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There is a Beginning

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There is a Beginning

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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Ardor

Science and nature inspire me to create. I have always found a unique beauty in abstracted views of organic matter. I have built a visual vocabulary for my imagery through examinations of scientific images from topography and biology. In addition, my responses to the natural environment inform my abstract, expressionistic, mixed media paintings.

Using oil paint in a nontraditional way, I rub, brush, and manipulate paper surfaces to create subtle texture and color. Then, I add a vast range of materials such as resin, varnish, and enamel to build depth and layers. My works suggest actual surfaces in nature and symbolize the interconnectivity of all living things.
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Introduction

I have always had an affinity for science and nature. I believe this is because my father is a science teacher. From a young age, he instilled in me an appreciation for the earth, its creatures, and processes. My family had a great collection of science books in the house and I enjoyed looking through the images whether drawn, diagramed, or photographed. These images and colors influenced my young imagination and have stayed with me over the years.

My passion for art developed around age eleven when I joined a summer watercolor class. It was in this class that I learned basic drawing skills and watercolor techniques. It inspired me to begin taking more art courses throughout my education. Ultimately, I decided art would be my career path.

My interest in nature and science guided my artistic voice. While painting, the color palettes and imagery I grew up with seemed to reappear in my work. I began to instinctively manipulate my media in ways that mimicked natural patterns and surfaces, such as leaves, skin, or water. By allowing the colors to build through thin layers, saturating the surfaces and using a variety of materials to act as resists, my paintings began to reflect surfaces of natural elements.

I hoped to continue to develop my art making processes. However, due to the intensity of teaching and starting a career, it seemed that it was not likely that I would continue to be creative and make art. Conversely, during my first year teaching high school art in the public education system, I entered Virginia Commonwealth University’s Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program. In the Program, I continued my interest in mixed
media processes, painting, and have maintained making art while teaching.

Aesthetics

Because of the environmental and scientific influences in childhood, I am drawn to the colors and textures that make up organic matter, such as the surfaces and topography of leaves, skin, or land. My abstract paintings allow me to reconnect with the natural environment by creating the surfaces of nature through texture, color, and gestural markings. My mixed media works and paintings focus on the similarity between abstracted organic matters, and each piece can be interpreted as a multitude of natural surfaces. Through my art, I maintain a connection to the elements of nature.

I compare my process to cooking, intuitively adding ingredients and making adjustments until it feels right. I begin a work by soaking layers of brown or white paper in solvents to make the support for the media. Then, I crumple and crease the paper, which adds a random but natural pattern of lines. Next, I use various materials such as resin, wax, or liquid latex in the first step of a resist technique. Then, I use brushes, brayers, and various cloths to massage and manipulate diluted oil paint and linseed oil into creases and crevices of the paper, and on top and around the resist materials. I employ various gestural mark making techniques by rubbing the paper with graphite, oil pastels, and charcoal. The result is an organic surface similar to burnished rawhide. The combinations of these processes allow me to build up layers creating a sense of spatial depth. I also use other more industrial materials such as strings, twines, and thin metal wires, which are stitched into the surfaces. To add to the sense of spatial depth, I hammer grommets into the paper, creating holes that allow the viewer to see through the paper in some small areas. Other pieces are mounted in front of lights which allow the surfaces to take on a
warm organic glow. When displaying my works, I arrange them as an illuminated installation which allows the viewer to experience the pieces as though they were a living environment.

These pieces allow me to reflect upon and replicate an essence of the natural world. The free application of paint and use of mixed media allows me to be physically and creatively expressive. The imagery is not the result of a preconceived idea but of the creative process influenced by my aesthetic preferences and childhood influences. These paintings help me record the moments where I look to reconnect with the natural environment.

