Fluid Realities: A Light on Life's Journey

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Fluid Realities:
A Light on Life’s Journey

A thesis 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

Images of nature and family comprise the gestural and abstracted interpretations of my life events. I use my photographs as inspiration for my work. I fuse layers of color, light, and line into glass and onto wood to suspend a personal memory. I want to capture those moments that flit by in life and envelop them in the media.

In my fused glass work, I manipulate color, light, and line. In these pieces, I layer frits and sheets of glass onto an abstract sculpted relief of fiberglass and fuse them into one thick slab. The sculpted relief creates a textured deflection of light. In each layer of glass, I encapsulate simple line drawings of my family, elements of the landscape, and organic shapes.

In my works on wood, I pour and layer transparent color using acrylic and a water-based polyurethane mixture. I do not fully cover the natural grain of the wood but allow it to contribute to the imagery. I repeat linear marks and create layers of texture using a palette knife, and attach mud and caulk to the natural surface. I further manipulate the surfaces by sanding and carving to express my emotions and memories. The layered media symbolically references layers of time in my personal journey.
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Introduction

I am in awe of the light bulb moment, that moment when the revelation of a new image or understanding is captured amid my everyday experiences. As a mother and teacher, I witness that moment in the gleam of a child’s eye. As an artist, the enlightened moment occurs when an image from my past experiences flows onto a surface with intuitive direction, allowing the process to become an important element of the final work.

As a child of two teachers, life-long learning was ingrained into every facet of my being: academically, spiritually, and artistically. My parents always encouraged my creativity. They provided me with endless stacks of treasured drawing paper and encouraged exploration outdoors. My family traveled across the country every summer. These travels immersed us in nature as we camped and explored new landscapes along the way. I vividly remember a cross-country trip we took when I was four. I woke up just as the sun was rising; the entire desert landscape filled the front of the van’s windshield. The grandiose array of colors flooded the dark plains. That brilliant sunrise was contrasted by the horizon in the west, erupting in a lightning storm with deep blue billowing clouds. Experiences such as this instilled in me the belief that God’s canvas is beautiful. This canvas was made for me to absorb, experience, and respond to in a creative manner.

Those early experiences led me to earn a degree in art education, at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), with a minor in photography. Leaning in to see an image emerge from the developer was like reliving the actual moment that was captured on film, as every tiny, silver value was revealed in the developer tray. I documented everything I could,
from nature to my family. I even experimented with abstracting nature with infrared photography to reveal its beauty in alternative views.

After earning my teaching certificate, I was immediately offered and took a position in Hanover County, Virginia. The next year, I was hired to open the brand new Oak Knoll Middle School in Mechanicsville, Virginia. This school has been my creative canvas for the last fourteen years, not merely a place of work. That canvas has included coaching on athletic fields, curating art fair displays, designing athletic logos, and creating annual play sets. As a wife, mother of four, coach, and teacher, time was always divided and sub-divided. The years started to slip by fast, and being a practicing artist had always taken a back seat to the moments I devoted to children as both a mother and teacher.

Celebrating my children’s and my students’ light bulb moments eventually inspired me to enroll in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program at VCU. This program nurtured my desire to learn more, introduced me to new techniques and media, and allowed me to collaborate with colleagues. I chose to focus on crafts where I made kiln-formed glass paintings. The process I worked with in glass, with layers of pure color, led me to choose another focus area in painting. My imagery flows from one piece and one media to another. In both glass and paint, I build pieces through experimentation from conception to a fluid reality.

**Aesthetics**

My photos are a starting point of my process, and I use them as references in making my glass and wood pieces. My photographs are composed with attention placed on natural light and texture in the scene. Sometimes, I adjust exposures to isolate and emphasize the contour of
figures and objects. Later, in the studio, I often manipulate images with computer software. I do this to heighten my memory of the event or location.

Growing up, it was a joy to revisit precious family albums, sharing the stories behind each shot. There is a photograph of my older sister at the age of three, scowling as she covered her bowl of M&Ms. I innocently look at the bowl with my hand out. This photo illustrates the universal story of the big sister versus little sister relationship. This type of family photograph influenced my choice to take countless, informal, and sequential shots of my children and extended family’s evolving relationships. So, I document and am inspired by my family in typical situations. I cull from my family photos memories such as in *Photographic Resource 1* (Appendix, 1). Here, I wanted to illustrate the relationship between father and son as communicated by the proximity of my husband to my son. The saturation of color from the sunset frames the quiet scenario. In the second photo, *Photographic Resource 2*, (Appendix, 2), I wanted to capture the expanse of the water and blue mountains in contrast to the small presence of family. There is an intimate connection of family that seems to fit seamlessly into expanse of the lake and mountain scene. These photographs are a starting point to a precious story line that continues to develop as a body of work that communicates the universal story of family and nature.

