Unified Journey

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Unified Journey

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

My paintings, sculptural work, photography, and mixed media pieces represent aspects of journeys. These journeys are presented as literal, physical, and psychological. I find myself impacted by recent journeys which have evolved into abstracted pieces representing a new life passage, motherhood. Creating this work helps me to express the surrounding beauty I continue to encounter. Collectively, these journeys unify my metaphorical journey through life.

The process of making my art is also a journey. My images shift and transform through the process of development. I work with a variety of materials including watercolor, acrylic, paper, textured paste, plaster, and photographic images on canvas. Layering and applying various materials to create texture becomes an instinctive act. More planned is my use of color, which signifies steps in my journey, such as violet indicating transformation, red implying excitement, and yellow showing joy.
Unified Journey

Introduction

A memorable pastime of mine includes crafting artistic projects with my four siblings. While my mother cooked, we sat at the table creating holiday ornaments, stained glass art, and clay sculptures. When I was seven years old, my family life drastically changed. My parents were headed for divorce and the comfort of my home had become sabotaged. As I grew older, I continued drawing as an outlet to channel my feelings and emotions. Art was an approach to express myself and simply focus on a task for hours without the distractions of reality. This hardship later influenced my decision to study art therapy in college.

As a high school art student, most of the work I created was observational. The work would feature new skills and techniques I learned at the time, such as mixing colors, blending with pencils, and shaping clay into forms. During my college years as an art education student, I was definitely pushed out of my comfort zone to produce work that was abstract and meaningful. This was a struggle because I realized the images I created might bring back memories that I did not necessarily want to relive. I pursued the challenge and took advantage of the life drawing classes offered. I included symbols of my Christian faith and struggles in my spiritual journey.

After college, I decided to pursue a career as an art educator rather than an art therapist. While I appreciated the art therapy sessions, my passion was educating and inspiring children. In addition, I had always valued the structure of a school day and the daily routines that rendered life to be somewhat consistent in contrast to my experiences at home. I hoped to bring this creative outlet as a means of self-expression to other children as well.
During the first year of teaching, I struggled to find time to create my own artwork. My passion for art began to suffer and I felt empty, uncertain as to why I pursued the career in the first place. The only outlet to exercise my skills was minimized by a few random trips to an art gallery where I met with several colleagues once a week. We would draw from a live model for a few hours. However, the long metro ride, cold air, and long walks alone in the dark soon became irritating. Later, I decided to end my weekly drawing excursion.

When it was time to obtain recertification points to renew my teaching license, I decided to take a Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) watercolor painting class. I thoroughly enjoyed the atmosphere of being in the classroom again, but this time amongst art teachers as art students. During that class, I realized that perhaps the interruption of my own work was a blessing. I felt refreshed while I observed new developments in my work. Unfortunately, the value of this course wore off and life got so busy that it wasn’t until several years later that I would take another class offered by VCU. During a conversation, my husband emphasized the significance of earning a master’s degree. Admittedly, I was more interested in helping my salary improve. There had to be a better reason to continue. Determined to make a commitment that would enhance my skill set, that of my students, and promote enjoyment in teaching, I applied to the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program through Virginia Commonwealth University where I focused on painting and mixed media.

Aesthetics

Originally, my pieces represented physical aspects of journeys I had taken. Over the years, my work evolved from actual trips to symbolic ones. I was determined to create more
meaningful artwork than my earlier landscape-based pieces. Later, I discovered that I would embark upon a new journey; one that embodied a new life passage for me, motherhood. Imagery in this body of work included the shift of responsibility and roles. The extraordinary honor that the human body can serve as a temporary home for the development of another human life is remarkable. This portfolio of work showed the inner human structure and framework of a developing fetus. My interpretations of anatomical imagery were inspired by the emotional and physiological changes that occurred during the progression of my pregnancy. The conceptual qualities revealed the nature of my reality. My interest in human anatomy developed during this new voyage.