Influences

My first major art influence was Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009). Wyeth was an artist who used his surroundings of Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania as inspiration for his watercolor and tempera paintings. With these works of art, Wyeth chronicled his life through portraits and landscapes. Using a palette of earth tones, Wyeth depicted his environments and subjects with an appreciation for their details and subtleties. Although classified as a realist, Wyeth stated in an interview with Richard Meryman, he considered himself an abstractionist and that “at the core of his works is an abstract excitement” (New York Graphic Society, 60). Unsatisfied with abstraction alone, he added in realistic objects. With the combination of abstraction and realism, Wyeth wanted to capture the essence of his subjects seen in motion or from his peripheral vision.

Wyeth preferred to paint in the winter or the fall when, he suggested, “you can feel the bone structure in the landscape” (New York Graphic Society, 60). In his painting Snow Flurries (1953), he depicted a wide open, rolling hillside textured with the remnants of snow. Using the snow as a focal point, Wyeth draws the viewer’s attention through the lightly textured browns and yellow ochres of the field and lets the eye rest in the transitions of grey sky. The highly
detailed work allows the piece to be viewed as a conceptual abstraction. However, in the lower right-hand corner, two aged wooden fence posts bring this into the range of realism by giving the viewer a sense of place and space.

Even with the few notes of realism, I believe my paintings are noticeably similar to this piece. When painting, I try to represent the foundations and core of nature. My abstractions allow me to focus on the essence of natural objects. Using an organic color palette, my works allude to natural surfaces. In many of my paintings, I interpret the subtle transitions of topography. I find inspiration from observing the colors and blended textures of Wyeth’s paintings.

Another artist whose work I draw clear connections to is Eva Hesse (1936-1970). Heavily influenced by the Abstract Expressionist movement, her early works were abstract paintings focusing on her interest in spatial and personal relationships. As her art and ideas developed, Hesse began using nontraditional materials such as plastic, latex, resin, and fiberglass to build minimalist sculptures that built upon her early conceptual interest. Intuitive and self-reflective, her work bridged a gap between sculpture and painting.

Hesse’s work *Contingent* (1969) is an example of the interplay between two-dimensional and three-dimensional arts. Here, she covered eight large rectangular, banner-like sheets of cheese cloth with latex and fiberglass. The displayed sheets were hung in a row from ceiling to floor. These thin sheets gave the appearance of an organic, yellowed material. Viewed as individual pieces the sheets reflected her interest in abstract painting but when viewed as a group they became a sculpture that demonstrates her interest in spatial relationships. Another work by Hesse that unifies sculpture and painting is *Seam* (1968). In this work, Hesse covered a long rectangular sheet of wire mesh in latex and using wire stitched vertically down the center, creating a visual division. She hung the brown sheet from the ceiling and allowed it to unroll
down a wall, lying partially on the floor. Although constructed with wire mesh and latex, the appearance is of a crumpled, soft, and organic texture.

In a similar fashion, I began my abstract, expressionistic works with long rectangular sheets of brown or white paper. Working intuitively, I manipulated the surfaces of the paper with linseed oil, mixed media, and industrial materials such as liquid latex, resin, enamel, wire, and grommets. These mixed media works and paintings suggested organic materials and surfaces and enabled me to realize my artistic vision. Hung from the ceiling, the pieces are displayed in a group that creates a three-dimensional environment.

Similarly to Hesse, my work is heavily influenced by the Abstract Expressionist movement. I find myself linked in various ways to Abstract Expressionist painters of the 1940s and 1950s, and the basic tenets of the movement. Abstract Expressionism was forged during a time of economic boom followed by a depression. The boom resulted in an aggressive industrial expansion but was stunted by the economic collapse during 1929, which was followed by a long period of depression and sense of cultural alienation. The Abstract Expressionist movement, that emerged from this time, was made up of painters that attempted to voice their feelings of alienation through an impassioned and energetic form of art making. Additionally, they tried to move past direct visual imitation. Putting aside traditional art making techniques, they attempted to capture the act of art making as an event rather than a final image.

Parallel to the economic and cultural era of the Abstract Expressionists, I experienced the strong economy of the late 1990s plunge into a recession. I left behind the farms and countryside I grew up with and moved to the Washington, D.C area because of job availability. Additionally, technology and media have changed at a rapid pace and dramatically altered the way people communicate during the last twenty years. Again, in a time of great strides of faster and now
instantaneous forms of communication, people report they feel more lonely and detached. I believe my abstract and expressionistic works come during a similar cultural and economic time in American history.