My extended family reconnects at traditional outdoor places each year, providing a timeline for changes in the family as well as the environment. These scenarios provide a myriad of colors and textures that I capture on film. Typically, when I photograph these events, I slip away to investigate the land, stand in the sun, and listen to the sounds. I create my compositions by first taking pictures of the surrounding landscape. I photograph from different vantage points and allow time to elapse. By recording the environment on film, I celebrate the changes of color
on the landscape. I carry my camera with me to catch interactions, such as parents and children, a volleyball game at sunset, or siblings and cousins playing.

My passion is making new discoveries in my life experiences. The elements of both my family and familiar landscapes intermix as the subjects of my work, such as seeing a sunrise as a new scene unfolding with diverse colors, textures, and light. Time is imprinted in my work and memories are imbedded in my abstract interpretations. Through my layering process and chosen media, I want to unveil my personal response to family, place, and time. I want my body of work to communicate the universal story of family and nature and make a connection with the viewer’s similar life experiences.

Influences

The photographs I use as references for my work are often sequential, film-like shots. Each shot tells one part of an unfolding story. One pivotal experience in my storytelling was in a middle school enrichment class where I took documentary-style photos in the city of Richmond. Documenting with the camera led me to Dorothea Lange’s (1895-1965) documentary-style photography as an influence on my approach. Lange’s influential imagery, depicting the plight of migrant workers and other Americans affected by the Great Depression, influenced my storytelling. Lange crafted an emotional response by cropping out unnecessary elements as she framed a scene. Her iconic images allowed the viewer to experience the personal distress that engulfs her subjects. For example, in Migrant Mother (1936), Lange creates an intimate composition of mother and child coupled with the vivid texture and facial expressions that communicates hopelessness and despair. That story, told on film by Lange, captures the essence of life events during the Depression and evokes an emotional response from the viewer even
decades later. I am influenced by Lange’s poignant storylines. However, in contrast to her subject matter, I document uplifting and pleasing memories in my personal life.

When my photographs shifted to being used as digital references for my work, color became an element to communicate emotion. At this point, I began to study Edward Hopper’s (1882-1967) use of color to evoke emotion in a scene. Hopper was influenced by Impressionism but is identified as having his own unique style. In *Cobb’s Barn and Distant Houses* (1930), his brush strokes swiftly define the passing light as it illuminates texture. The snapshot of a mundane scene of old buildings becomes poetic with his use of highly saturated color that captures the time of day. His lighting allows the viewer to take notice of a familiar American landscape. I also depict scenes that can be recognized as familiar and universal.

Another artist that influences my work is a contemporary, local painter Ron Johnson. Johnson achieves luminescent color by mixing small amounts of acrylic color with water-based polyurethane and applying this mixture in layers. Johnson begins his systematic process by building and priming a braced, wooden panel. Next, he attaches one-quarter to one-half inch synthetic ribbon to the surface. Multiple ribbons create lines that flow across and off the panel in an organic manner and intersect to create variable sized, curved shapes. After applying the ribbon, he pours and allows the paint to drip over the sides of the panel. When a layer of color is dry, he attaches more ribbon to the surface and he pours another transparent color on the previous layer. In the last step, he removes all of the ribbon. Some of the ribbon reveals early layers that expose his process and the layering of pigment. Studying Johnson’s work showed me a layering approach that I used on my glass that carries over into my paintings.

My techniques and processes in glass and paint have been influenced by Lange, Hopper, and Johnson. Like Lange, I captured stories in snapshots that I used as references, but I
communicated uplifting stories of family. Like Hopper, I absorbed and responded to nature and expressed my feelings through the use of color. Lastly, I employed Hopper’s approach to landscapes and combined it with Johnson’s process of layering color. The layering process allows texture and color to become key elements of the work.

In Glass

When I work in glass, I begin with a digital photo. I use computer software to manipulate and separate spaces, shapes, and colors into layers. Each layer will be replicated in colored frits on a separate sheet of glass. In addition to painting with the frits, gestural lines are drawn on one layer. For example, in the triptych Sunset at Santa Rosa (Appendix, 3), I used black enamel paint for the line. This enamel was mixed with gum arabic and fixed to the glass in a low-fire (low heat) process. After lines were painted and the enamel was dry, I used a sgraffito (scratching) technique for added visual interest.

Each of the three layers of colored frit and enamel lines were created and fired separately. Using a frit sifter, I applied powdered glass to the bottom two layers of glass. This created visual depth by overlapping transparent color. I then stacked all layers together and fused them into one piece. This process was the same for each of the three pieces in this work.

