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Transcendence

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Transcendence

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 have often created art with an organic quality because I have felt bound by the earth’s natural elements and forces. These extend to and influence my human qualities which influence my artwork. My paintings and mixed media works symbolize the issues and defects that affect me in various ways and represent my attempt at overcoming them.

At its core, my body of work addresses psychological and emotional recovery work. I have been burdened for a long period of time with anxiety, various character defects, and difficulties but I find catharsis through creative expression. Because I have chosen to address and convey my on-going struggle for emotional well-being in my work, I depict distorted images which I sometimes describe as ghostlike figures. These images symbolize the issues and defects that often have a negative impact on my life. However, in many ways, these images also symbolize to me the gratitude I feel for overcoming such trying times. For without these psychological and emotional trials and tribulations, I would not be the person I am at this point in my life. I now possess the tools I need to develop a healthier quality of life. My experiences are reflected in my works.
Transcendence

Introduction

There is a photo of me when I was about six years old drawing at my desk with an incredibly focused look on my face. Immense concentration was crucial when I drew images of solar flares, but especially when I drew prehistoric beasts I found in various natural history books. I marveled at the idea that such giant terrestrial and marine creatures evolved from lower life forms spawned from the earth’s oceans. I wanted to capture the grandeur of dinosaurs. I drew them feeding and fighting in tropical jungles and hunting in the abysmal depths of archaic oceans. I felt like I was privy to a kind of true to life fairy tale. I was fascinated by the aesthetic nature of their bodies and I now realize how much I had fallen in love with organic texture and pattern. My interest in natural history was a manifestation of my love of the natural world, which has always soothed my mind, body, and spirit.

As I matured I was attracted to a variety of fantastical imagery. I was inspired by science-fiction and horror films. Then, I was exposed to the early twentieth-century Surrealists which validated my attraction to fantasy themes. During my undergraduate studies, a painting professor showed me slides of cell structures and I was compelled to produce imagined cellular forms and organic patterns. As I studied the natural world around me, I created work that was pattern-oriented and I moved toward more non-objective imagery. While it was an exciting and productive time for me, I felt my work lacked direction and purpose. I was focused on developing a stylistic approach as opposed to assigning meaning to my images.

After graduating with my Bachelor of Arts in Studio Art and Design, with a certification to teach art, I soon found employment as an art educator. After teaching high school for a few
years, I decided to return to school. I felt I needed new challenges and contact with fellow artists. I entered the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program offered by Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). While working in this program I started to understand my artistic journey, my role as an art educator, and my purpose as an artist.

**Aesthetics**

My interest in and experiences with the natural world influence my approach to imagery in painting and sculpture. I also draw inspiration from any number of sources, such as music, art, popular imagery, and imaginary forms. However, the content involves the pursuit of personal freedom and recovery from emotional and psychological bondage. To reference elements of nature, I depict textures and patterns which resemble rock, animal skins, and tree bark. The abstract figuration found in my paintings and sculptures relates to my love of Surrealism. These inspirations lead me to a spontaneous, intuitive development of abstracted imagery and forms which represent my admiration and respect for the natural world, as well as my need to overcome personal difficulties.

As a flawed but unique human being, I often feel that I am held prisoner to unforeseen states such as fear, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Although these can be common and shared elements of human nature, I seek to overcome these character flaws and personal barriers that hinder my well-being. This struggle to balance my life and to accept my condition is often difficult. How I succeed or fail is played out in the imagery and gestures that comprise my work. My work provides personal catharsis.

I create mainly easel-sized to slightly larger paintings and small, clay bas reliefs. My
paintings, while abstract, refer to the figure more directly than my sculptural work. My process involves an energetic, stream of consciousness approach whereby I develop gestural, figurative forms that suggest tortured or struggling postures. These elements represent my progress toward achieving spiritual fulfillment, an integral part of emotional and psychological recovery.

In the initial phase of my painting process, I lightly sketch in gestural elements. Then, to create depth, I build up layers by applying textured paste, gesso, and occasionally caulk with different putty and palette knives. Then, I add paper, cardboard, wood, and glue. Next, I stain this textured surface with paint, chalk, and oil pastel or oil stick. My color palette varies depending on the mood I want to convey but I typically I use darker, earthier hues. In the next phase of the work I use white paint, chalk, and oil pastel to add in ghostlike figures. These are not ghosts in proverbial white sheets. I create them to appear as wispy, disembodied spirits whose essence inhabits the picture plane. These elements are distorted and abstracted and refer to the figure through biomorphic shapes and lines. Tension exists between the biomorphic shapes, marks, occasionally collaged images, and the figurative elements. In this work, through the suggestion of struggling forces, I acknowledge my fight with psychological issues and character defects. In making the work, I personify these issues and defects in order that they may seem more real. My work espouses the emotional liberation that comes from addressing and managing such attributes.

**Influences**

Several art movements and artists have inspired me but those from the early twentieth-century have played a key role in my paintings and sculptures. Three noteworthy artists are early Surrealist painter Yves Tanguy (1900-1955), abstract painter Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), and Action painter Willem de Kooning (1904-1997). By studying their art, I saw how deeply I
connected with their work and how it has influenced my own work.

When I discovered the work of the Surrealist painters of the 1920’s, it immediately appealed to my already well established love of fantasy. I was intrigued by their use of metamorphosis, levitation, ironic juxtapositions, and depiction of dreams. In my imagination, I also wanted to explore the vast, eerie landscapes several of those painters depicted. I was especially drawn to ethereal landscapes painted by Yves Tanguy. His unique form of non-representational Surrealism, often characterized by his research into clairvoyance, telepathy, levitation, and other psychic phenomena, was very alluring. I was inspired by his abstract, other-worldly landscapes with a limited color palette, contrasting color accents, and alien-like, biomorphic forms. His creation of the illusion of depth and volume expanded my creative consciousness. As a result of studying Tanguy and the other early Surrealists, the concept of an imprisoned spirit began to materialize in my work. I distorted imagined forms in my drawings and eventually, my oil works on paper.

Later, I studied German abstract or nonfigurative art, also from the early twentieth-century. Art from movements, such as Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider) (1911-1914), enchanted me with its sense of spontaneous, liberated shape and colorful patterns. Wassily Kandinsky was a leading figure in this movement. He was interested in the possibility of evoking a spiritual or emotional response to painting. In an attempt to develop his theories, Kandinsky made completely abstract paintings that focused on the comparisons between color and marks with music and sound. He believed, as he explained in his 1914 treatise Concerning the Spiritual in Art (1977), that all art has the potential to reach any viewer on a spiritual level. In this text, he looked inwardly and articulated his dedication to inner spiritual growth as inner need and an integral part of his paintings (Kandinsky, 55). During his Der Blaue Reiter Period,
Kandinsky created what he called *Compositions* and *Improvisations* (1911-1914). The bold outlines and directional brushstrokes of the paintings in these series were the techniques I used in my pieces.

Next, I studied American Abstract Expressionism (1940’s-early 1960’s). Like the Surrealists and abstract painters of the early twentieth-century, American Abstract Expressionists (also known as Action painters), used concepts associated with the subconscious mind as an underpinning of their approach. They plumbed deeply into the human psyche by allowing the application of their media to reflect their physical movements in their rawest form. It was thought that this rawness could then evoke a more primal reaction in the viewer. Eliciting such a response was an attractive notion to me and something I wanted to integrate into my work.

Action painter Willem de Kooning was one of the core artists of the American Abstract Expressionist movement. His outlined, smeared, and abstracted shapes in *Composition* (1955) had a liberated quality that I sought to achieve in my work. In addition, he applied blotting papers and old drawings to his paintings in a new, raw approach to image making. This intrigued me and I strategically tore up previous drawings and paintings and applied them to my new paintings. I also used expressive contour lines to express emotion and to impart a sense of movement. My intention was to have the outlines attract the viewer to my pieces, and then let the subtlety of distorted line and form hold the viewer’s attention.

As I studied and learned from these artists, I saw the value of letting my process and media dictate my outcomes. I began to allow my media to exist in its natural state without my interference. I let paint drip and run slightly, slathering it on with paint and putty knives. For example, when I manipulated paint to a minimal degree or closed my eyes for a second or more, I completely let my stroke fall where it may. This approach allowed some degree of chance to
alter my plan and therefore alter my process. I took risks and relinquished manipulation and control of the media to address the analogy of recovery in my work. I studied and found inspiration in the works of many different artists’ works. However, the paintings of Tanguy, Kandinsky, and de Kooning moved me to apply some of their techniques and theories to my own work. The MIS-IAR helped me put their ideas into practice.

**Painting**

I create work that reflects my emotional struggles and successes. I have found the act of making art, which addresses particular issues, to be spiritually fulfilling. I enjoy using a paint brush but I especially need to get my hands directly involved in the development of the surface. Intuitively, I stain, scrape, smudge, scratch, scumble, and blend different media. I build layer upon layer to produce a complex surface. To a great extent, I operate without a set plan, randomly developing and combining organic lines to form biomorphic shapes. I build from that point. If I have an idea, I might sketch it out with pencil, charcoal, or diluted acrylic on wood panel, paper, or canvas. While my approach is painterly, I also incorporate a variety of other materials into my paintings.

In the diptych *Transient Lovers* (Appendix, 1), I expressed the pain, sense of loss, and regret that existed in my past marriage. The figures shown here are combative and destructive entities. They do not yet realize the depth of their mutual emotional and psychological issues. Slashing marks and strokes convey the sense of anguish and turmoil that comes from the grave uncertainty and doubt that plagues a dysfunctional relationship. The small figure represents the child that will never be born from this couple, which is splitting apart. The bleak color of the background landscape and smoky, red sky were used to evoke a feeling of unrest, even doom. The two entities are faded images of who they once were. They are now distorted, ghostlike
images pulling away from one another. I created this piece on a dense, heavy weight paper and used pencil to create faded imagery on a distant horizon. I used charcoal and oil pastel to outline areas of the work; acrylic paint, chalk, and charcoal to tone the landscape and sky; and drew with glue to create circular shapes in the sky. I applied corrugated cardboard strips to the surface of the right panel to create a sense of roughness, violence, and uneasiness. I attached bubble wrap which had been wrapped in tarlatan and covered both with gesso. This area hardened much like plaster and gave the figure’s arm a three-dimensional effect, making it appear as if it extends toward the viewer.

Substrata (Appendix, 2) was also executed in acrylic and charcoal on the same heavy weight paper. I knew I could rely on this paper’s durability to sustain the media that I applied to it. I feel a spiritual connection to the natural world and my process of recovery helped me appreciate this relationship. So in this piece, I envisioned the earth’s tectonic plates as actively shifting and moving. I imagined the earth as a strong, living organism with thick bones anchoring the structure of the world. To relay these ideas, I created layers of thick, gestural marks and forms. I created tension between areas of the composition by outlining areas of cerulean blue, varying browns, and bone-like shapes.

Hopeful (Appendix, 3) was a piece I created spontaneously. I used oil paint on the same heavy weight paper in a very quick, gestural manner. In this piece, I depicted a yellow-green sun which I placed left of center. It is emphasized by the dark brown which surrounds it. Gestural line abounds in this piece. I used this element to make the landscape appear uncertain and to encapsulate the sun, which symbolizes hope for achieving inner peace through improved emotional well-being. My initial phases of emotional and psychological recovery were quite daunting. Eventually, I saw the proverbial sun, and what it symbolized, as a remote albeit
attainable goal for the pale figure in the foreground, which represents me.

*Bound* (Appendix, 4) signifies the point at which I decided to give some of my pieces a more ghostly quality with lines and shapes flowing throughout the picture plane in a chaotic manner. The title mainly suggests imprisonment, but there is a double meaning in that the concept of a direction and a destination in my recovery work are implied. I created a high level of contrast to evoke a heightened sense of emotional intensity by juxtaposing wispy, white lines with acrylic paint, textured paste, and chalk against a dark background. A sense of confinement or even claustrophobia exists in pieces such as this because I run my imagery and marks off the edge of the picture plane. This quality of *horror vacui* (L. fear of empty spaces) produces my desired effect of tension and distress in this piece. I also wanted to imbed a sense of grace under pressure here. Therefore, I unified slightly rough lines, shapes, and textures, which express the anxiety I have experienced by living a life devoid of spiritual meaning, into a focused direction.

Like *Substrata*, the triptych *Training Camp* (Appendix, 5) was imbued with similar earthy qualities, except my goal in this work was to show an increased sense of self-focus by simplifying the elements of each progressive panel. The *horror vacui* quality I created in *Training Camp* (left-hand side panel) reflects the overwhelming force of a life that tends to gravitate toward a sense of chaos. To achieve this feeling I wove pattern atop pattern. I used clashing, diagonal black lines and biomorphic shapes to create a feeling of visual overstimulation. Interlocking lines and shapes symbolize suppression of clear thought and the hindrance of emotional growth. Finding a single point of focus is difficult.

In the central panel, I direct my lines and shapes toward the right. I leave a meager amount of negative space in the upper center area of the canvas to alleviate the sense of suffocation. I applied more of a pure, vibrant red to areas of this panel to create a sense of flux.
In the panel on the right, I used mainly a white, blue-gray, and yellow color application. Black, gestural outlines unify the majority of the piece, but chaos is still present. By incorporating geometric, angled line work and the subtle break-up of shape and line toward the top of the canvas, I intended to give the impression that emotional unrest is in the initial phase of becoming manageable. A clearer vision of my future was starting to look viable as I created this third and final panel of Training Camp, an apt title for my personal sense of psychological and emotional recovery.

In my painting Rising (Appendix, 6), I depicted a figure set alight, rising through dark, swirling shapes which represent a spiritual funk. In the piece, I reaffirmed for myself, the uplifting power and serenity that comes from effectively addressing my psychological issues and character defects. This piece signifies a turning point in recovery. It is the beginning of understanding how to look outside of myself for help; putting faith in a greater entity or a cosmic, all-encompassing energy; and letting go of my desire to manage so many of life’s uncontrollable outcomes. The figure’s ascension represents such progress. First, I painted the lower portion of the overall figure as a dark, listless, and scattered being. Second, the large hole in the lower center of Rising represents a wound in the soul of this being. In the final phase of the piece, a shining figure triumphantly ascends through a world I painted dark and foreboding. There is a sense of mystery and uncertainty conveyed by the deep violet hues used in the background. This single figure motif, which symbolizes my struggles and successes throughout my recovery work, recurs in my sculptural work.

