Reflecting on the Ordinary

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Reflecting On the Ordinary

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 work is about valuing the ordinary moments in life that can be described as joyful, difficult, beautiful, painful, or even transcendent. My creativity arises from a need to tell the story of these moments, and to share my experience with others. These moments are often evidenced by the objects we leave behind. They are a testament to the life we have lived, or are now living. My attention to small, ordinary details includes honoring and remembering people who have died. They may be artists, writers, friends, or family members but it is important to me to record the unique contributions they have made to this world.

To tell my stories I work with clay, paint, wood, wire, photography, jewelry, books, and found objects. I incorporate text to tell the story of the piece. I layer objects and imagery to focus the viewer's attention on the mundane. I use found objects to serve as metaphorical evidence of the path we take. Many symbolic images also recur in my work, such as crows, gravestones, hands, and trees. Finally, I use grids to organize the structure of my pieces and help create a sense of order in the profusion of information. I want my art to be mindful, to elevate the ordinary, and to ask the viewer to join me in reflection on the human experience.
Reflecting On the Ordinary

Introduction

As long as I can remember, art has been a natural part of my life. Growing up in a large family with seven children, we always had plenty of plain paper, crayons, and paints at our disposal. We often held art shows for our parents where we hung our latest creations on the walls. Even outdoors, my siblings and I would dig moist clay from the ground and fashion it into pots to dry in the sun. I was always experimenting with different methods.

My middle school had an excellent teacher who inspired me in the arts. I was constantly in the art room, and even participated in an art camp at his family's farm in the summer. In high school we moved to the East Coast, and as a high school senior I finally took art classes again. My teacher was a skilled potter, and I became proficient at hand-building ceramics.

When I went to college, I thought I might become a lawyer or a therapist, as both fields interested me. I was also convinced that it was impossible to make a living with art. But just for fun, I signed up for ceramics, art history, and drawing in addition to my academic subjects. As time went by, it became apparent that I loved the arts and needed to pursue it despite my worries about its viability as a career. So, I applied, was accepted, and transferred to Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, where I earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts. My areas of focus were ceramic sculpture and photography, though I was exposed to many other media and processes as well.

In addition to art school, I held a variety of jobs which added to my education. I also started teaching workshops at local colleges, high schools, and galleries, mostly on pinhole photography or alternative photo processes. It was a surprise to me how much I enjoyed teaching. Meanwhile, I had given birth to three children and found it difficult to find time to make my personal artwork. I volunteered with tutoring, substitute teaching, and special projects.
and found that I enjoyed the work. Upon the end of my marriage, I took a job teaching art to middle school students at my current school, where I have now taught for seventeen years. Teaching is enormously satisfying, and I love seeing the spark of learning light up in my students’ eyes.

I have continued to create my own artwork over the years, but slowed down significantly in exhibiting my work. My intention in entering the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) was to carve out time to create my own artwork. Another goal was to take classes using media and techniques that were out of my comfort zone, and that required stretching my knowledge. So, rather than study photography or ceramics, I chose to focus on painting and mixed media in the Program. Exploring these alternate media added dimensions to my art that I never expected. It has been a rewarding experience, and my work has developed as a result.

My Aesthetics

My artwork is based on slowing down to reflect on the beauty or value of ordinary experiences. It is important to me to draw the viewer into a quiet space and help them to see everyday events and relationships anew. Often, I will use my sense of humor or an element of whimsy to soften subject matter related to death. In my work, individuals are reflected symbolically in the objects they leave behind, the residue of their existence. In response to this idea, I pick up found objects on a daily basis which are later added to my mixed media work. I present these objects as evidence of people and their inevitable mortality.