In the next triptych, Greenbrier River (Appendix, 4), I again used black enamel, linear elements to represent the river rocks and the figures. In the separation process, I used five sheets of glass instead of three. The background and foreground were doubled, using two layers of glass each. Using additional layers of glass makes the bottom layer seem to recede further into the background. This extra layering of glass allowed for the illusion of a greater visual depth.
In the top layers, I used metallic mica powders. These powders added a bright reflective quality that I used to invite the viewer to investigate the imagery more closely, making the middle ground more apparent. Once the compositional layers were finalized, I stacked the five separate sheets of glass and fired them into one unit.

In the next triptych, I focused on color and created a minimized composition of a seascape. In *Placid Ocean* (Appendix, 5) I used a reactive glass for the sky area. This type of glass changes to a brilliant transparent color, depending on how high the heat is used and how many times the glass is fired. I wanted to make the sky a brilliant and luminous yellow. To create this effect, I had to plan the process differently than previous pieces. After testing the glass for color, I decided that one mid-fire (medium heat) would be used to produce an intense yellow while keeping the sky transparent. On the ocean portion, I sifted heavier amounts of blue and blue-green frits, and I cut lines into the darker values that were layered first and sifted lighter values in those lines creating a sense of movement and depth in the water.

I chose to frame my glass pieces using a thick, wooden border. The surface was roughhewn and the pieces were joined in simple butt joints. The frame was intended to be a contrast to the intimate, delicate glass paintings while keeping with the natural elements of the environments that are depicted. I chose a textured, tea-stained linen as the ground surface for the glass pieces. Finally, I attached one-inch spacers to the glass to lift the paintings off the linen. This framing method allowed light to easily travel through each piece.

I capture ephemeral moments of family and environment in the medium of glass. My photographs are inspiration for imagery but the color and line become the focus of the composition. My memories are expressed in the process of working with the layering of glass.
The focus in glass shifted from representational imagery to emotional interpretations of landscape and figures, and became the stimulus for my work in acrylics.

On Wood

My transition from glass to wood was inspired by Gulf Coast waters in Santa Rosa, Florida. For the triptych *Emerald Trinity* (Appendix, 6), I carefully chose a sheet of wood. I wanted to use the natural grain and the texture of the wood to mimic water and sky. First, I thinned acrylic paints with water and applied different values of color to stain the wood. Then, using acrylic and glue, I added thick and thin black lines to define the waves and clouds. Next, using a palette knife, I added sheetrock mud to add a rough texture to the water. To contrast with the water, I added thinned, clear caulk to the sky. I sanded back into the wood to expose the natural color of the wood and built more dense areas of paint in a few areas. I continued to manipulate the surface, and over a two-week period, I poured on thin layers of clear acrylic with minimal pigment. Additionally, I painted back into the piece and sanded the surface to a matte finish.

Seeing the effects of the fluid nature of the acrylic and how the color traveled on the surface prompted me to experiment further in *Timeless Under Current* (Appendix, 7). For this work I used leaves from my parents’ gingko tree. These leaves have personal significance to me for several reasons. Ginkgos are some of the oldest surviving trees and are traced back to prehistoric times. These living fossils have survived through the ages. I began working with ginkgo leaves during a time when I was getting ready to donate my kidney to my father. I had been painting at my parents’ house that fall and when looking out of the window the brilliant, yellow leaves caught my eye. I went outside to collect them and remembered how smooth and
calm they looked on the heavily textured ground. The leaves also made me remember the pictures I have of my children playing in the golden bed of leaves. They threw them in the air and let the vivid leaves drift back to the ground, while dancing in and out of them. In that time of pending mortality, the golden leaves came to represent the preciousness of time. So, in my painting, I arranged the gingko leaves to look as if they were dancing across the painting. I wanted to connect the memory of my children’s joyful dance with the gift of continued life that my father received with my donated kidney.

With those memories as inspiration, I began the painting in a range of yellow, horizontal linear marks. These marks were layered into six to seven coats of clear acrylic. On the bottom, I allowed the color to run without manipulating it. The board was warped and I let gravity determine the flow of color. On the top half of the painting, I manipulated the color, value, and surface to mimic the flow of water in a stream. As the layers were poured thicker, the acrylic dried slower. This drying time allowed me to make circular ripple-like patterns. This pattern and transparent blue pigment represents mountain spring water (at one of my family’s traditional places).

Painting circular ripples led me to see a pattern left on some leftover construction material from renovations to our first home. The old shelving board was sturdy so it was reused as a mudding tray to fix holes in the wall and to set the paint cans on. The paint cans left circular impressions of dripped paint on the board. As I ran my hands across the texture of the wood, the memories of the first fifteen years of our marriage, raising our little ones, and literally making a home came flooding back to me. So, my next piece was inspired by this old board and my memories. I began Circular Bond (Appendix, 8) by adding mud with a palette knife to the two circles I saw on the old board. Then, I smoothed some areas with a damp rag and sanded back
into the wood in other areas. The contrast of rough versus smooth symbolized the journey of my marriage. The circles illustrate the paths of two individuals coming together as one, yet retaining their individuality.