The cycle of conception, pregnancy, birth, and post-pregnancy intrigued me as this was now the new course my life would endure. I slowly became conscious of the fact that my artwork was simultaneously reflecting what I had encountered in that very moment of the journey itself. It was my instinctive desire to express the pleasures and discomforts of these experiences. My work is a collection of interpreted imagery that reflects the beginning stages of human creation from the natural preparation of the female body to nursing a newborn.

Influences

I was inspired by the anatomy illustrator and artist, Alex Grey (b. 1953). I appreciated the rendered depictions that reveal physical quality of both the inner and outer human body. I was also drawn to his use of line variation, repeating patterns, and vibrant colors. In addition, Grey often creates paintings as a series of a larger body of work that reflect various human experiences such as praying, meditation, copulating, pregnancy, birth, nursing, and dying. Much of his work illustrates what I experienced internally and physically during my journey to
motherhood. Many of his paintings also include detailed representations of the skeleton, nervous system, cardiovascular system, and lymphatic system all of which are vital components in supporting a fetus.

I believe the motivation of my work is best expressed by the words of Grey when he stated,

Pointing to those subtle and casual dimensions beyond the physical is part of the purpose of my work. Interweaving the dimensions together – physical, emotional, conceptual, psychic, subtle and the spiritual has been part of my intention, my mission of art, always with the hope that it resonates with people and affirms their own deeper understanding of themselves and the world. (Grey, 2001, 106)

Working with photography, I found myself influenced by the technique and conceptual ideas of educator and photographer, Jerry Uelsmann (b. 1943). Uelsmann’s work is produced entirely in the darkroom. His surreal photo-montages are created in a series of steps that include masking and exposing different areas of photosensitive paper as he changes negatives. The result is a unified composite of a singular view or scene. Positive and negative spaces are inverted. Uelsmann’s imagery includes earth, water, architectural elements, landscapes, and still life. I appreciate the ambiguity in his imagery which allows for subjective interpretation. He communicates his emotion on a personal level through technique and unique compositions. Furthermore, he includes the use of more than one focal point in his photographs. When asked to describe his technique and vision in the December 2011 article in Black & White Magazine, Uelsmann explained,

What I try to emphasize beyond technique is creating images that resonate. In my eyes, my images have changed in that they have a more spiritual and mystical quality in recent years. Everything happens so intuitively. Some days I will look at things and realize I am reinterpreting myself or being influenced by things I have done in the past. On other days I get excited because things are coming out differently than I expected, in which case I will run with it. All of my images are part of my visual legacy, and as I have grown I have more life experiences that feed into my consciousness and permit a broader range of things to occur. (Pitnick, 11)
I related this approach and experimentation in Uelsmann’s work as he invents a language. Like Uelsmann, I’ve made proof sheets of my photographs. The negatives are kept in numerical order but I let proof sheets get mixed up. I have found that I can pick up old and current proof sheets and find the particular image I need. I consider these analog images a collection (a visual diary) of life events including travel and symbolic imagery representing what I've seen and responded to over a period of time. Rarely do I decide, while I'm taking a photograph, where the element will end up. Similarly, negatives may reappear within my work, acting as a focal point in one work and background in another.

Collectively, these artists challenged me to define what I want to reveal to the viewer through my work, my journey to motherhood. Each artist has a different media of preference that has influenced and taught me various approaches to self-expression. Initially, I came across these two artists through my teaching experiences with my students. I was fascinated by their artistic products, hence my desire grew to explore and research these artists to gain knowledge of their individual life experiences. Only recently did I realize how that helped me to create a deeper connection to my own work.

**Process: An Overview**

My sense of process has developed and varied into a less controlled manner than previous work. I allowed each experience to influence my use of materials in individual pieces. My series of work is a combination of paintings, mixed media collage, sculpture, and photography. The most common technique used is layering of materials and repeating imagery. This emphasizes the sequential changes of the female body and fetus. I intended to show transformation, the bloom of creation, and cells working together within systems of the body. I
find the nature of different approaches to producing my art mimics the spontaneity of growth, one process taking place before the other can occur.

