Enigmatic Allegory

Sara Virginia Kinsey

Virginia Commonwealth University

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Enigmatic Allegory

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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Virginia Commonwealth University
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December, 2013
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Artist Statement

My artwork is autobiographical and shaped by my experiences. Collectively, it serves as a visual journal expressing a range of emotions honoring meaningful people, portraying important places, and commemorating significant events in my life. My art documents the progression from turmoil, despair, and isolation to growth, recovery, and gratitude. I utilize a recurring set of subjective symbols which hold personal significance. These symbols, which include robots, eggs, chairs, shoes, and trash cans, help me create narratives and visual continuity across my body of work. I purposefully omit some information to mask the entirety of the story being told. Typically, these symbols represent people, most frequently myself. By covertly telling my story, I invite the viewer to interpret meaning based on their own distinct history.

I place my methods outside the box of established painting and printing practices. After much experimentation and exploration with printmaking media, I have developed a technique with a strong foundation in traditional aquatint etching blended with graffiti-inspired pochoir ink application, or stenciling. This allows me to achieve a contemporary illustrative look within a media deep-rooted in tradition. In painting, I frequently revert to my printmaking background by layering pigments of varying levels of opacity, painting on metal plates, and then etching into the surface. This approach allows me to achieve richness in color, texture, line quality, and visual depth while sharing my story.
Enigmatic Allegory

Introduction

As I was growing up, drawing was a means for escape. I spent many hours in my room drawing characters from my favorite Disney movies, imagining I was on a magic carpet journey, befriending talking animals, or having adventures in Never Land. I had a tendency to become enveloped in a drawing to a point where I unknowingly would tune out the outside world. Later, I discovered other means to achieve the same feelings of detachment. I became reliant on various mind-altering substances to maintain the pretense of normalcy.

For years, I almost compulsively created composition after composition personifying robots. These whimsical robots existed in isolation in a banal urban landscape without ever truly being a part of it. They were just passing through, disconnected, lacking meaningful relationships, motivation, or sense of purpose. My robots often exuded a feeling of melancholy, isolation, or indifference. In hindsight, I identified with the robots in my artwork. They were a metaphor for my own reality.

After over a decade spent making unhealthy life choices, my world had grown very small and I was spiraling into a wasteland of hopelessness. I made a decision to actively take steps to become more present in my life, and to rediscover what I had lost over the years. In recovery, my relationship with art evolved from a method of escape to a means of understanding. It has fostered a sense of belonging and acceptance. Robots gave way to a broader symbol set. Imagery from my subconscious and objects from my past began to surface in my artwork and helped me gain a new sense of clarity. These novel symbols gave me a fresh vocabulary to convey my experiences without being entirely exposed.

Coincidentally, this recovery and subsequent revival occurred in the midst of my
enrollment in the Virginia Commonwealth University’s (VCU) Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program. My life changes and my growth as an artist are documented in the prints and paintings I produced in my coursework. My work is interlocked with my progression of recovery; one would not be successful without the other. Both have taught me to trust myself and value my own story enough to share it with others. This new-found sense of clarity and purpose also extends into my professional life as an elementary art educator. I teach at a school with a large population of students with emotional disabilities. Now, I have much more to offer my students in the form of knowledge and a contagious verve for the subject I teach. I am also grateful to be able to provide my students, who struggle with their emotions, with similar therapeutic art experiences that have helped me work through and communicate my innermost thoughts.

**Aesthetics**

Because of my desire to better understand my past and be at peace with the road that has brought me to the present, I have a predisposition for being autobiographical in my work. By using personal symbols, I developed intent in meaning and process for creating cohesive content. A set of recurring whimsical imagery unifies my prints and paintings and also represents specific elements of my identity. After some research into the history of archetypal symbols, I learned that some aspects of my symbol set are coincidentally congruous with the accepted or historical meaning of the symbol. However, for me, objects from my past and present acquire importance in my subconscious not founded in conventional symbology.

Once a new motif surfaces in a painting or a print, I reflect on its relevance in my personal history. This contemplative process may entail sketching, journaling, meditating, or
conversing with others. The object remains in the forefront of my mind’s eye until I have made sense of its emergence. The symbols that I developed often represent my state of being throughout different stages of my life. For example, a Viking helmet signifies childhood, a robot symbolizes isolation, a chicken-egg toy marks the beginning of growing consciousness, balloons serve as a metaphor for hope, various shoes represent influential people, and empty chairs reference a specific place and time.

