2010.

Figure 4.  *Vessel*, stoneware, 6-1/2” x 14-1/2” x 14-1/2”, 2010.

Figure 5.  *Direction #1*, oil on canvas, 40” x 30 “, 2009.

Figure 6.  *Balance #3*, oil on wood, 12” x 12”, 2011.

Figure 7.  *Attraction*, oil on wood, 12” x 12”, 2011.

Figure 8.  *Family*, oil on wood, 12” x 12”, 2011.
Figure 1.  *Raku on Wood*, mixed media, 8-3/4” x 7 1/4” x 2-1/8”, 2010.
Figure 2. *Pinch Pot*, porcelain, raku, 3-1/2” x 5-1/8” x 5-1/8”, 2010.
Figure 3. *Treepot*, earthenware, 8-1/4" x 9-3/4" x 9-3/4", 2010.
Figure 4.  *Vessel*, stoneware, 6-1/2” x 14 1/2” x 14-1/2”, 2010.
Figure 5. *Direction #1*, oil on canvas, 40” x 30”, 2009.
Figure 6.  *Balance #3*, oil on wood, 12” x 12”, 2011.
Figure 7. *Attraction*, oil on wood, 12” x 12”, 2011.
Figure 8. *Family*, oil on wood, 12” x 12”, 2011.
David S. Didra

Education:

2013    Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art
         Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia

2001    Bachelor of Science in Art Education, Kutztown University, Kutztown, Pennsylvania

Teaching Experience:

2002-2005    Art Teacher, Henry Clay Elementary School, Hanover County Public Schools, Ashland, Virginia

Related Experience:

2007-Present    Art Framer, Henrico County Public Schools, Henrico, Virginia

Exhibitions:

2013    Influenced and Altered, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA AT TBA

2010    All Media Show, Art Works, Richmond, Virginia, Juror: Martin McFadden

2008-2011    Artists As Educators, (Annual), Henrico County Public Schools, Henrico Virginia

2003-2009    The National Arts Program, (Annual), Pine Camp Culture Arts and Community Center, Richmond, Virginia

2006    Throughout my Travels, Windemere Art Gallery, Mechanicsville, Virginia