The confidence of creating these paintings led me to make my next piece. The composition in *Weathering the Path* (Appendix, 9) was inspired by a long-exposure photograph taken while riding down an old country road where I grew up. There was a tornado warning, so the light was eerie and the clouds were rolling rapidly in the sky. The road looked illuminated as the light reflected off the wet surface, in contrast to the dark woods along the road. I decided to work quickly with the materials and keep the sense of motion of the original time-lapsed photograph. So, I mixed black acrylic with sheetrock mud and applied it with a palette knife. I kept the surface in low relief because I wanted the natural surface of the wooden panel to be a part of the painting. All of the paint used for the woods and sky was thinned using a matte medium which contrasted with the road where I applied clear acrylic. The light, reflective road symbolized God illuminating my life’s journey.

My work with acrylic paint emerged from the experience of layering color and line in glass. Both media originated from my strong connection to family, nature, and spirituality. Imagery developed from captured memories and an interaction with process. The gestural lines and color express imagery in both mediums. Working with glass and transparent layers of acrylic revealed my emotional response to the world, revealing an enlightened moment between artist and process.
Conclusion

I enrolled in the MIS-IAR Program intending to add processes and skills to my instruction in the classroom. I also wanted to fill my personal artistic gap that started to widen while being a dedicated mother and teacher. My coursework built upon my foundation of skills while challenging me with more advanced techniques. I now incorporate processes and portfolio examples into my classroom instruction. Students witness my personal learning process, and as a result, see value in the foundation that they are establishing as beginning artists.

As I developed my personal aesthetics, my focus areas of kiln-formed glass and painting evolved as parallel processes that flowed from one work to the next. That natural progression was the result of the structure and collaboration within the MIS-IAR Program. The program has enabled me to continue the development of the skills that enhanced my classroom instruction, and has given me the confidence to pursue my own artistic path.
Bibliography


Forrester, Gillian, ed. *Rebecca Salter: Into the Light of Things*. London, UK: Yale University Press, 2011. Published in conjunction with the exhibition “Into the Light of Things” shown at the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, CT.


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NETA-GRACE COLEEN SHEPHERD

EDUCATION

2014 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA (Crafts and Painting)

1999 Bachelor of Arts Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA (Art Education, Photography)

CERTIFICATION

2000-Present Art, K-12

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

2000-Present Art Teacher, Oak Knoll Middle School, Mechanicsville, VA

2007 Art Teacher, Arts and Music Camp, Northside Baptist, Mechanicsville, VA

2005 Art Workshop Instructor, JAB Theatre Company, Mechanicsville, VA

RELATED EXPERIENCE

2001-Present Graphic Artist-Athletic Apparel, Oak Knoll Middle School, Mechanicsville, VA

2008-2012 Girls Softball Head Coach, Oak Knoll Middle School, Mechanicsville, VA

2003-2012 Girls Tennis Head Coach, Oak Knoll Middle School, Mechanicsville, VA

2006-2011 Art Director, CASTLE Productions, Oak Knoll Middle School, Mechanicsville, VA

2002-2005 Set Consultant, CASTLE Productions, Oak Knoll Middle School, Mechanicsville, VA

2001-2003 Girls Softball Head Coach, Oak Knoll Middle School, Mechanicsville, VA
AWARDS AND GRANTS

2013  
**Published Student Work**, *Virginia Art Educator Association (VAEA) Quarterly*, Richmond, VA

2010  
**Mechanicsville Teacher of the Year Award**, Oak Knoll Middle School, Mechanicsville, VA

2001-2002  
**Published Student Work**, *VAEA Quarterly*, Richmond, VA

2001-2002  
**Partners in the Arts Grant**, *History Through the Arts*, Oak Knoll Middle School, Mechanicsville, VA

2001  
**New Teacher of the Year Award**, Chickahominy Middle School, Mechanicsville, VA

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2014  
*Fluid Realities: A Light on Life’s Journey*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, at Gallery Flux, Ashland, VA

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2014  
**Educators As Artists**, Crossroads Art Center, Richmond, VA

2014  
**Artists Who Teach**, Hanover County School Board Office, Ashland, VA

2013  
**Artists Who Teach**, Hanover County School Board Office, Ashland, VA

2002  
**Youth Art Month Exhibition**, Oak Knoll Middle School, Mechanicsville, VA

2001  
**Artists Who Teach**, Hanover County School Board Office, Ashland, VA

1999  
**Undergraduate Photography**, Photography Department, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA