A New Beginning

Nancy Rae Habit

Virginia Commonwealth University

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Documentation Instructor Sara Clark
A New Beginning

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 artwork reflects elements of simple, everyday life. I find poignancy in people as they go about their daily business, children playing on the beach or an elderly woman at her kitchen stove. And, it’s not just people in whom I find intrigue. The creases and folds of crumpled, brown paper bags; fresh fish lying on crushed ice in outdoor markets; and household objects, such as chairs, irons, and wooden spoons are the types of things that are also evidence of daily life.

In my work, I strive to replicate with both accuracy and emotion all of these things. In my paintings, I focus on objects and purposefully omit ancillary details. I use large brushes to paint the gestural lines of fresh fish or aging fruit. I use neutral colors to focus attention on content. In contrast, my ceramic sculptures are highly detailed. I sculpt and carve exacting and specific elements, such as the bones of a fish skull or the wrinkles and nail beds of aged hands. I want my work to communicate my world and offer viewers an opportunity to see something of their world as well.
A New Beginning

Introduction

Art has always been an innate part of me. As a child I drew constantly. When I wasn’t
drawing, I was cutting paper and magazine pictures to create collages or sculpting with
everything from my mother’s bread dough to a clay-like substance I dug from a ditch in the
neighborhood. I loved it and never found myself void of subject matter or ideas. I enjoyed
school and art so much that I realized early on I wanted to be an art teacher.

That plan changed when I became a young mother and wife. After three children and ten
years of an exhausting attempt at marriage, I found I was better off as a single mother. I was
especially eager to begin creating art again. I enrolled in the art program at Tidewater
Community College in Virginia Beach, Virginia. There, I learned technical skills in painting,
drawing, printmaking, and ceramics. These skills then helped me through my undergraduate
studies at Old Dominion University where I thrived as a painter.

I began my teaching career in a private, alternative school in Richmond, Virginia where I
taught both art and science to at-risk and underprivileged children. The experience kindled a
new fire in me. I realized that art was a way in which I could connect with teenage children.
When the Center for Effective Learning in Virginia Beach asked me to implement an art
program in their alternative middle school, I was honored. I eagerly accepted the position and
have remained in alternative education throughout my career as an art teacher. While this career
choice has been enjoyable and fulfilling, it has also been demanding of my time leaving little left
for my own artistic endeavors. Add to that motherhood, and I had just enough time and energy
left to scratch a few simple drawings into a makeshift sketchbook.

You don’t realize how important something is to your being until it is gone. When my
children became old enough to get along without me for a while, I insisted on continuing my education in art. I wanted to get reacquainted with fine art to see what art had evolved into and to be involved with other artists. I had taken classes for recertification through Virginia Commonwealth University’s (VCU) Off-Campus Program. The classes were most enjoyable and edifying. Looking for an excuse to continue going to classes, I decided to apply to VCU’s Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program. I was thrilled to be accepted and even more thrilled to go to class with adults and learn from educators with professional skills and knowledge. In addition to focusing on painting, drawing, and crafts, I also learned how to make my art more meaningful as I experimented with fiber, handmade paper, and encaustic paints.

Aesthetics

Keeping a sketchbook is like keeping a diary. I document my life by way of drawing my surroundings and memories. I present images of objects and elements that reflect everyday life as well as objects which embody simple living. Fresh foods and household items such as chairs, irons, and bags are items related to my childhood. Fish and fishing implements are symbolic of simple living and are included in my imagery. Finally, skulls and bones, representative of life and death, find a place in my work.

Family is an integral part of my life and the foremost influence in my work. I am driven by memories and the lifestyles which shaped my childhood. My father’s upbringing in rural California embodied simple living that was rich in love, family, and friends. The focus was primarily on living each day to the fullest with the least amount of effort. By that, I mean to enjoy the simple pleasures granted throughout the day, such as picking apples and lemons from
backyard trees, daily meals prepared simply and served with little fanfare, and quiet chats while relaxing in mismatched chairs on the backyard lawn.

My mother, a full-blooded Italian, and her family more acutely influenced my memories and imagery. I was born in Naples, Italy where I spent a good deal of my childhood. It was loud, vibrant, and energetic. Next door to my nonna’s (Italian for grandmother) was a fresh fish market that sold bacala, an abundant and inexpensive form of cod. I remember the market vividly, watching with awe as the owner laid out whole fresh fish onto beds of crushed ice, their glazed eyes staring at nothing. My experience with fresh fish continued when my family moved to Iceland. In Iceland, headless fish were strapped to wooden frames by their tails. There they would hang for days to dry in the cold, crisp air.