**Sculpture**

In The Crawl (Appendix, 7), a bas relief I made in stoneware clay, I used a combination of red glazes to create a natural, earthy quality to the work. I designed this piece to symbolize
my life prior to my recovery work. In this piece, I incised lines to create the illusion of cracked, barren earth. A snail-like, biomorphic creature modeled in low relief in the lower portion of the piece, symbolizes my slow struggle in working the steps of the program. The creature will eventually move beyond the rough terrain, a metaphor for the defects and difficulties from which I may be released. The slow, arduous journey I represent here is similar to recovery work, because obstacles steadily present themselves and must be overcome to find spiritual balance.

In my bas relief Eclipse (Appendix, 8), I sought to show a figure ascending and maneuvering around both the obstacles presented by life and those which are self-imposed. My use of geometric relief elements and incised lines alludes to circuit boards, which harkens back to my love of science fiction. I used blue crackle, red, and black glazes to help create a celestial motif. My synthesis of the compositional elements, along with my placement of an abstract figure placed slightly right of center, creates the desired effect of a celestial voyager. I imagine this being traveling onward, transcending space and time, and charting new territory. In essence, this piece depicts my personal mission in recovery, which is to reach beyond the confines of self. I can successfully negotiate emotional and psychological obstacles to find the serenity I desire, one day at a time.

Conclusion

I have undergone a kind of transformation as a result of my work in the MIS-IAR Program. My confidence as an art instructor has been boosted as I now more effectively help studio art and design students express themselves through their artwork. I have gained additional knowledge and insight into the work of other artists as well as my own. I have experienced an enhanced ability to demonstrate certain processes, particularly those in painting and sculpture, with greater proficiency. I find I am more capable of coordinating student exhibitions of a
professional caliber. Overall, I feel my dedication to my artwork and to teaching art has been rejuvenated through my work in recovery, but especially through my work in the MIS-IAR Program. I am an empowered artist and art educator, more capable of developing meaningful instruction and relating to students on a personal level.

As an artist, I attempted to find concrete content in my abstract paintings and mixed media work for many years. Groping for this meaning was sometimes arduous, but once I entered the MIS-IAR Program my path to finding contextual clarity began to form. At the time of entering this graduate program, I was also in a program of recovery to deal with personal issues. Perhaps it was divine providence or serendipity, but I found the artistic meaning for which I had been searching while in this program. I now, feel I am a stronger artist capable of creating artwork which directly relates to who I am as a person.

Bibliography


Appendix

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Figure 3. Hopeful, oil on paper, 28” x 36”, 2010.

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Figure 7. The Crawl, glazed stoneware, 14” x 8” x 1/4”, 2010.

Figure 8. Eclipse, glazed stoneware, 9” x 13” x 1/4”, 2011.
Figure 1. *Transient Lovers* (diptych), mixed media on paper, 27.5” x 21” each piece, 2009.
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Figure 8. *Eclipse*, glazed stoneware, 9” x 13” x 1/4”, 2011.
James Christopher Klinke

Education:

2012  Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia

1997  Bachelor of Arts, Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, IL
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2005-present  Art Teacher, Mount Vernon High School, Fairfax County Public Schools, Alexandria, Virginia

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2003-2005  Key Middle School, Fairfax County Public Schools, Springfield, Virginia

1998-2004  Langston Hughes Middle School, Fairfax County Public Schools, Reston, Virginia

Related Experience:

2008-present  International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program Committee, Cadre Leader for Visual Art Department, Mount Vernon High School, Alexandria, Virginia

2011  Co-sponsored the National Art Honor Society, Mount Vernon High School, Alexandria, Virginia

2011  Supervised design of Courtyard Mural Project, Mount Vernon High School, Alexandria, Virginia

2007  Trained Fine and Performing Arts Department on International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program (IBMYP) implementation, Mount Vernon High School, Alexandria, Virginia

2007  Presented strategies on implementation of IBMYP to South Lakes High School Visual Art Department, Reston, Virginia
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2004-2005  Co-chair of Visual Art Department, Key Middle School, Springfield, Virginia

1999-2004  Coordinated annual student art exhibits and receptions for Youth Art Month at the United States Geological Survey, Washington, DC

1998-2001  Langston Hughes Middle School Art Department Chair, Langston Hughes Middle School, Reston, Virginia

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1999-2000  National Gallery of Art Sculpture Conservation Project and Video, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC and Langston Hughes Middle School, Reston, Virginia

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