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Conversing with Nature

Hope Harding

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Conversing with Nature

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

I reference nature in my mixed media works that primarily include painting and glass. My process is intuitive and the materials guide me each step of the way. I create textural surfaces that are intended to reflect and mimic nature. I often add found objects to my work that I have picked up along a walk. The objects capture a memory for me, and add visual and textural elements.

I want to evoke a familiar feeling or sense of place in each piece by suggesting sensory experiences, such as the dusty earth, the wind against the skin, or the smell of salt water. I would like people to be drawn in and to look closer in hopes that a familiar feeling or sense of place is evoked in them.
Conversing with Nature

Introduction

My love and curiosity for nature began in childhood as I spent most of my free time climbing trees, playing in creek beds, and watching insects. I loved exploration and I found my safe place in nature. It gave me an embracing sense of comfort and peace. In my mixed media, painting and craft pieces, nature is the primary theme.

As a visual learner, art has been my way of grasping ideas as well as expressing them. I have vivid childhood memories of making art in school. I credit my elementary and high school art teachers for being an influence on my passion for art. Therefore, in college I earned my Bachelor of Fine Arts in Art Education and began my teaching career. Later, I was encouraged by my colleagues to apply to the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). I had taken recertification classes and it made sense to carry those credits over towards a graduate degree. The Program has been a wonderful opportunity to meet other art educators and develop my own work. I have also used learned techniques in my classroom. The best part of this process has been learning to carve out time for my own work. As an educator, my busy schedule often distracted from setting aside time to create.

My areas of concentration in the program were painting and craft studies. The skills I acquired in my painting helped me to express my responses to nature. In my craft work, I focused on glasswork and learned a multitude of techniques, and incorporated glass into my paintings. I also used glass pieces in making sculptural, three-dimensional objects. This helped me to merge painting with crafts. Had I not gone through the Program, I may not have discovered these methods of expressing myself.
Process of Creation

I find contentment in nature along a dirt road or on a sandy beach. To express my impressions of these types of places, I create abstracted and textural compositions that break free from literal depictions yet have a connection to nature. At times, my approach to a piece is prompted by poetic ideas or writings. I use paint, glass, paper, and found objects in a variety of compositional structures. My palette typically consists of earth tones or cool colors which reference land, air, and sea.

I work instinctively without intention towards a preconceived end result. Typically, I work on a small scale and on more than one piece at a time. This assures a sense of continuity throughout my work even though each work is a unique endeavor. I avoid a sense of preciousness with each piece. This strategy makes it possible for me to freely experiment and discover new avenues and produce new results for my ideas. Experimentation allows me to take risks, and taking risks allows me to grow as an artist by discovering new ways to mix media or merge techniques.

My process of experimentation is the focus of my work. It is the process that creates visually interesting layers and textures in the surfaces. As I am creating a piece, I use various materials and convey my intuitive responses to place, time, and nature. It is through my process that I allow the surfaces to summon the viewer to recall a memory, to take a closer look, and to want to touch the surface. I want them to have a curiosity about how each piece was created and what materials were used.

My work incorporates fused glass pieces within paintings, prints, and three-dimensional sculptural pieces. I use materials that are atypical in combination. For instance, I use small fused and inclusion glass pieces in the surface of my paintings. The challenge is to unify the
glass with the canvas. I also include found objects, which occasionally drive a piece’s composition. Other times, an object is an afterthought. My overall goal is to have cohesive compositions built from multiple materials.

My techniques include scraping, pouring, spraying, carving, attaching, stamping, and layering. I may begin by layering modeling paste and using a nearby tool to add texture or scrape into the surface before it dries. Usually, I build up the surface as well as the sides of the canvas. I also accept and include unexpected results, which add to the visual complexity of a piece. My process allows each piece to evolve differently resulting in a variety of outcomes.

Influences

Abstract Expressionism was a movement in the 1940s and 1950s that incorporated elements of self-expression and abstraction. An artwork became an arena for creative activity. In other words, the process of creativity was the focus of the work. This movement and its philosophy have influenced my approach.

Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) was an American painter and well known Abstract Expressionist. In his work, he would lay out large mural-sized canvas on the floor of his studio. He would then drip, throw, or pour paint as he moved around the canvas. He was said to have introduced the concept of *all-over painting*. This approach involved making a work with no focal point or positional orientation. Pollock spoke of how he was unaware of the physical process of creating while involved in a painting. His movements became spontaneous and instinctual. He blocked his conscious thoughts and responded to the canvas, implements, and materials automatically. This creative approach is known as *automatism*. I recalled these same feelings and used my intuition when placing marks onto a canvas. In this way, like Pollock, I
allowed the paintings to organically develop.

Pollock left objects in his work as a way of expressing himself. Once the painting dried, the object was forever embedded into the piece. He once said, “I prefer sticks, trowels, knives, and dripping fluid paint or a heavy impasto with sand, broken glass, and other foreign matter added” (Frank, 109). I too have incorporated foreign matter such as string, glass, rocks, feathers, and lint in a heavy impasto. There is something exciting about including an object that is not expected in a painting.