In addition to these culturally specific displays of fish, I joined my grandparents and uncles on fishing excursions. A favorite memory is bringing the fresh catch home to my mother who would stand at the kitchen sink, her children watching in awe as she cut off fish heads, scaled their bodies, and used her fingers to pull out their innards. This sounds very graphic and it was, but it was all part of the experience that made fresh fish a significant part of my life and now a prevalent source of imagery in my art.

The images of human skulls and bones are also motifs in my work. As a child, I was taken to the catacombs in Rome. I was intrigued and awed by the skeletal remains of the deceased in their dusty hollows. My nonna would hold my hand as we walked through the dimly lit passage ways and she would point out certain people, especially children. She had lost three babies, so I surmised this was the reason for her interest in the smaller remains. We would pray for them by repeating the Italian prayer for the dead. She had compassion and love for these people and the simple standards by which they once lived. She passed these thoughts and
feelings on to me.

My images are a result of these childhood memories from diverse cultures. Simple objects are composed in a manner intended to evoke in the viewer a sense of familiarity and appreciation for everyday living. I allow myself time to mentally plan my imagery and composition prior to beginning a work. Seldom do I make a sketch on paper. When it comes time to work with the media, I want my work to be spontaneous and to feel natural.

I am driven as much by media as by imagery. Acrylic and oil paints allow me to be versatile. I can explore contour and energy with gestural lines and mood with color. Or, I can take the time to render pertinent details one might otherwise overlook. Compositions can be changed to suit with the swipe of a brush, and I intuitively respond to decisions and make changes accordingly. Encaustic paints appeal to both the painter and the sculptor in me. The process of building layers of color and texture helps me to feel and create a sense of atmosphere and depth. Often times, I add excessive layers so that I can carve them away, exposing the strata of media and creating textures. However, it is in ceramic sculpture where I invest the most time and energy. I strive to replicate with acute realism size, texture, and color to articulate my intent. I create exacting details which I feel hold narrative. Through all media my works tell my story.

**Influences**

I am drawn to the work of twentieth-century artists whose imagery depicts ordinary, everyday subjects. Most appealing and influential to me are Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009), Kathe Kollwitz (1867-1945), and Alice Neel (1900-1984).

The impeccable rendering ability of Magic Realist, Andrew Wyeth, initially caught my attention. Wyeth’s *Helga Pictures* (1971-1985) were especially captivating, not only because of
his attention to detail but because of the manner in which he chose to represent his subject. There is nothing pretentious about his model or the spaces in which she poses. The marks and moles on her skin, as well as the wisps of unmanaged hair around her face, reflect her natural beauty and attest to Wyeth’s acute ability to find the exquisite in the otherwise mundane.

In his painting *Monday Morning* (1955), a worn and dirty wicker laundry basket leans against a mottled outdoor wall. Long cast shadows suggest morning light. While the laundry basket seems to be the primary focus of the painting, other details within the work add additional narrative. For example, a crooked shutter, dusty window panes, and a wooden cellar door are fodder for interpretation and conversation. These images exemplify simple living yet seem to be symbolic of something more, perhaps hardship or loneliness. Drawing inspiration from Wyeth’s direct yet profound imagery, I contemplate my images and compositions with more focus and intent.

One of the most notable experiences in my life has been motherhood. From intense love to intense pain, fear, and heartache, the spectrum of emotions is unmatched by any other circumstance. German Expressionist artist, Kathe Kollwitz, eloquently illustrated the power of a mother’s love and heartache in her works depicting families affected by war and social injustice. One image that I find compelling is *Woman with Dead Child* (1903). In this work, a dark and compelling lithograph, a mother clutches her deceased child so closely that the two appear as one. Beate Bonus-Jeep (1865-1954), a close friend to the Kollwitz for over sixty years, made the following statement regarding the work:

A mother, animal-like, naked, the light-colored corpse of her dead child between her thigh bones and arms, seeks with her eyes, with her lips, with her breath, to swallow back into herself the disappearing life that once belonged to her womb. (Prelinger, 42)

With the same emotional intensity as the image itself, Bonus-Jeep describes the work in graphic
detail arousing the listener and stirring emotions within. In my work, I strive to reflect this same kind of emotional intensity.

In another work, *Seed for the Planting Shall not be Ground* (1942), three young children are protected by their mother’s powerful embrace. Two of the children are looking in the same direction as the mother. Their facial expressions are curious yet indifferent, while the mother’s expression seems pensive. The third child seems to be looking just to our left. He appears to be smiling slightly as he moves his mother’s garment away from his face as if to play peek-a-boo, making this work even more endearing. As the viewer, we are subjected to an array of effectively illustrated yet carefully balanced emotions from the mother’s fear and strength to playful innocence to the unknown. My work is also meant to address emotion and compassion.

Alice Neel, New York portrait artist, painted what compelled her at any given time. Her paintings of family, friends, and even strangers are crude, natural, and spontaneous. Her portraits are expressive and brutally honest making them especially poignant. Her palette was more expressive than naturalistic, giving her imagery symbolic emotional impact. She painted her world in her own unique style; some of her paintings look unfinished. *The Family* (1970) and *Mrs. Gardner and Her Son* (1967) are two works with uneven levels of finish which taught me to resist the need to fill the entire picture plane with imagery.

Neel’s pictures are often symbolic, as in her painting *Fire Escape* (1948). This work depicts the view from the apartment she shared with her two young sons in Spanish Harlem. The scene is that of tenement housing, tightly cropped to imply confinement. For me, the image of balconies and laundry suspended from clotheslines tell an austere story about the people who reside in the buildings. This is an example of the simple and honest truth of life that I want to incorporate in my own work.
Painting

I was introduced to paint as a child. My nonno (Italian for grandfather) and my uncles painted homes for a living, so there were always buckets of colorful paints and brushes of various sizes around the garage. In the beginning, I was offered a small brush with which to paint on small areas. Rollers were next. Eventually, I was painting with bigger brushes and more colors, helping with edging, trim work, and doors. Through these experiences I became familiar with the feel of paints and brushes, and painted in high school and college. When I began painting in the MIS-IAR Program, I picked up where I left off in my early paintings. I used the techniques of realism and chose imagery that mattered to me. At this point, I used photographs as the reference for my compositions.

In Boy Talk (Appendix, 1) twin brothers enjoy a chat on the beach. I took many photographs of these children as I watched them engage in play and conversation with one another. Because of my fondness for ordinary people enjoying simple everyday life, I was compelled to paint this scene. I rendered and painted them realistically paying particular attention to the details which exemplified their youth, such as chubby sunburned cheeks, oversized ball caps, and wisps of hair sticking out from under the caps. I used naturalistic flesh tones to illustrate their fair and delicate skin. The close proximity of the boys shows their comfort with one another and symbolizes brotherly love. I purposefully eliminated painting the beach in detail using only color, texture, and the boy’s bathing suits to infer the setting. I wanted this to be about innocence and love, rather than a day at the beach.

In Drying Fish (Appendix, 2) I referred to a photograph my father had taken in Iceland. Generally, most of the drying fish we saw were shriveled and gray or tan. The fish in this
particular photograph were unique in that they were wet, shiny, and colorful implying that they were fresh kills. Determined to make a change in my approach to painting, I put down the smaller brushes I used to ensure control and exacting detail and opted for larger brushes. I also changed my palette to inspire a more expressive use of color. To heighten the drama, I increased the scale and cropped out extraneous detail. I used large, dry brush strokes to accentuate the contours of the fish. These brush strokes created the illusion of movement, making the fish look somewhat animated. I was encouraged by the expressive quality of the painting.

I began to think about my use of imagery and detail within a painting. The adage less is more inspired me to think about my compositions and what I was trying to conceptually relay in my work. Challenge Your Circumstances (Appendix, 3) is evidence of my progress toward a less restrictive way of thinking. The sole lemon was formerly part of a larger still life. I felt the painting looked too predictable and questioned my motives. I took the canvas from my easel to the sink and began to scrub away the painted imagery. To my surprise, the lemon began to look brighter and take on a distinctive presence. I washed away all but the lemon. As I evaluated the image on the stained canvas, I thought about the unfinished look of much of Neel’s work. At this point, I concluded that this painting was complete. The sole lemon held more veritable narrative in this space than it did as part of a still life.

I have come to the realization that my paintings are much more expressive when I approach them spontaneously and when I paint from life. Photographs are a helpful resource, however, my memories offer symbolic details that are not apparent or are missing in the photographs.
**Encaustic Painting**

Soon, I decided to expand my media and found that encaustic encouraged and inspired change in me. My knowledge regarding encaustic was limited to the Fayum Mummy portraits of the Coptic Period in Ancient Egypt (3rd-c - 9th-c AD). These portraits were delicate and beautiful and I admired the skill of the artists who created them. I was mesmerized by the rich colors and textures of the art work, and I wanted to incorporate some of these features in my work.