In my paintings, I typically began by sketching images into my bristol board drawing pad. These sketches illustrated both researched and interpreted images of the placenta and vital organs necessary for fetal growth. I then elaborated on the images as I added light washes of watercolor, building upon layers of lightly saturated hues. I limited myself to a small palette of four to five colors in order to keep the focus on the imagery and continuity in the body of work. I loosely applied these colors mimicking the fluidity of the internal organs and cells. Later, I cut these watercolor paintings out and added them to acrylic painted canvases.

Once I established this process, I soon realized these intricate images could then be repeated and added to future artworks. This technique aided in the concept of development and transformation that I intended to illustrate throughout the series. I would utilize my photography training to scan, edit, and resize the painted images digitally. At times, I printed the scanned images on transferable inkjet transparency sheets or onto computer paper that could be transferred by using packing tape. This process involved placing tape on the ink side of the image, soaking in water, and lastly peeling away the paper so only the image remains. Furthermore, this approach stresses the design of binary fission, membrane growth, and DNA replication.

While I used digital techniques to advance my mixed media work, I then invited analog photography to play a part in my work. Again, I wanted to continue using repetition of images to show how cycles affect the process. These photographic images acted as a documentary explaining how the baby came to exist through the relationship between my husband and me. It
also recorded my feelings throughout the pregnancy. Through darkroom approaches, I was able
to duplicate and manipulate imagery in relaying this personal journey.

**Mixed Media and Painting**

In my mixed media sculpture on panel, *Conception* (Appendix, 1 and 1a), the zygote,
cells, and veins have been painted on bristol board, cut out, and adhered to the wood support.
Then, I applied plaster on top in a very loose and circular motion to create depth and to give the
effect of furious movement as the sperm make their way to the egg. Next, I carved into the
partially dried plaster using a clay modeling tool to more purposefully shape areas of the surface.
I then smoothed the grooves with sand paper. The act of carving into the plaster embodies the
reality that the body too must prepare itself for conception. Once the plaster dried completely, I
painted the sperm with violet and the forming fetus with cadmium red watercolor. The quality of
watercolor imitates fluidity of the internal imagery of the female body such as the intestines and
organs. All materials used allow for a three-dimensional plane. My intention was to build upon
the flat surface, replicating form and development of human growth. In addition, the raw media
had been altered from its original state just as the sperm and egg transformed.

In my painting, *Placenta Evolution* (Appendix, 2), I worked with a variety of materials
including watercolor, acrylic, paper, and textured paste on canvas. I began by creating images of
the placenta in watercolor. I painted organic forms and lines that varied in length, shape, and
color. I also applied newspaper to create texture on the surface of the canvas. The newspaper
text was then muted with gesso and grey paint. Grey denotes security and black linear elements
allude to the mourning of old life. Occasionally, I left a typed word, such as “complication” and
“collections”, untouched to emphasize a feeling or emotion influenced by the transformation of my body I experienced at that time.

The significance of color follows through in my painting *Embryo Burst* (Appendix, 3), which signified steps in my journey. Here again, I used violet to indicate transformation, red to imply excitement, and yellow to show joy and activity. The use of elevated bristol board, painted with yellow acrylic in a curving motion, reflects the sense of radiance I felt as the physical shape of the baby became more evident with my ever-changing body.

As the pregnancy progressed, experiences soon became uncomfortable and awkward. As skin stretched and the baby grew within the womb, tingling feelings pricked at my ribcage. As referenced in the piece *Spinal Footprints* (Appendix, 4), my breasts became enlarged and sore while levels of gas circled through my abdomen. Later, I discovered that I would give birth to a baby boy. Hence, blue was introduced to my palette. I continued to use alizarin crimson throughout the series of mixed media and painted images, this time to emphasize the strong rib cage and internal depth of the body. Bone texture was painted with a mixture of crackle paste and white and cadmium red acrylic. I then layered images of small spheres on top of the bone structure by painting blue acrylic on bubble wrap and printing onto the dried canvas. These repeating circles surround the bones characterizing the sense of expansion.