In my work, I addressed my own feelings of cultural alienation and my desire to reconnect with the natural environment through paintings which I approached in a similar manner to the Abstract Expressionists. My paintings are influenced by nature but do not directly imitate scenes or objects from nature. They are highly improvised works that are my instinctive response to the natural environment. Like the Abstract Expressionists, I broke free of the canvas and worked with my paintings on the floor in a physical and gestural method. The act of painting generates energy and meditation and my creative performance was as important to me as the final work of art. The final works have no focal point of interest or sense of boundary but offer a glimpse into a moment of the creative act itself.

**Paintings**

My intention is to create expressions of nature. When painting, I start with a general color scheme and size. From those two bases, I allow myself freedom and movement to create intuitive and gestural mark making. Using linseed oil, oil paint, and paper, I am able to express my interpretations of the natural world.

In *Terbium* (Appendix, 1), I began painting on a 20”x 20” clear acrylic sheet. I chose a variety of deep blue colors. I used a large brush to coat the acrylic sheet in a mixture of linseed oil and blue oil paint. The acrylic base was resistant to absorbing the oil paint and this caused areas of paint to form in puddles rather than an even coating. I decided to emphasize this feature by wrinkling and folding the sheet. I wrapped a rubber band around the crumpled acrylic and
left it to dry for two weeks. When I returned to the piece, it was mostly dry but still damp enough that I was able to pull it open. I flattened out the paper and added a second coating of blue oil paint mixed with linseed oil and applied some areas of yellow and brown oil paint. This coating stuck to the dried areas and seeped into the creases. I tilted the acrylic sheet to allow for some dripping movement to connect some of the pooled areas of paint. I again crumpled the paper, wrapped a rubber band around it and let it dry for two weeks. When I pulled it apart the second time, it had dried faster and I had some difficulty getting it open. This resulted in some areas where all the oil was pulled to one side and only the acrylic sheet was left to show through. This repeated process added layers and illusionistic depth to this piece which I wanted to expand upon.

The first development I made in creating depth and layers is demonstrated in Cerium (Appendix, 2). In this work, I began with a 20.5”x17” sheet of white paper. To this, I added a mixture of yellow oil paint and linseed oil. The paper eagerly soaked up the oil and paint, creating a transparent surface, tinted yellow from the paint. I crumpled and folded the paper, wrapped it in a rubber band and allowed it to dry. At the same time, I began three more paintings in this same manner. When all the papers were dry, I opened them and to each I added a mixture of crimson and brown oil paint with linseed oil. This reddish-brown paint seeped into the creases of the paper and emphasized the organic line quality. I let the papers dry flat so the paint would set in the creases without running. When dry, I layered all three papers together and glued the edges. The layered paper did not allow the transparency I had hoped for, preventing the third layer from being seen. However, I noticed that when I held the papers to the light, I was able to see all the layers. In addition, the contrast created by the lighting emphasized the lines that webbed across the surface. This encouraged me to add lighting as a display method for
some of my art works.

In continuing with the ideas of layering, transparency, and lighting I began *Lanthanide* (Appendix, 3). With this work, I used a sheet of white 40”x12” paper. I soaked the sheet in a base of linseed oil. I eliminated oil paint in this initial layer with the hope that it would emphasize the transparency of the paper. Onto this, I poured a mixture of reddish-orange oil paint with linseed oil. I then folded the paper in half, sealing the paint between the layers of paper. I used the pressure of my hand to move the oily substance around inside the layers. This technique developed a variety of effects as the paint dried in varying puddles and thicknesses in addition to the areas that were left unpainted. With the addition of lighting to this piece, the work glows a warm orange and the viewer is able to see the intricacies of the paint sealed between the levels of paper.