My first attempts with the medium were on small, wooden substrates. I experimented with layers of beeswax, color, and some collage materials, such as fabric, papers, and strings. The painting, entitled *Obituaries* (Appendix, 4), began with layers of wax medium, newspaper, and translucent color. I took a very spontaneous approach to this piece and had no preconceived plans. I simply wanted to explore encaustic and collage.

I began by layering thin layers of wax medium on the surface of the wood. I picked up a sheet of newspaper and laid it onto the warm wax. As I painted a layer of medium across the paper, I noticed that I had randomly chosen the obituary section. Immediately, I thought of my nonna and mother who combed the obituaries for lost friends or acquaintances. This, in turn, made me think of them preparing the fresh fish my uncles brought home. The fish heads and guts were always wrapped in newspaper to be discarded. Using thick coats of encaustic paint, I began to create a fish in relief on top of the newspaper. I purposefully placed its head and eye at the center of the composition, and just above the word “obituaries”. With a carving tool, I sliced a line through the wax in the area that one might begin to decapitate a fish. I filled the void with red and yellow paints to imply oozing blood and innards, and added the fillet knife. Splotches of red, yellow, and green suggest that this fish was not the first to experience its demise on this cutting board.
Another technique I employed with encaustic painting was transfer rubbings. To do this, I printed photographs of my drawings from a laser printer and transferred them to layers of medium and color on a wooden panel. *Catacomb* (Appendix, 5) was comprised of layers of wax and prints of bones and skulls. I prepared the wood surface with a layer of gesso, then a wash of ultramarine and burnt umber oil paints. Once that was completely dry, I brushed on a thin coat of wax medium. I applied the imagery onto the wax by using the back of a spoon to thoroughly rub the image onto the surface. With warm water and a sponge, I removed the paper leaving the transferred image embedded in the wax. I continued layering images and wax to create an illusion of depth. The subject was culled from memories of visits to the Roman catacombs.

The encaustic medium allowed me to be more spontaneous and inventive in my work. I still chose images of simple daily life but I presented them in more expressive and abstract ways. For example, *Mom’s Chair* (Appendix, 6) represents the style of furniture we used in the early 1960s when I was a child. The chair, painted from memory, was one in which my mother sewed, read her magazines, and talked on the telephone. After applying a preliminary coat of encaustic medium, I brushed in large areas of color to represent the flat, geometric surfaces of the chair. I took advantage of the sculptural quality of the medium and created the same woven look of the chair’s upholstery. The actual chair was made of vinyl and the texture was made to look as if it had been woven fabric. To further emphasize the vinyl, I added white highlights and then buffed the final painting to a high sheen.

This chair was the first in a series of many. The imagery was always developed from memory. One of particular inspiration was that of an abandoned home with old and broken furniture scattered about the yard. The scene was thought provoking, so I recorded the memory in *Discarded* (Appendix, 7). This was a scene we drove past on a visit to my Great Aunt
Bertie’s in Clovis, New Mexico. I was touched by the emptiness of the home. The legs of the chair were bent and rusty; the vinyl seat was ripped and stained. I felt a quiet presence and pictured family chats around a kitchen table, or an elderly man enjoying the fresh air as he sat on the chair in his backyard.

I began this composition using encaustic paints to create the landscape and shack. I built up layers of color and texture then scrapped away some areas exposing underlying color. Next, I painted on layers of translucent encaustic medium to create a haze and obscure and de-emphasize the shack. I took advantage of the sculptural quality of the encaustic to carve and model the chair in the foreground.

The encaustic medium has allowed me to be more spontaneous and expressive in my art. The ability to sculpt, collage, and transfer imagery has broadened the spectrum of my creative possibilities.

**Sculpture**

Clay is an integral part of my artistic endeavors. I enjoy creating functional pottery such as bowls and platters. However, this media is more valuable to me as another form of conceptual expression. *Drawstring Bag* (Appendix, 8) represents the canvas pouch in which my Italian grandparents stored coins and dollar bills that they would later share with their grandchildren or the tithing basket during Mass. The sculpture is larger than the actual money pouch. By increasing the scale, I wanted to draw close attention to the pouch and its worn fabric and sullied drawstring from years of use.