I continued this piece with an added watercolor painting on bristol board. The painting was then cut out and attached to the canvas with a foam core backing to elevate the importance of the maturing baby. This additional element shows a more developed baby inside a comforting sack. The sack then lengthens into an organic form that shows small bone structures in yellow along pink, tentacle-like branches. This imagery symbolizes the interpretation of my ultrasound.
I was overwhelmed by the little skeletal body taking shape inside me. The movement of the vertebrae is what I sought to duplicate in the layered watercolor image.

*Insistent Fluid* (Appendix, 5) continues the theme of movement throughout the series. While researching this stage of my pregnancy, I learned that the volume of amniotic fluid correlates with the growth of the fetus. Amniotic fluid is inhaled and exhaled by the fetus. It is essential that fluid be breathed into the lungs in order for normal development. In addition, amniotic fluid protects the developing baby by cushioning against blows to the mother’s abdomen, allows for easier fetal movement, and promotes muscular and skeletal development.

At this time of the pregnancy, fear and worry started to play a role. With the 20-week ultrasound nearing, I worried about the baby’s health and development. I communicated these weighing thoughts through my art.

Anxious to begin relaying my fears, I started applying newspaper to canvas, suggesting my research and investigation into potential developmental problems. I shaped the applied newspaper to resemble parting cells. I used pieces of larger bubble wrap to emphasize the cushioning of the fluid. I used alizarin crimson to outline the bubbled cells and crackle paste to accentuate texture and alteration. Also, this piece is on a larger canvas than the other artworks in this series. A larger scale stresses the worry I endured at that time. I intended to draw the viewer in to this illustrated microscopic view, accentuating all the cells that work together in support of a growing fetus.

As I learned the baby was developing normally, once again I was able to enjoy the little movements. *Distended Abdomen* (Appendix, 6) illustrates the sounds I imagined the baby produced while in the womb. I began by painting the canvas yellow to evoke the sense of relief and joy I felt now. I then painted large bubble wrap with silvery grey acrylic and printed the
circular shapes onto the canvas to accentuate the sound of a pulsating heartbeat. I developed the circles by adding white highlights to create more sphere-like shapes. Using a brush, I painted increasing crescent shapes illustrating sound waves. Later, I incorporated the original watercolor painting from *Spinal Footprints* (Appendix, 4). I scanned the painting and printed the image twice. My intention was to display the ongoing transformation of growth over the succession of time.

One print was edited on the computer by first reducing the size then flipping the image horizontally. The smaller print of the baby’s silhouette presented the concept that at 20 weeks, the baby had more than doubled in size. This copy was printed onto transparency film for both surface quality and variety of texture. The durability of the film allowed for a more interesting composition as I was able to permit the image to extend off the canvas. The image was carefully carved out using a small blade. I then added the transparency film print to the lower left corner of the canvas with gel medium.

The second print was simply a replica of the original painting. After I printed the scanned painting on regular computer paper, I positioned strips of clear packing tape to the ink side of the image. Using a dampened sponge, I applied water to the paper. Eventually, the paper pulp peeled away from the tape leaving a transparent image embedded on the adhesive side. I spread gel medium on top of the transfer and burnished the image to which I then adhered to the canvas. In addition, the image then overlapped the printed spheres, sound wave crescents, and smaller transparency film print. Later, I sanded the tape to remove the gloss finish to achieve a translucent, skin-like quality. Overall, this piece represents advanced development and progress as the end of the second trimester neared.
Photography

Playing on the concept of repetition, photography was a tool that would help me relay a message I hoped to convey. I wanted to communicate a sense of documentation that would aid the viewer in learning how the pregnancy came to be and what was happening in my life during the third trimester. In addition, the documentation component permitted self-expression of my narrative journey in a variety of ways through journaling, photo taking, and development of images.

To record my journey, I began writing down words in my sketchbook that articulated my feelings. The journaling process was nonlinear. Instead, I started a lot of pages using paint, collage, drawing, small printed photographs, and words. Then, I returned to rework and add to the pages already in progress. I took advantage of this process to express my thoughts and daily experiences, observe and illustrate my environment, and lastly document and record time. Overall, this journal functioned as a creative connection to me.

During this time, I photographed with both a single lens reflex (SLR) camera and a digital camera. I used both analog and digital photography because it allowed me more options. Much of the imagery illustrated metaphors for words and phrases expressed in my visual journal. Common images include a bassinet, my home’s exterior, a radiator, a toilet, a tree, a chapel window, medical illustrations, and stairs. For example, Renovation (Appendix, 7) displays three images portraying not only the necessary renovation of our recently purchased older home but also symbolically refers to my body. I began the process using a SLR camera to photograph a variety of images throughout our home. Stressing the significance of each object, my approach to composition included viewpoint, cropping, and off-centered subjects. These inanimate objects
included a radiator meant for body heat, the exterior of my home representing renovation and progression, and a toilet used for feelings of discomfort.

In the darkroom, I printed the negatives onto photographic paper with a glossy finish. An additional technique helped me manipulate the original image of the toilet. I placed larger bubble wrap, the same used in previous mixed media work, on top of the photographic paper. I projected the toilet image using the enlarger. I then printed the image. Once developed with the necessary chemicals, the end result was an image that characterized restless bathroom trips.

Once dry, I scanned the three images onto the computer. I flipped the images horizontally. I then printed each image onto laser jet transparencies using an inkjet printer. While the transparencies were still damp with ink, I moistened the substrate. I applied a light wash onto hot pressed bristol board paper with a sponge brush. After a few minutes, I placed an inkjet transparency ink-side down on the paper. Using a brayer, I pressed the image onto the nearly dried paper until the image transferred completely. I carefully peeled the transparency away from the substrate, revealing an aged and weathered appearance. I repeated this process for each image. Lastly, each print was mounted to an individual 3”x3” canvas.

I continued using selected photographs taken with the SLR camera. I pulled from several proof sheets. Some dealt with more recent subject matter while others recorded the previous summer’s travel. *Perceived Design* (Appendix, 8) expressed an overall idea of documentation. Each completed print, in the series of nine, collectively symbolized a significant occurrence. For example, the photograph of my husband (top row, center) overlooking Aruba’s ocean signifies a sense of waiting. I emphasized waiting with a play on words and incorporated a photocopied page titled *Where the Weight Goes* from a pregnancy book validating each gained pound. The photocopy was placed onto the photographic paper in the darkroom, while the negative projected
down I pressed the print button. With intent to engage the viewer, I flipped the photocopy so it read backwards.

Another printed photograph (top row, right) displays the staircase in our home. This staircase contains a particular memory in the hot summer of my last trimester. As I had become less mobile due to my increasing belly, walking up the stairs presented a challenge. At the same time, they provided a task in the form of exercise. I used a lighter to burn the edges of the film. The distorted print not only exhibited my connection to the stairs but also stressed the sense of heat.

*Perceived Design* exhibits nine images on photographic paper each adhered to their own 3”x3” canvas. The individual glossy prints wrap around a deep-edged canvas. Small nails are hammered into the sides of canvas indicating a more industrial quality to the overall piece. Wire joins the nail from one photograph to the adjacent canvas, documenting a complete design.

Later, I revisited mixed media and combined photography. The photographic process of *Radiated Womb* (Appendix, 9) transpired when I printed the image of the radiator onto an inkjet transparency. I painted a small 5”x7”x5” canvas with a subdued acrylic mixture of burnt sienna tinted gesso. I scanned a page from a medical book that illustrated the progress of the baby descending through the pelvis during labor. I created a gel medium lift from the photocopy so that the painted canvas would show through the text and image. I added color to the illustration using colored pencils to highlight certain areas of the female body. There was a Bible verse that had traveled through my head throughout the pregnancy that I felt impelled to incorporate in some aspect of my artwork. The verse declares, “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart” (Jer. 1:5 NIV). I wrote the verse down onto thin
newsprint paper, placed clear packing tape on top of the words, then tore the paper so only the words were left on the tape. I pressed the taped verse onto the scanned illustration.

Materials and tools were carefully considered. Later, I took the photograph of the transparent radiator and burned the edges with a lighter. I hammered nails into the sides of the canvas. I used a thin wire to weave through the transparency then around the nails. The act of weaving reaffirmed the notion that my body was at constant work knitting the baby together. The transparency functioned to resemble an X-ray, similar to sonogram images.

In my paintings, I continuously invited my current journey to generate the meaning and composition while allowing the development of materials to transpire. As my journey of pregnancy reached the closing stages, I desired to meditatively record the experience with intent and purpose. The photographic technique naturally facilitated the documentation process. While working with painting, mixed media, and photography, I established a balanced approach which illustrated not only my ever-changing inner and outer physical appearance but also my thoughts, concerns, and emotions. These concentrations have been contingent upon one another to communicate my journey.

Conclusion

The MIS-IAR Program has had a much deeper impact on my artistic development than I imagined it would. I began taking graduate classes to renew my teaching certificate. However, I became aware of the impact the pursuit of the degree would have on my artwork and the instruction delivered to my students in the classroom. Becoming a student again, helped me empathize with my students to overcome time-restraints, fear, and self-doubt. Additionally, class discussions regarding process led to a more disciplined work ethic. I became attracted to
experimenting with a variety of media and techniques that would increase my knowledge base and add diversity to my body of work.

I quickly gained an appreciation for the environment the Program possessed. The overwhelming support and shared instruction of other teachers as artists inspired me. As confidence grew, I rediscovered a passion to create images exhibiting personal journeys.

Overall, the most significant development was exploration. My graduate experiences challenged me to consider not only techniques and various use of materials, but to investigate who I was as an artist. I was inspired to discover and develop a mature body of work through personal experiences. I learned how to express the intent of my work in concise detail to others. I plan to put into practice this comprehensive process with future work.
Bibliography


Appendix

List of Figures

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Figure 1a. *Conception* (Side View), plaster, acrylic, watercolor, inkjet transfer, and colored pencil on wood, 12”x12”x3”, 2012.

Figure 2. *Placenta Evolution*, acrylic, watercolor, bristol board, and newspaper on canvas, 8”x10”, 2012.

Figure 3. *Embryo Burst*, acrylic, watercolor, bristol board, and newspaper on canvas, 12”x9”x4 ½”, 2012.

Figure 4. *Spinal Footprints*, acrylic, watercolor, bristol board, and crackle paste on canvas, 12”x9”x3 ½”, 2012.

Figure 5. *Insistent Fluid*, acrylic, crackle paste, bubble wrap, and newspaper on canvas, 16”x20”x5”, 2012.

Figure 6. *Distended Abdomen*, acrylic, inkjet transfer, and tape transfer on canvas, 8”x10”, 2012.

Figure 7. *Renovation*, analog photography, digital negatives, bristol board, and inkjet transparency transfer onto three 3”x3” canvases, overall size 3”x12”, 2012.

Figure 8. *Perceived Design*, analog photography, Ilford glossy paper, nails, wire, and digital transparency onto nine 3”x3” canvases, overall size 13”x13”x4”, 2012.

Figure 9. *Radiated Womb*, acrylic, marker, colored pencil, gel medium, nails, wire, and inkjet transparency on canvas, 5”x7”x5”, 2012.
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Figure 3. *Embryo Burst*, acrylic, watercolor, bristol board, and newspaper on canvas, 12”x9”x4 ½”, 2012.
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