When displayed, I would like my viewer to sense the organic and natural essence of these paintings. To emphasize this, I titled my paintings with names of elements from the periodic table. Although I wanted to express the organic quality, I did not want to limit or direct the viewer’s interpretation too strictly. By titling my paintings in this manner, I am able to express the natural sense of the works while still allowing the viewer to make personal interpretations.

**Mixed Media**

My mixed media works further develop the ideas and processes of my paintings. The use of a broader variety of materials allows me more freedom of expression and mark making. Over time, the variety of supplies I use has grown into a large pantry of industrial materials and mixtures. These new materials and resulting processes have allowed my art making vocabulary to expand.
I began my first experimentation with Praseodymium (Appendix, 4) with the addition of oil pastel. In this piece, I again used linseed oil to soak the surface of white paper. Then, I added shavings of oil pastel to the surface for a more textual feeling. Some of the pastel dissolved in the linseed oil while other, larger pieces remained intact. As in Lanthanide, I folded the paper in half sealing the oil pastel and linseed oil between the paper. Again, with the addition of light, the work takes on an organic warm glow and allows the viewer to see the different layers of oil pastel within.

Inspired by the idea of using new materials and my desire for both the layering and lighting effects in my art to develop, I began thinking and experimenting with different materials, some of which are not traditional to making art. My mixed media painting Holmium (Appendix, 5 and 5a) demonstrates the use of new materials to my processes. In this work, I rolled out an extensive 142”x36” sheet of brown paper. I mixed a deep purple paint, diluted it with a generous amount of linseed oil, and applied it to the entire surface. Because of the size of the paper, I had to mix several batches of color which all varied slightly. This allowed for some variation of color across the painting. As before, I crumpled and wrinkled the paper and allowed it to dry. The following week, I found the surface of the paper to be tacky and when I pulled the paper open some sections ripped. Because this work on brown paper was reminiscent of animal hide, I decided to stitch the ripped sections of paper by hand. The small areas where I could see through the stitching appealed to me and I wanted to expand on this idea. I found some small grommets in my garage and I began hammering them onto the painting in sporadic locations. These two techniques provided more sense of visual depth. Next, to emphasize the line quality of the wrinkled paper, I rubbed green oil pastel and black charcoal across the surface. They stuck to the tacky paper surface and enhanced the texture and wrinkles of the paper. These new materials
allowed me to expand upon the visual depth and textures of my art.

I continued to push the limits and test a larger variety of new materials. In *Thulium* (Appendix, 6), I again began with the brown paper base. To this base, I generously added a mixture of a variety of blue and green oil paints diluted in linseed oil. Then, I wrinkled the paper and let it partially dry. At this stage, I did not allow the linseed oil to completely dry. I wanted to seal the paint between two layers as I tried in both *Lanthanide* and *Praseodymium*. To allow the viewer to see through the layers, I placed a sheet of wax paper over top. I wrinkled the surfaces again so they would form similar creases and left it to dry. When it seemed completely dry, I pulled it apart. Some of the wax paper stuck and ripped, this allowed some of the linseed oil underneath to seep out onto the wax paper. I allowed it to move around and puddle in the creases and then added a layer of enamel which pooled with the linseed oil. I allowed this to dry flat so the enamel and linseed oil would settle in the crevasses. As a last step, I coated the surface of the piece in liquid latex. This added additional texture and a rubbery skin-like feeling.

The use of new materials allowed me to expand upon my interpretations of nature in new ways. It provided me additional means to create surfaces and textures that enhanced my vision. Without these materials, I would not have been able to achieve the variety of textures and visual sensations that my art encompasses.

**Conclusion**

In a new time and place in my life, my abstract, expressionistic pieces allow me to reconnect with the natural environments of my youth. Through these works, I am able to express my interpretations of the images and sensations that I recollect. When I view my works I am reminded of moments, smells, and textures from many years ago. The MIS-IAR Program has
allowed me to fully pursue my art making and thoroughly investigate my purposes and concepts that inspire my creativity. Without the program, I would not have been able to compile a complete portfolio of quality work that fully embodies my passion for art.
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