*Bacala* (Appendix, 9 and 9a) is an example of how I utilize the clay to express and narrate real life events. The sides of the fish were cut out of two slabs of clay. I used newspaper
and masking tape to mold a rounded form which I placed between the two wet slabs to create the belly of the fish. I joined the two slabs around the edges and I added fins to one side. Then, I loosely wrapped the clay in plastic so that it would dry slowly. I needed the clay to be dry enough to carve, yet still wet enough to add sculpted elements. When the clay reached that point, I carved an eye and added texture to the fins, creating a naturalistic version of a fish.

Then, I began work on the reverse, and added symbolic details. I carved an arched hollow into the belly, and created walls and a floor. This compartment would serve as a symbolic catacomb that held a skull and bones. Next, I carved away the surface of the head to reveal the skull bones of the fish. Finally, on the body of the fish, I carved the imagery from my mother’s childhood environs. These images include the gate which led to her ground floor apartment, the aluminum door behind which was the fish market, the bay of Naples, and a crucifix to symbolize her Catholic heritage.

I used a traditional glazing technique to add color and shine to the naturalistic side of the fish. I was concerned about stressing the clay with too many firings, so I fired very slowly. For the symbolic side, I brushed a black underglaze over the surface, and then used a sponge to wash away the excess. The glaze settled into cracks and recesses creating an aged look. The brownish areas were created using diluted coffee applied with a camel hair brush. Lastly, for the base of the sculpture, I used concrete which I manipulated to look like the cobblestone streets I remembered in Italy. A steel rod was used to support the fish on the base.

Icelandic Landscape (Appendix, 10), is a pivotal work because it is the first sculpture I created using natural fibers. Once I learned the technique of making handmade paper, I began to consider the possibilities of creating art with this media. To begin the process, I created many sheets of handmade paper using Cotton Linters, a pulp consisting of short cotton fibers that stick
to the seeds after ginning. These fibers are removed and utilized in paper making pulps. I added natural plant fibers the pulp to for color and texture. These textural sheets reminded me of the Icelandic landscape. I created a rafter-like support using sticks and used cotton string to tie the sticks together. Then, I draped a sheet of handmade paper over the frame allowing it to fall naturally over the edges. As the paper dried, it began to shrink and conform to the stick frame. Next, I created fish shapes using round reeds from the stalks of tall perennial grasses and secured them to the frame with thin copper wire. The base for the work is a piece of slate from slab roofing. It is cold and hard much like the Icelandic landscape.

Generally, when I think about my work, I realize that there is a significant difference between the processes in my sculptures and my paintings. Both of these areas contain symbolic and narrative elements but my paintings are approached intuitively and spontaneously; while my sculptures are planned and rely on technical processes. Both directions allow me to create honest, meaningful work.

Conclusion

The MIS-IAR Program has been instrumental in helping me discover my artistic potential. I began taking classes both to fulfill certification obligations and to procure a slightly better salary and retirement. That was my excuse, anyway. What I really wanted do was to make art again. I did not anticipate the level of education and dedication I would experience with each new class. My instructors created learning atmospheres which generated rapport and thoughtful discussions among the students. They challenged me to think beyond my comfort zone, to explore my motives, and to develop a more meaningful body of work.

Inspired and refreshed by the experience, my teaching has become more meaningful as I
utilize what I have learned in the program to engage and stimulate creativity within my students. As with me, they are realizing that art is much more than replicating imagery. They are learning to search for deeper meaning and to examine more non-traditional ways in which to express their unique voice through art.
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Education:

2013  **Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art**  
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Teaching Experience:

2009-Present  Art Teacher, Renaissance Academy, Virginia Beach, VA

1995-2009  Art Teacher, Center for Effective Learning, Virginia Beach, VA

2000  Art Teacher, First Colonial High School, Virginia Beach, VA

1993-1995  Art Teacher, Educational Development Center, Richmond, VA

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2004  Docent, Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, Virginia Beach, VA

1993-1995  YMCA Summer Arts Coordinator, YMCA, Richmond, VA

Professional Positions:

2010-Present  Media Liaison, Renaissance Academy, Virginia Beach, VA

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2000  Chair, Virginia Beach Middle Schools Youth Art Month Show, Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, Virginia Beach, VA

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1988  Award of Excellence, Student Show, Tidewater Community College, Virginia Beach, VA

**Exhibitions:**

2013  *Challenge Your Circumstances*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, d’ART Center, Norfolk, VA

2012  *Area Variations*, Suffolk Art Gallery, Suffolk, VA

2012  *Summer Invitational*, Virginia Wesleyan College, Virginia Beach, VA

2012  *Teaching Artists Exhibit*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Virginia Beach, VA

1993  *Alice*, Senior Show, Granby Street Gallery, Norfolk, VA