Certain symbols recur throughout my work, such as crows, grave markers, trees, hands, and grids. I carefully research the historical significance of symbols I want to use, and ensure
that their past meanings fit with the meaning that I intend. For instance, crows are both witnesses to and announcers of life's events. They cry out to their flock, announcing danger or change. Yet, they individually retain a beautiful stillness about them as they silently survey the world around them, watching. When I wander in old cemeteries I often photograph the markers. Reading the epitaphs and names makes me reflect on what these people have left behind. There is a quiet sense of timelessness there. Similar to the crows, the cemetery evokes a stillness that I find peaceful. Trees evoke life, even when bare of living leaves. Traditionally, they are used as symbolic representations of the tree of life, which references individual or universal genealogies. Hands are symbolic of the human element of the here and now. They are readily identified, a part of every person. Hands can also indicate spiritual involvement, such as prayer or reflection. Finally, I use the structure and symbolism of grids. The sameness of the compartments, giving equally weighted value to each section, brings a sense of order and calm to my work. It creates a controlled system that plays counterpoint to the changing nature of objects balanced within it. By using these symbols, I call on the viewer to focus on the connections we share through everyday images and experiences.

In my two-dimensional work, I use acrylic paint on canvas or paper, mixed media, and digital photo transfers. In my bookmaking, I make the paper, write the text, add the photos, and stitch the binding. My sculpture pieces present crows against an assemblage of wood frames, screens, metal grids, foil, and plaster. And, I also use found objects in my work, often stitching them into panels of soft, clear plastic.

Influences

When I first used a grid in my work, it was a reference to Eadweard Muybridge’s
(1830-1904) Animal Locomotion (1872-1878) photo series created at the University of Pennsylvania. In these photos, Muybridge photographed subjects moving through space, making very ordinary actions such as walking or climbing stairs. He was celebrating motion by stopping it as time-lapsed still photographs. He presented these images in grid-like formats so that each increment of movement was recorded. Many of these small moments would otherwise be overlooked. As an undergraduate at Tyler School of Art, also in Philadelphia, I made several books based on this series. In the first book, I used his format for my cartoons of animals in stop-action motion. In the next one, I used Muybridge's photos to tell the story of his life. These books inspire my current use of the grid because each page functioned as a single unit that held a separate image or idea.

I am also influenced by Joseph Cornell’s (1903-1972) shadow boxes, especially the ones with found objects and gridded sections. Cornell walked the streets of New York searching through antique stores for unique and interesting images or objects to use in his sculpture. In these works, he removed objects from their original context, placed them in shadow boxes, and presented them like precious images of devotion. Like Cornell, one of my daily practices is to pick up objects that I find on my travels, mostly when walking. I collect these objects because they are the evidence of humans passing through the landscape. They remind me to value the small moments in my life and relationships. My pockets get emptied each evening into containers that hold the objects until I use them in a piece. I sew these found items into layers of thick, clear plastic. These small panels are sewn together to make large wall sculptures. Each individual object is contained in a separate stitched section, open to observation. I value each one of these things because they reflect my personal journey and relationships I have with others.
Wendy Ewald (1951-present), a contemporary documentary photographer, also influenced my work. She goes into remote communities around the world and teaches photography to children who live there. Ewald has worked in a variety of places, from Appalachia in America to villages in India to small towns in Guatemala. She encourages the children to document their daily lives and to reveal the simple beauty around them. Their photos are honest and direct. She teaches the children to value all the elements of their lives. She inspired me to find ways to value the ordinary details of my own life.

Painting

Painting enabled me to transform objects, intensify imagery, and reflect on feelings while honoring the legacy of individuals who have passed on. Old Tree (Appendix, 1) was painted in my parents' yard in Maine. The tree grows in a rural area where my ancestors have farmed for hundreds of years. It was quite large and certainly pre-dates my immediate family's existence. The tree is historically symbolic of the progress and development of life, always adding new growth and expanding its size yet continuing to age and change. I centered the trunk of this large tree in the center of my canvas. The tree is a silent witness to human events that pass near it, including my family's past, present, and future. Though we are enmeshed with the details of our daily lives, the tree represents the overarching force of life beyond those details. For me, the tree represents time itself.

My next work was comprised of a series of small (8”x8”) paintings, entitled Obituary Series (Appendix, 2). Each of these paintings focused on a different person who has died. In each, I drew attention to their unique contributions to the world. Typically, they were people whose lives have made an impact on society in some way, while their names largely remain
unknown. Honoring these people relates to the ordinary moments that are often overlooked. Our society benefits from their contributions, but most people do not recognize the historical person who created the impact. It is important to me to value these people.