Once I have wittingly attached meaning to an object, I can begin to utilize it with narrative intent in my artwork. This has proven to be a very therapeutic process. Translating this meaningful imagery and being able to communicate through it has acted as a cathartic window into my psyche. My artwork embodies the adage *a picture is worth a thousand words* because when words and conscious communication fail, I can convey ideas and thoughts visually. The act of representing suppressed thoughts or emotions in paint or print facilitates a liberating release within.

I have learned to listen to and trust my subconscious. Because of my desire in the past to creatively isolate and hold back, my previous work lacked cohesion and was fragmented in content and style. Now, I am motivated by the idea that through deliberate use of my personally symbolic imagery, I can map my evolving state of consciousness and better understand my relationships to people, places, and past events. Conversely, I do not expect a viewer to be able to accurately read my stories within my artwork, nor do I necessarily want them to. The whimsy masks the truth in my life, often of isolation, disappointment, or fear. My intention is that each composition retains enough ambiguity to encourage multiple interpretations.

I had a strong foundation in traditional printmaking which provided me with the building blocks to explore experimentation with various materials and techniques. By finding my niche
in printmaking, nestled between established and experimental, I created my own process that allowed me to fuse conventional etching techniques with contemporary graffiti-inspired stenciling. I utilized accessible materials, such as Plexiglas, acetate sheets, and non-toxic water-based Akua Intaglio inks to layer the different components that make up the printed image with varying colors, tones, and line quality. This breakthrough in printmaking carried over to my paintings and led to technique and subject matter that are accordant with my prints. Like my printmaking, my painting process often includes building multiple, semi-transparent layers of pigment, then masking, or etching into the surface of the painting.

Influences

I draw inspiration from many artists, spanning diverse media, technique, and subject matter within contemporary art. Artists who have significantly influenced my work are London-based graffiti artist, Banksy (b. 1974); multi-media artist, George Condo (b.1957); author-illustrator, Timothy Basil Ering (b.1966); and Austrian Expressionist painter, Egon Schiele (1890-1918). Delving into these artists’ unique processes, ideas, and motifs has helped guide me in my own journey of artistic expression.

Many connections can be made between modern-day stencil graffiti technique and printmaking. It is easy to get lost in the lengthy, laborious, detail-oriented process of preparing either a stencil or printing plate surface. There is a certain invigorating anticipation in the unpredictability of the outcome in transferring an image until the actual pigment is applied to the stencil or plate. Then, a sense of control is regained when the artist uses their knowledge of their craft to adjust technique or to command the outcome. Banksy is an artist who exemplifies this process. He is a master at crafting bold, visual statements through easily recognizable images in
public places that are accessible to all who pass by. His graffiti imagery is thought provoking, often encouraging the viewer to react to its meaning based on their own circumstance and life experiences. Many of Banksy’s most remarkable pieces are completed utilizing just a few colors, demonstrating his mastery of the problem solving and forward thinking that is necessary in creating sophisticated stencils. For example, his piece, commonly referred to as *Sniper* (2007), depicts a boy about to pop a paper bag behind a crouched man pointing a gun. With just four colors and a well executed stencil, Banksy is able to transform an average urban wall into a powerful public statement on the current condition of modern-day society.

Banksy has remarkably managed to maintain his anonymity for the entirety of his controversial street art career, out of legal necessity and a disregard for celebrity. Banksy and his loyal peers have gone to great lengths to hide his identity from the public. This mystery gives his statements more potency because it is only the statement itself that we absorb. The message doesn’t get mixed up in judgments about his personality or our perception of who he is, as with many figures in the public eye. Although anonymity is very much a necessity for a graffiti artist, I appreciate the level of authenticity it can bring to an artist’s work. I experience a freeing effect when producing art that doesn’t reveal my whole reality because I feel safe from outside scrutiny. Like Banksy, I value the worth of guarding aspects of myself from others.

Similar to the controversy over the validity of graffiti as an art form, contemporary printmakers have pushed the conventionally established norms within the print world. In 1960, Jasper Johns’ (b. 1930) first lithograph, *Target*, marked the beginning of an eruption of new ideas within printmaking. This simple print utilized methods and media that had been used for over 150 years, yet he managed to make an entirely new statement. His loose, expressive lines, inscribed to form a circular target serve to symbolize limitless potential within a media that has
formerly been very rigid and calculated. It is this establishment of new ideas, while refining the mechanics of established methods, development and experimentation of new materials, and evolving artistic movements that has given birth to endless possibilities within printmaking. I have taken advantage of these possibilities by breaking out of my previous comfort zone of conservative, technical printmaking.

Like many contemporary artists, George Condo does not work exclusively in one media, he is a printmaker, painter, and sculptor. His artwork often contains imaginative, goofy, stylistic imagery referencing pop culture. In Condo’s cheerful color aquatint, Clown (1989), the lively character exists on a purple, ethereal background achieved by the layering of multiple color plates and soft-ground etching techniques of traditional intaglio processes. This juxtaposition of his absurdist creatures and the mechanics of traditional aquatint etching appealed to me and inspired me to apply contemporary imagery to the time-honored color aquatint process. Condo explained that creatures in his art, which are born in his imagination, “exist independent of [his] own free will.” (Condo Painting) Similarly, my symbols, which originated in my subconscious, began to take on meaning after they were committed to paper or canvas. Like him, I feel that visual images communicate more effectively than verbal language.

Similar to Condo, Timothy Basil Ering’s imagery can be described as wildly creative and silly, while staying within the realm of fine art. Ering found success writing and illustrating children’s books. His inventive illustrations combine descriptive and painterly techniques, achieving an intensely textural, dynamic look. His imaginative stories tell positive, inspiring tales of the human spirit, adventure, relationships, curiosity, and love. The Story of Frog Belly Rat Bone (2003) takes place in a dull place called Cementland. It follows a set of vibrant characters on an escapade that ultimately ends with them dancing across the page while colorful
fantastic flowers sprout up all around them, transforming Cementland into a place of wondrous beauty. When I first encountered Ering’s work, I felt like I was viewing something that was extremely original, like nothing I had seen before. It motivated me to find a form of artistic expression that fit my artistic voice.

I was initially drawn to Egon Schiele’s landscape paintings by his color palette and omission of certain parts of a motif. Schiele’s use of rich ochres and deep blues creates a feeling of melancholy, while the starkness of the landscape exudes a sense of isolation. Similar moods of melancholy and isolation are prevalent in my own paintings and prints. Also, the symbolic meaning of many of his landscapes, particularly a series of “portraits” of houses, was created by basing the object on its original existence, modifying it, and relocating it into unfamiliar, barren surroundings. In his painting *Dead City* (1911), Schiele chose to replace the surrounding buildings, mill, blue Moldau River, bridge, and walkways around a group of houses with a dark moat. Thus, giving them a subdued, abandoned look and rendering them nearly impossible to identify without prior knowledge of the place. I identify with this symbolic reconstruction of the world to foster self-expression and communicate meaning. After becoming familiar with the themes and strategies of Schiele’s paintings, I explored the idea of constructing meaning by creating compositions around memorable chairs from my past and present.

All of the artists who have had the greatest influence on me share a common thread, experimentation leading to innovation. They built on existing ideas, experimented with new techniques, and let their imaginations soar elevating their art to something truly unique and inspiring. The MIS-IAR Program created an environment that compelled me to investigate these artists’ practices and apply some of their innovations to my own artwork.
Printmaking

The process of printmaking has been very gratifying to me ever since carving my first block print in rigid, unforgiving battleship linoleum. I appreciate each step in the process from sketching and dissecting the layers of the image, carving or etching into the surface, mixing and applying the inks, to the definitive moment when the print is transferred to paper. Art critic Robert Hughes (1938-2012) compared envisioning the synthesis of all the different elements of a print to “learning to play Ping Pong backwards in a mirror with a time lapse.” (Tallman, 22) Printmaking is a unique media that relies on a certain adherence to process and meticulous technique, while maintaining an air of unpredictability until the final print is pulled.

When I approach a print, I have an idea of the desired outcome, but despite my best planning, the materials and processes have a tendency to take on a life of their own. Various elements of the print contribute in their own way, sometimes differing from my intentions. Many times it is these periodic blunders that lead to innovation. For example, when I experienced difficulty with registering my stencil layers, I began using transparent acetate sheets to help me align the layers. It is important for me to have a relationship with printmaking that has room for this periodic loss of control, relying on the fact that my vision, ingenuity, and technical knowledge will prevail over any unforeseen challenges.

Each print is a new challenge, building on what I had done previously. It starts as an image from my subconscious then becomes real when I put pencil to paper in a sketch. The aquatint, Honor Roll Chicken (Appendix, 1), marks a significant point in my recovery and my printmaking journey. The studious chicken toy represents me and the commitment I made to preserve my mind and bring an end to the destructive path I had been on. This chicken is a recurring symbol for new beginnings and personal growth. In addition to being the origin of my
current symbol set, *Honor Roll Chicken* was my first full-color, three plate aquatint etching. Up until that point, I never had the desire to put forth the time and energy for the meticulous planning and laborious execution that a multi-plate color aquatint etching necessitates. Nevertheless, I had a new desire to make my art meaningful, and that meant digging out of the rut of my previous inclinations. Once color infiltrated my printmaking world, I never looked back. Color seemed to open new doors, giving me a desire to experiment to find my own niche within the limitless possibilities of printmaking.

The subsequent experimentation resulted in my discovery of a printing process that incorporated the precision of stenciling and fine line etching with the fluidity of varied ink applications. This technique lent itself to the creation of *Eh* (Appendix, 2), with a wide-ranging gradient of color and form. Each color was applied to a clean Plexiglas plate and pressed through a meticulously cut, clear acetate stencil onto the paper. Variation of color and texture was created by controlling the way the brayer is loaded with ink. In this monoprint *pochoir*, or stenciling process, the final black ink etching overlay tied all layers together. This print corresponds with the importance of personal reflection in the recovery process. *Eh* is a commentary on my past states of unmanageability, unrest, and isolation. By representing these dire times in a whimsical way, it shifts the power from destructive to constructive, helping me create a separation between who I was then and who I am now.

After becoming more comfortable with this monoprint *pochoir* technique, I wanted to push the boundaries by creating a large scale print. A smaller print is more private, requiring a viewer to step in close, similar to whispering a secret. A larger scale image is unrestrained, acting more like a declaration to the public. For me, a very guarded person, making a larger, louder statement is out of my norm. *Dynamism of a Foot in a Meeting* (Appendix, 3) mimics the
visual representation of repetitive kinetic movement. The tapping foot in this print captured the outward manifestation of my unease and frustration of learning to be at peace with myself.

Continuing the idea that I can use images of objects to symbolize feelings or experiences, *That Was Then*... (Appendix, 4) is a reflection on a specific time in my life. This lawn chair represents carefree times but was placed in a bleak landscape, creating a narrative on my attitudes and memories. Emptiness and inconspicuous surroundings have become a recurring aspect in my solitary chair series of prints and paintings. I guard my anonymity while inviting a viewer to attach meaning based on their own experiences.

**Painting**

Prior to my enrollment in the MIS-IAR Program, I considered myself solely a printmaker. However, throughout my coursework I sought new methods of expression. This led me to revisit acrylic painting, a media that previously brought me great frustration. With each painting, I learned more about technique, pigment application, and color interaction. As I found fulfillment experimenting within printmaking, I became driven to take risks and vary my approach to painting. I heeded and was comforted by the advice given to me that *you can always paint over it* if experimentation goes awry. This phrase became a reassuring mantra at times when I felt frustrated or out of control as I developed as a painter.

My painting process is more organic than my printmaking process, relying more on spontaneity than meticulous planning. Once I see an image that I feel compelled to paint, in my mind’s eye, I begin with a simple thumbnail sketch to work out the composition. I then draw a few directional lines on the canvas or steel surface and begin applying layers of color. Once the general atmosphere of a composition is created, I become more specific and representational in
my mark making by referencing material from old photos or by taking new digital photos.

To feed my desire for new and varied artistic experiences, I painted en plein air on the Potomac River. Rather than painting a traditional landscape of a place I had no personal relationship to, I searched for elements within the landscape that I connected with. The deflated balloon, depicted in Deflated (Appendix, 5), hung from a tree and was a remnant of a child’s party or family barbecue. Like much of my artwork, this painting serves as a symbolic self-portrait; a visual documentation of a specific sentiment. The analogy of a deflated balloon, a vestige of happier times, resonated with my emotional condition at the time.

While Deflated conveys a defeated self, Uphill (Appendix, 6) suggests hope. The chicken is no longer stationary and alone; it has found a guide to take it on a new path. The shoes of the guide are representative of a significant person in my ascent into recovery. Together, the pair make the upward climb toward a faint yellow glow in the upper right corner of the canvas. This warm glow represents a promise of something better than the callous gray wasteland that they are pictured in. The atmospheric texture in the ground was achieved by aggressively building layers of paint and adding gel medium or water to control the paint. Once the environment was set, I introduced the characters of the narrative with a careful hand.

An important aspect of my recovery was to let go of the past and not repeat many of the same behaviors. I came to terms with the barriers I had put up since childhood. One of my favorite possessions as a child was a costume Viking helmet. Perhaps this helmet was part of my everyday wardrobe because it made me feel safe. Self-portrait (Appendix, 7), in which a fragile egg is shielded by a Viking helmet, pays homage to my childhood and the need to feel secure. To make the helmet appear to fade into the darkness, I applied a wash of medium and dark hues to deepen and unify the overall tone of the painting. Then, continued painting to re-emphasize
the light areas. This technique helped me achieve a somber mood and visual depth in my paintings.

Like the Viking helmet, I attach meaning to objects based on my personal experiences with them. Routinely visited chairs take on the associations of specific locales. *Take a Seat* (Appendix, 8) records many of the places and events that have shaped me throughout my life. Because it is a chronicle of many personal stories, I chose to blend techniques from both focus areas, printmaking and painting. I appreciated the fluidity of color application and the varied surface texture that was achieved through painting. I also responded to the physical weight of a metal intaglio plate and the meticulous process of etching into the surface. By painting on steel plates instead of canvas, I was able to incise the surface with an etching needle to reveal the bare surface of the steel below the painted surface. This adds visual weight, and actual surface texture that catches and reflects light, to the main elements of the composition. This process was born out of experimentation and a willingness to break away from what is comfortable or expected.

I am able to tell my story through the development of enigmatic symbolism and my evolved printmaking and painting processes. My techniques necessitate the ability to let go and embrace the nature of the media and let my subconscious speak. While this relinquished control adds spontaneity and honesty to my artwork, I rely on planning, a careful hand, and strong intent to dictate the final product. The processes that I utilize originated in traditional practices but developed to facilitate my inscrutable narrative imagery and style.

**Conclusion**

My enrollment in the MIS-IAR Program has coincided with a time of intense emotional turmoil, growth, and self reflection. Finding my artistic voice through my coursework has
played a huge role in my search for serenity and self worth in my personal life. By immersing myself in making art more than ever before, I gained a sense of clarity as to the meaning of my imagery. After developing a deeper understanding of self, my artwork has progressed into compositions laced with a unique visual language. This new symbol set gives me an opportunity to flush out feelings, reactions, and opinions about elements of my identity that may have otherwise remained buried. I learned to appreciate the cathartic value of artistic creation and experimentation and to be comfortable outside the box of conventional technique. I now feel free from the artistic rut I previously dug myself into. Art making is exciting and meaningful again.

Because of my growth in the MIS-IAR Program, I see the value in teaching my students to practice the technical aspect of art making and exploration within media and creative ideas. I observe my students enjoying the artistic process more and producing more advanced work. Like me, they benefit from understanding the importance of experimentation and individuality while maintaining a reverence for tradition.
Bibliography


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Figure 8. *Take a Seat*, acrylic on steel, 20” x 36” x 3”, 2012.
Sara Virginia Kinsey

Education
2013  **Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art**
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
Concentration: Printmaking and Painting

2004  **Bachelor of Science in Art Education**
Nazareth College of Rochester, Rochester, NY
Honors: Magna Cum Laude

Teaching Experience
2005-Present  **Art Specialist**
Marshall Road Elementary School
Fairfax County Public Schools
Vienna, VA

Related Experience
2003-2005  **Studio Assistant to Roycroft Renaissance Printmaker, Laura Wilder**
Rochester, NY

Professional Organizations
2009-Present  National Art Education Association
2006-Present  Fairfax County Federation of Teachers

Exhibitions
2013  **Walk a Mile, Sit Awhile**
Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Art Thesis Exhibition
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
Verizon Gallery, Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC) Annandale
Annandale, VA

2012  **Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) Artist Teacher Exhibition**
Verizon Gallery, NVCC Annandale
Annandale, VA
Juror: Adam Lister

2009  **FCPS Artist Teacher Exhibition**
Verizon Gallery, NVCC Annandale
Annandale, VA
Juror: Kurt Godwin

**Artomatic**
Capitol Plaza I, Washington, DC
### Exhibitions (continued)

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