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The Nature of Architecture

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The Nature of Architecture

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 enjoy driving in the city. It makes me feel minuscule against the skyscrapers and monuments. I wonder about who has lived in the city and admire the craftsmanship, the creative design, and the intelligence it takes to engineer and build these structures. The clean lines, geometric shapes, and surface textures of the buildings inspire my works. My obsession with construction and architecture has driven my creativity.

In ceramics, I reflect on architecture when forming vases and jars. I hand-build and wheel-throw my pieces, and add surface texture and lines reminiscent of stone and brickwork. Only white and black glazes are used in order to focus attention on form. Groupings of these vessels are presented as cityscapes in pottery.

In printmaking, I depict geometric, stylized buildings at skewed angles in vibrant colors. The contrast and harmony of man-made structures against nature are issues that interest me. In these stylized works, I hint at nature with the rendering of whimsical clouds and trees but the architecture remains the focus.

In painting, I present the images using traditional techniques of realism. Architectural structures are arranged in a landscape format to emphasize the contrast between geometric and organic shapes. Like printmaking, I continue to rely on bold color choices to make an impact.
The Nature of Architecture

Introduction

I have always been inspired to build and make things. Maybe it was my obsession with Lego’s or the geometric patterned quilts my mother made and taught me to create, but the concept of construction has driven my artwork. There have been times I struggled to create and other times I have doubted my abilities. Yet, my need to build was a constant. I took art classes all the way through high school, but it wasn’t until my enrollment in an advanced placement (AP) art class that I started to have an aversion to my artwork. The class was mainly focused on two-dimensional work and I wanted to build and sculpt. It wasn’t a good fit, so I dropped the class and switched to psychology. Psychology became my new focus and the declared major for my undergraduate degree. It wasn’t until my junior year at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) that I took my first ceramics class and found my passion for the arts once again. After more ceramic classes, I decided to stay in college a little longer to earn a minor in crafts knowing that psychology was not my calling.

Eventually, after odd jobs and carpentry stints, I decided to go back to school for certification in art education. I attended the University of Richmond, earned my teaching license, and began teaching at Leesylvania Elementary School in Woodbridge, Virginia. I grew to love teaching art. I saw young artists bloom but missed learning about art myself. Then, I heard about the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program at VCU and took a class. I had a wonderful experience and knew this was the right direction. I made art in my preferred media, ceramics, and experimented with printmaking and painting. Now, I am a more confident artist and teacher, and I haven’t looked back since.
Aesthetics

In my artwork, I focus on the process of construction by using the imagery of cityscapes and architecture as a symbol of the man-made. A building’s construction involves the act of making an infrastructure. The process takes detailed planning, availability of materials, and a strong design. Construction involves budgeting for supplies and labor, as well as considering the environmental impact. Materials can be repurposed or reused, while others can be new. The design of a building is crucial in bringing all of the parts of construction together and making it a reality. Similarly, each piece that I create first takes planning. I sketch and design each level of the composition, then gather materials and construct my work.

Construction also involves some type of deconstruction, or the dismantling of parts of a building or structure. These parts can later be repurposed for another aspect of the new building. This recycling creates a positive balance between natural and man-made resources. In ceramics, I use second-hand clay and discarded, old molding to make the sculptures and their bases. For my prints, I repurpose cereal boxes to create multi-piece collagraphic plates.

In clay, I choose the forms of jars and bottles that can be stacked or grouped together to create a metaphorical and changeable cityscape. I use this functional and historic form for my cityscape sculpture to suggest the skyline of buildings as eclectic yet similar. The ability to reorganize these vessels in various installations addresses my ideas related to construction and deconstruction.

My prints depict industry and a united bond between the man-made and nature. The focus is on the architecture of a cityscape but I also depict landscape elements (trees, clouds, and birds). I use a style that is cartoon-like and expressive by combining simple, graphic lines with bold colors. When using architecture as a symbolic feature, I use geometric shapes and contours
to indicate structures and bold colors and lines to portray a light-hearted and whimsical mood. These approaches help to make my work visually appealing, and place a positive emphasis on a balanced relationship between the man-made and nature.

My paintings are less stylized and more naturalistic than my prints. Again, I reflect on architecture in harmony with nature. I pay as much attention to the detail of the architectural elements as to the nature that surrounds it. This equal attention allows me to present these elements as entities in balance.

Process has driven my work. Through construction and deconstruction, I found focus. I build and repurpose materials, use varying techniques and media, and focus attention equally on buildings and the environment. Like a city, my work is constantly changing and growing.

Influences

In ceramics, I am influenced by Greek Proto-geometric (1050-900 BC) pottery. This pottery was characterized by simple coloration and geometric motifs which were hand-painted on the outside of the piece. Minimal shapes (circles and triangles) and bold stripes were iconic of this period. These design elements were precisely placed around the neck and shoulders of the vessels with a compass or brush. I incorporated this style into my pottery by using simple colors (black and white) and geometric designs.

In contrast to ancient Greek pottery, I am also influenced by twentieth and twenty-first-century works. The potters that I’m drawn to, such as Judith Salomon (b. 1952) and Stanton Hunter (b. 1956), stray away from traditional methods of pottery production and function. Often form is the focus over function. These artists push the form and change the traditional curves of the classic vase to alter the profile of the piece. They also modify the pottery by cutting and
adding other pieces making the vase’s form unusual and architectural. After studying their works, I approached some of my pottery works as sculptural forms.

As for painting and printmaking, I have been influenced by many different artists and styles. However, there are three distinct artists, Edward Hopper (1882-1967), Charles Sheeler (1883-1965), and Frank Stella (b. 1936), who are the most influential to my work. All three artists are considered to be Modernists who used bold colors, geometric shapes, and graphic lines or contours. They were all inspired by architecture in some way.

The first artist that I was inspired by was Edward Hopper. I can remember seeing his paintings in an art history class. Hopper was an important American Modernist who used nineteenth-century architecture to display middle-class American life. While other artists at the time were choosing the Brooklyn Bridge and the Chrysler Building as their muses, Hopper was choosing architecture that personally appealed to him and where he lived at the time, Washington Square in New York City. Hopper’s cityscapes were unconventional because he chose less iconic buildings and architecture. Carolyn Troyen, a curator for the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston stated that:

…Hopper knew the modern, skyscraper city but chose instead to bring together the commonplace, familiar, ordinary buildings that were most people’s lived experience in New York. His goal was to record, and by recording to make permanent, the coming together of structures that gave the city meaning. (Troyen, et al., 115)

Like Hopper, I also want to present imagery that reflects my life and experiences.

Although Hopper chose a soft-focused realism in developing his images, he used large shapes and atmospheric lighting which I incorporated into my work as well. Hopper also saturated his paintings with bold color to capture and enhance a mood in his work. This aspect also became a feature in my work.

Charles Sheeler (1883-1965) is another artist that made an impact on my concepts.
Sheeler, originally a self-taught photographer, used industrial sites and architecture as a central focus in his painting. He was inspired by his photographs of New York City and the industrial forms of the Ford Motor Company buildings. Sheeler called himself a Precisionist and rendered his images with acute detail. His work was a symbol of American productivity and technology’s positive impact on American life. Like Sheeler, I also wanted to show the coexistence of man and nature. He focused on industry with a backdrop of nature in his work. His paintings hint at the positive aspects of technology and production without destruction to nature. I also refer to this relationship in my pieces.

I have always enjoyed Frank Stella’s (b. 1936) art and his early approach to reductive painting. His choice of bold and contrasting color and geometric shapes inspired me. Stella emphasized vibrant colors against hard edges with repetitive lines and shapes. This style gave his work an illustrative and cartoon-like quality which I chose to echo in my work. This style is visually exciting and conceptually accessible to a wide audience.

I have also incorporated some of Stella’s construction methods as well. In some of his late pieces, he assembled panels together and then painted them. Stella’s process of construction compares to my process with printmaking, where I build a plate, deconstruct, paint, and reassemble it. He stated:

I was able to use my gift for structure with something that modernism hadn’t really exploited before, the idea that paintings could be constructed, made by picture-building…Building a picture was something natural for me. Build it and then paint it. It was a job I was well suited for. (Tufnell ed., 45)

It is this metaphor of building that I have found in my own process. Stella’s influence can also be seen in my ceramic sculptures. My ceramic sculptures are built, stacked, disassembled, and rearranged to mirror the process of construction in architecture.
Ceramics

When it comes to ceramics, the form is my focus. I think of the form as the outer shell of a building. I relate the base of the vessel to a structural foundation, the walls to the walls of a building, and lastly, the neck to the top of the building. I created the forms as a collection, mimicking a cityscape of varying heights and styles. This can be seen in my piece Bottle Cityscape (Appendix, 1 and 1a). Each bottle or jar has its own style and character just like a single building within a city. I position them in a radial format to imitate a cityscape with the larger bottles and vases in the middle and the smaller ones placed towards the edges. The color is reduced to black and white. The decorative markings are simplified and geometric. The jars and bottles can be presented in various configurations in each installation.

I also experimented with height in my ceramic work, as seen in my piece Stacked Jar Pillar (Appendix, 2). I wanted my audience to gaze up and down the stacked jars as they would a skyscraper. I saw this piece as representing one tall building or a single aspect of an architectural element. In making this piece, I created each component separately so that it can be deconstructed and then reassembled in various arrangements. I compared this to the buildings and architecture in a city that are constantly changing. I used a clear glaze with no colorant or detail so that the contours remained the focus.

In the piece Hand Built Pillar with lid (Appendix, 3), I made another singular vertical structure. This time, I experimented with hand-building techniques to produce more geometric contours in the vessels. I created a base for the sculpture from reclaimed wood molding to suggest old architecture existing with the new. This referenced the practice of repurposing materials.

Clay comes from the earth as a natural material and when manipulated by the touch of
man it can be transformed into a useful or meaningful object. Through my manipulation in clay, I created a variety of pieces about the multi-faceted aspects of architecture and its elements.

**Printmaking**

I experimented with several techniques and processes but it wasn’t until I discovered the collagraph that I became interested in printmaking. A collagraph is a collage style of printmaking involving a layered plate of paper, cardboard, fabric, or other textural materials that are cut and glued together. A plate made from layers of these materials is run through a press resulting in an image made up of a multi-piece plate. I made my first collagraph plate out of recycled cereal boxes. I appreciated the straight lines and miniature details I could achieve from this readily cheap and available material. Next, I made a lot of different collagraph plates in the same size. I used a uniform format so that I could experiment with layering images and patterns and explore the possible variations.

In *Beach and Power lines* (Appendix, 4) I used cereal boxes and hot glue to make the printing plates. I used hot glue as a drawing tool for the textural lines and marks that depict the sand and the beach. The soft edges of the glue created a contrast to the sharp contours of the power lines. Next, I inked the textural beach ground in a neutral cream color reminiscent of sand. Then, on top of this, I layered a yellow and orange-toned plate depicting power lines. The contrasting colors represent the beauty and energy that both the beach and power lines exude, both elements are features of our environment.

In *Cityscape* (Appendix, 5), I explored the process of a linoleum-cut reductive print. The process began with an image carved into a linoleum plate which was easy to cut with carving tools. Then, the plate was inked starting with the lightest color. After the plate was printed, I
carved into it again. Lastly, the process of carving then printing was repeated over and over again until the desired amount of layers and colors was achieved. With this process, I realized multiple layers, crisp lines, and geometric shapes reminiscent of a building. This process also allowed me to build layers of detail and color with subsequent carvings into the same plate. The process of building, adding, and reducing lines and shapes reflected the process of the growth and change in an actual city.

In my work *Cityscape with birds on a Wire* (Appendix, 6), I returned to the collagraph. In my general process, I was unable to get a variety of colors with one plate. So, I developed a method that allowed me to incorporate a variety of colors. First, I started with one collagraph plate. I cut out a cityscape from cardboard, cut out each window, and glued each piece to a bigger piece of cardboard for stability. Next, I cut this plate into several pieces and layers. Then, I painted each piece in different high-saturated, bright colors. Finally, I reassembled the pieces into one colorful plate. This print contained up to ten colors. Now, my prints were full of color which added to the stylized and whimsical graphic elements. It was a cityscape that seemed alive.

In *Layered Cityscape* (Appendix, 7), I used this same multi-plate collagraph process but added an extra step. For defined lines and extra detail on the surface of the print, I etched a plate in Plexiglas and inked it in black. I ran it through the press and the outcome was an even more graphic image. I extended the bulbous clouds past the rectangular edges of the print to explore shaped formats. The clouds also contrasted with the geometric lines of the cityscape.

Through printmaking, I was able to experiment and develop my ideas through layering. The process of building a print one layer at a time is analogous to an architect or builder working on a structure. This process has guided my work in other media.
Painting

Painting for me was a new venture but I continued my focus on the balance of the man-made and nature. In my acrylic painting *Railroad Bridge over the James River* (Appendix, 8), I painted a bridge that I visited many times on hikes through Richmond, VA. The repetitive features of the bridge mesmerized me. It also became a metaphorical bridge between the man-made and nature. I used bright reds and oranges for the bridge and its reflection, and greens and yellows for the environment. The complementary colors allowed me to make a high-contrast, graphic image in a new media.

In my painting *Water filter* (Appendix, 9), I added detail and focused on the water filter. The filter was an interesting object protruding from the water and was surrounded by beautiful water lilies. I made it the focal point of this painting but I also paid homage to nature by depicting the surrounding water lilies. Here, I experimented with layering colors to create texture. Again, I used a contrasting palette of grays and greens to symbolize the elements of man and nature existing together.

I continued to explore the fluidity of the acrylic paint in my triptych, *View from Mount Vernon Trail* (Appendix, 10), where I experimented with a naturalistic color palette. In this painting, nature dominates the composition. At the bottom of the panels, I depicted a cityscape quietly nestled into the environment. This format echoes the way I felt sheltered by nature when painting this view.

With my paintings, I typically experimented with naturalistic color choices and the techniques of realism. I focused on the elements of man and nature that I find both beautiful and necessary. Through my ceramics, printmaking, and painting, I wanted to present this idea of harmony to my viewers.
Conclusion

The MIS-IAR Program has guided, changed, and improved my life in a number of ways. As I advanced through the Program, I gained confidence and experience with different media and new ideas. I further developed my body of work and focused on a specific theme. My ideas have expanded the ways I express myself through my art work.

As a teacher, I feel more knowledgeable and can better teach my students. The MIS-IAR Program also re-energized my creative impulses by providing an environment that included artists and teachers sharing new ideas and techniques. The MIS-IAR Program guided me to my fulfillment as an artist.
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