In the obituary painting, Arch West (Appendix, 2a), I chose to honor the inventor of nacho flavored Doritos, Arch West (1914-2011). West was a traveling cheese salesman when he created the tasty corn chip. First, I painted the surface and the sides in the same color red as the Dorito bag. Then, I added an image of a large Dorito corn chip surrounded by West's obituary clipping, a photo of West holding a plate of cheese, and painted a funerary urn sprinkled with chips. I used lighthearted humor in honoring a developer of a popular snack food. The use of humor and whimsical imagery often brings attention to a subject that is frequently overlooked or avoided.

The next work was also realized as part of a series. Epitaphs once functioned both as a record of the one who had died and as a warning to the living. Memento Mori, which translates from Latin as “remember that you will die”, is the title of this series. The associated images and texts were reminders that we are all mortal and thus should reflect on the quality of the life we are living. Memento Mori One (Appendix, 3) is a painting on Rives BFK paper. I chose to paint on paper because it adapted well to the transfer process. First, I took photographs in cemeteries of figurative statuary seemingly frozen in time. Then, I transferred these digital photos onto part of the paper. The paper was about three times larger than the photo transfer, which allowed me to add other elements to the painting. Next, I painted black, gray, and white brushstrokes around the statue and enhanced the bare tree in the background. Lastly, on the right side of the format, I stenciled text that reads: PASSING STRANGER CALL IT NOT A PLACE OF FEAR & DOOM. While an actual epitaph, it did not come from the depicted monument. I chose this epitaph as a
reminder that the beauty of the statue and the calming intent of the words attempt to dissuade our fears of death. The words indicate that death is a transition but not an ending.

Painting gave me an opportunity to work with photography, mixed media collage, and text to create multilayered images. Through humor and serious reflection, these paintings allowed me to express my feelings and thoughts on life and death. Life and death are inextricably wound together, and to value one you must also allow the other. This concept brings balance to my own life.

Books

After creating series of paintings, I explored bookmaking due to the serial nature of a book’s collected set of related pages. I wanted to have control of the entire process from making the paper to writing the story to illustrating it to binding it together. Presenting my work in serial imagery allowed me to feature each separate part within the whole. The book form was another way to contain and present ideas.

One of my books is called Remembering the Dead (Appendix, 4 and 4a). It is based on Mexico's Day of the Dead festival, which is a positive celebration of the cycle of life. There is a playful feeling throughout the Day of the Dead festivities that softens the grief associated with death. This whimsy in no way denigrates the memory of the loved one. These two approaches of playful celebration and honor exist side by side. In this work, I commemorated different people whom I care about who have died. On each page, I presented a photograph of a person and three or four sentences, written in white ink, about how their life impacted mine. The pages are hand-made black paper that I painted with decorative designs and flowers. On the cover, I painted a stylized skeleton. The book was bound with small, colored beads in a single-page
stitching technique. The Day of the Dead festival couples imagery of life and joy with remembrances of people who have died. This insistence on a positive reflection is one that I find helpful in expressing experiences of commemoration and loss.

Another book I made is *Un Petit Homage a Calder* (Appendix, 5 and 5a), which is in honor of the artist Alexander Calder (1898-1976). The title is in French because he spent half of his time in France and the rest in America. The book is small enough to fit into one's hand, 3”x6”x2”. The scale was intended to create an intimate experience. I used a double-folded page with heavy card stock so that the pages would support wire replicas of his jewelry that I made. I chose red paper because it was his favorite color. Calder was playful with his art, and would carry a roll of wire and pliers in his pocket to make impromptu portraits at parties. I painted a replica of one of Calder's paintings on the cover of the book, and used a wire double-spiral over the folded and glued binding. I chose to use wire in this homage because it reflected what he valued.

Altered books reflect my sensibilities because the contents of a book are disassembled and then re-assembled into another form. In my altered book, called *Tree of Life* (Appendix, 6 and 6a), the base was the “B” volume of an encyclopedia. I cut out, rolled, and glued pages of the book to make the trunk, branches, and roots which appear to grow out of the open book. I mined the pages of the encyclopedia for images and colors to use to add to the branches and base. For instance, I placed colorful birds all over the branches, while maps of Brazil, Belize, and Bermuda were cut into green leaves. The trunk of the tree and open book base were embellished with images from the encyclopedia, such as blood, Buddha, and books. The tree of life from Mexico's Day of the Dead is traditionally covered in imagery related to life and living
things; I decided to do the same. In my book, the tree rises out of the book and symbolically connects the knowledge and information found in the book with a living form.

Working with books gave me an opportunity to work on an intimate scale, and develop a series of related ideas contained within one work. Making individual pages or developing a sculptural book slowly over time also worked well with my thought process. It allowed me to give my full attention to each page or section as an independent piece of a larger whole.

**Mixed Media**

Mixed media allowed me to use all of my processes and skills. The layering of two-dimensional images with three-dimensional materials created a platform for me to express my value for the small details of life. In *Fear Not* (Appendix, 7) I chose to explore peoples' fears. I started this piece with a sheet of plywood that had a grid pattern of pre-drilled holes. I painted the plywood black and attached a metal handle to the top front. After placing nails into the pre-drilled holes, I wove recycled silk and light metal wire around the nails to create an open grid with cubbyholes. In and around these spaces, I placed quotes about fear written in white ink on black paper. One across the top reads *Fear makes us feel our humanity.* Above that are the words *FEAR NOT.* In the center of the gridded area, I placed a photograph of my hand in the Buddhist *mudra* position of fearlessness. *Mudras* are symbolic gestures of the hands in images of the Buddha in which each hand position has a particular meaning. For example, the *abaya*ha *mudra* translates as fearlessness and consists of the open right hand facing out. In the last step, small origami books were folded from Japanese mulberry paper and placed in the cubbyholes. For the text in these small books, I interviewed various friends and family members about their fears, and I wrote one of their fears in each book. The books are very small, an intimate scale,
and carefully stored within the spaces in the grid. Sharing our fears and valuing those vulnerable feelings shows that to fear is human.

The next mixed media piece is called *Found* (Appendix, 8 and 8a). This piece is comprised of found objects I picked up on a daily basis. I stitched grid-like patterns into two layers of 6”x9” plastic from blanket bags and sandwiched one object into each section. I separated the objects from each other and contained them within a special place of their own. The number and size of compartments varied depending on the size of the objects. Next, multiple 6”x9” compartmentalized sections were connected together to make a larger wall installation. This piece reflects how the smaller parts can make up a larger whole. I wanted to transform discarded objects into something to be viewed and valued in a new context.

Next, I created a series of sculptural works that focused on the symbolism of the crow. One work in this series is called *Solitary Crow* (Appendix, 9). In this piece, I constructed a rectangular painting stretcher and added a coarse gridded screen of wire across the upper section of the stretcher. Then, I attached two tree branches across the bottom. To the top branch, I attached a low-relief crow made from cardboard, foil, and plastercraft cloth painted black.


> Because of its black colour, the crow is associated with the idea of beginning. Because it is also associated with atmosphere, it is a symbol for the creative, demiurgic power and for spiritual strength. Because of its flight, it is considered a messenger...In Christian symbolism it is an allegory of solitude...the crow in itself signifies the isolation of him who lives on a superior plane, this being the symbolism in general of all solitary birds. (Cirlot, 68-69)

The historic symbolism of the crow and its black color support the emotions I am evoking in my work. The crow is both material (grabbing objects) and spiritual (flight). The crow in my
sculpture quietly reflects back on the world. The crow exists in a simple space that I have created to have a timeless feeling.

The next piece in the crow series is called *Release* (Appendix, 10). This piece was constructed similarly to *Solitary Crow*, but this time the composition is horizontal instead of vertical, and there are three crows. Over the coarse wire, I added a finer mesh wire cut into the shape of a range of mountains. Traditionally, mountains represent an intermediary structure between earth and heaven. Two of the crows are anchored in the composition, while a third appears to be in flight. The perched birds are passive, while the one in flight is active. The passive principle is one of reflection, a quiet inner observation. The active principle is the spiritual release of flying out over the mountains.

Mixed media processes were used in my jewelry as well. In the necklace, *Day of the Dead* (Appendix, 11), I used silver precious metal clay (PMC) to make small bones and skull-shaped beads. Polymer clay was the base for photo transfers of people. A fully articulated skeleton made out of PMC hangs from the center of the necklace. Finally, brightly-colored glass beads are interspersed among the bones and photo-beads on the necklace. This necklace is a tribute to the many people I have known who have died. I wanted to memorialize them while also celebrating the spirit of their lives that added to the quality of my life. I used the positive symbolism from Mexico's Day of the Dead to bring light and color into this piece that represents joy at having known these people.

My work has always been concerned with several layers of meaning at the same time. The piece must function well from a design point of view, but it must also carry personal meaning and also be supported by historically accurate symbolism. Using a strong base of
archetypal experiences creates a platform upon which my ideas on the reflection of the ordinary may play out.

**Conclusion**

When I began the MIS-IAR Program, I had hoped to recharge my art with new energy. I reached my goals and more. By focusing on processes that were unfamiliar to me, I expanded my use of materials which led me to develop new ideas and approaches. My comfort level has increased, especially in regard to mixing media and processes, and my work has grown in symbolic meaning.

My teaching has also been positively affected because I now encourage my students to take more risks in their work. Sometimes, they need to push beyond the boundaries of their comfort zone in order to move forward in their art knowledge. My work and teaching reflect the value I place on ordinary moments, on people I know, and on everyday experiences. I value ordinary human experiences that bind us together as a community and make life enriching. It is important to me to also teach my students to value the moments of their own lives and reflect on how they may add to the world through their art.
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Iva DiMacogno Conti
b. 29 Mar 1910 d. 4 Mar 1966

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*Radial Symmetry*, National Art Education Association (NAEA) Annual Conference, New York, New York
2011 *Drawing the Skeleton to Teach Anatomy*, NAEA Annual Conference, Seattle Washington
*From Velasquez to Picasso: Las Meninas*, VAEA Annual Conference, Roanoke, Virginia
2010 *Reviving Your Region*, NAEA annual conference, Baltimore, Maryland
2010 *Funky Monkeys*, with Helena Agnew and Kate Sternberg, VAEA Annual Conference, Norfolk, Virginia
2009 *Vitruvian Kids: Teaching Proportion with DaVinci*, VAEA Annual Conference, Richmond, Virginia
2008 Conference Chair, VAEA Annual Conference, Fairfax, Virginia
2007 *Tree Leaf Poem Project*, VAEA Annual Conference, Williamsburg, Virginia

AWARDS:
2009 Middle Division Educator Award for State of Virginia, VAEA
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PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:
2011-present Secretary, Virginia Art Education Association
2004-present Virginia Art Education Association, Richmond, Virginia
2004-present National Art Education Association, Reston, Virginia
2010-2013 Middle Division Director, Southeast Region of NAEA
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SOLO EXHIBITIONS:
2013  *Reflecting on the Ordinary*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA at the Hill School Performing Arts Center, Middleburg, Virginia
1997  *Linda Conti-White: Recent Work*, University Center Gallery, George Washington University, Ashburn, Virginia

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS:
2012  *Think Outside of the Box*, Middleburg Community Center, Middleburg, Virginia
2010  *Return of the Birds*, Middleburg Community Center, Middleburg, Virginia
2008  *Hill School Invitational Show*, Hill School Gallery, Middleburg, Virginia
2000  *New Photography*, Photoworks Gallery, Leesburg, Virginia

SELECTED COLLECTIONS:
Virginia Commonwealth University Library, Richmond, Virginia
The Erie Art Museum, Erie, Pennsylvania
George Eastman House International Museum of Photography, Rochester, NY
Xerox Corporation, Landsdowne, Virginia
The Hill School, Middleburg, Virginia
Scientech Corporation, Rockville, Maryland