When beginning a piece, Pollock did not work from drawings or sketches; instead, he painted directly onto the canvas. I have adopted this approach in my own work. He spoke of how he loosely controlled the paint by dripping it from cans or sticks. I also use unconventional tools from knives to sticks or whatever may be close at hand in the studio. I select my tools according to how they may change the composition just as Pollock selected a paint can over a stick or brush because of the way he could uniquely thicken or thin a line of paint. However, I maintain more control than Pollock did because I work on a smaller scale.

Like Pollock, I believe it is more important to be involved in the process of art making rather than the outcome. He took chances by relying on automatic responses from his unconscious mind. Though aspects of my process involve conscious application much of it is also a form of automatism.

**Paintings**

In my body of work there is a connection to nature. It is through nature that I connect to a higher consciousness resulting in a state of bliss. In this state, I am able to create pieces intuitively, in keeping with the approach of automatism. Nature nurtures my mind and body and
serves as inspiration to my art.

As I responded to my experiences in nature, I began working with additive mediums such as modeling paste, fiber paste, and matte medium. Additive mediums allowed me to manipulate the surfaces of my work. It was through the use of matte medium that I was able to get a translucent effect in the shades of blue in the mixed media painting, *Ethereal* (Appendix, 1). In this piece, I expressed my thoughts about a spiritual world and a physical earth. I chose a cool palette to suggest air and sea, and fiber paste to emulate the lightness of clouds. By using an angular brush, I was able to reference the gentleness of waves in an ocean. Then, I carved feather-like images into the media to further suggest the delicateness of nature.

Oftentimes, I have been on a walk and picked up a feather along the way. I have embedded images of feathers in my work as symbol for nature. A feather can suggest flight, freedom, home, and hope. As the nineteenth-century poet, Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), wrote in a poem, “Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul, and sings the tune without the words, and never stops at all” (Johnson, 116). It was this poetic line that supported my use of the feather in many of my pieces.

I also used an image of a feather in the piece, *Luminous Feather* (Appendix, 2). In creating this piece, I applied a thin wash of brown acrylic paint and allowed parts of the canvas to show through. While the canvas was lying flat on a table, I splattered the wash in some areas using a toothbrush. Next, I brushed on a thin layer of iridescent paint and drew a feather image into the wet paint with a scraping tool. In this work, I was able to reference nature through a layering process and a spontaneous drawing of a feather.

In the next painting, *Ode to Nature* (Appendix, 3), I created texture on the picture plane and along the sides of a dimensional canvas. On both, I manipulated modeling paste with a knife
as well as my fingers. On one side, I intentionally left fingerprints; and along two other sides, I placed a leaf into the wet paste (Appendix, 3a). Once the paste was dry, I brushed on a thin layer of brown wash allowing it to seep into cracks, giving the piece an aged look. On the picture plane, I used a brush to draw a dark brown spiral in the center of the format and then added layers of wash to soften the edges of the image. Next, I placed raffia (palm tree fibers) in a spiral configuration in the center of the piece. Then, I applied thin tissue paper over the raffia. This helped unify the textured surface, spiral imagery, and the raffia.

My paintings are inspired by nature and the objects used in my work. I work on the surface and sides of a canvas support. In doing this, I want to deemphasize boundaries. I also frequently minimize a focal point. The abstraction in my work is intended to allow me to freely express my responses to nature, and allow the viewer room for their own interpretations.

**Glass**

Similar to painting, glass can be layered, blended, or combined with other materials such as inclusions. It can be layered in transparent or opaque ways, just like paint. I also discovered ways to create textured surfaces that emulate land, air, and water.

One of the techniques I used was that of fusing glass in a kiln. I later took scrap samples of the fired glass and collaged them onto sheets of glass. For example, in the piece *Transference* (Appendix, 4), I chose to begin with a square-shaped glass piece because it contained swirls of black pigment. The swirls reminded me of elements in nature, such as air or water. On the bottom third of this piece of glass, I intuitively manipulated frit (crushed pieces of glass) into five circular forms. Before firing, I wedged a decorative gold leaf in the center and in between the swirled glass and a clear piece of glass cut to the same size. Then, I fired the piece in a kiln
so it would become fully fused. Due to oxidation while being fired, the gold leaf turned blue. In addition, an air bubble resulted on top of the leaf. These unexpected results from the firing process added to the complexity of the piece. After placing another gold decorative leaf under the fired piece I adhered the glass piece on the top two-thirds of a rectangular sheet of clear glass.

In the next phase, I placed three narrow rectangular-shaped glass pieces in horizontal rows below the square-shaped glass. Under these, in order to enhance the depth of the piece, I placed fibers of black embroidery thread before gluing the glass pieces down. I chose black embroidery thread to complement the swirling black lines. In this piece, I used glass along with objects and fibers as a metaphor for lines and shapes found in nature.

Photographs of gardens and parks can sometimes inspire my works. However, elements that I often notice in nature are feathers, and subsequently, birds. These are both poetic references to the environment. In *Bird* (Appendix, 5), I used a silhouetted photograph of a bird as the focus. To create the sepia image, I fired a transferred image onto glass using a specialized ink jet printer. To present the piece, I glued a twig to the top of the glass and wrapped raffia around a wire hanger. The raffia and twig serve as additional symbols of nature.

In *Continuity* (Appendix, 6), I found myself inspired by the ocean. I wanted this work to have a feeling of movement, such as an ocean’s tide. To create a gestural, lyrical feel, I blended cool colors of fine powder and medium-sized frit. Using a sifter, my hands, and tweezers, I placed the colors on a sheet of glass in wavy, horizontal sections. I blended purple with blue to suggest ocean waves. When fired, the fine frit created smooth, flat areas while the medium frit created a bumpy surface. These contrasting textural areas added visual interest. After framing the piece in a natural wood frame found at an antique store, I attached a frit infused and casted
spiral form to the upper left-hand face of the frame. The spiral shape suggests sea shells which ties to the ocean theme.

I am intrigued with the diverse ways in which glass can be fused, painted on, and collaged. Through controlled and uncontrolled movements, I also used a variety of approaches and tools. By having a range of options in creating glass pieces, I was able to spontaneously express my connection to nature.

**Mixed Media**

I have used elements of nature as my muse in paintings and glass. I also referenced nature in my mixed media work. I found methods to include glass within my canvas paintings as well as in more dimensional work. In the ways that land, air, and sea coincide, I wanted my mixed media pieces to be unified into cohesive visual statements.

In *Breaking Through* (Appendix, 7), the fused glass was created and fired first and inspired the painting. The colorful dots on the surface of the glass were made from stringers, which are spaghetti-like strands of glass. I grouped a bunch of them together and fired it into a long bar. Later, I snipped the bar into smaller round pieces. Then, I placed these pieces onto the surface of a rectangular-shaped sheet of glass covered with powdered frit. I fired this piece and applied the fused glass to the surface of a painting on canvas.

I began painting the surface of the canvas with modeling paste and blue acrylic paint. On the left side of the painting, I applied crackle paste to suggest cracks found in dry patches of earth. On the right side, I drew lines into the wet paint with a toothpick to suggest other designs found in nature. The fused glass on the left implies something breaking through the surface, such as new growth breaking through ground. After attaching the fused glass to canvas, I
applied paint to the edges of the glass to seamlessly merge it with the painted surface. I wanted to create a sense of continuity between the diverse media and surface textures.

Additive media creates a variety of textures and visual interest so I continued to explore these materials. I created the piece *Layers Lie Within* (Appendix, 8) by first applying crackle paste to the canvas. I manipulated the paste to give the surface a weathered appearance. Then, I took an irregular piece of glass and using etching cream I stamped a leaf shape onto the surface. Once dried, I wiped away the cream and used green colored pencil to enhance the leaf-like images. I glued this irregular shaped glass piece to the bottom half of the canvas surface with modeling paste. Next, I applied brown-tinted modeling paste around the glass to camouflauge the edges. Once dry, I dabbed a darker shade of acrylic paint onto the canvas and glass with a sea sponge. I wanted to unify these two materials into a cohesive visual statement about nature.

In the next piece, I returned to the symbol of the feather. For me, it has become a symbol of nature and implies hopefulness, freedom, and especially home. In the sculptural piece, *Hope is...* (Appendix, 9), my intention was to incorporate glass with a container of some kind which would represent home. I found a two-sectioned box at an antique store and stained it with a watered down tint of brown acrylic paint. I oriented the box vertically with the larger section above the smaller. Next, I cut a clear, unfired piece of glass to fit across three-fourths of the top section of the box. I left the bottom fourth of this section open so that I could access the space later. While preparing the glass itself, I used etching cream and a brush to create textured lines. Once dry, I washed the cream off and used shades of yellow and brown colored pencils over top the etched areas to add some coloration. Once the glass piece was prepared, I placed a photo transfer image of a bird on the top of the glass. Below the bird, and in the open space below the glass, I placed a small bird’s nest that I had found on a walk as a symbol for home. Inside the
nest I placed a feather.

I wanted the bottom compartment of the box to conceptually connect with the top. So, I cut a piece of glass for that area. Again, I made sure to cut the piece slightly smaller and placed a skeleton key in the opening as another symbol for home. Next, I used a dremel tool to etch an image of a feather onto the glass. Then, I rubbed black acrylic paint inside the grooves and wiped the surface clean. On transfer paper, I used a copy machine to print the words from Emily Dickinson’s poem, *Hope is the thing with feathers* (Johnson, 116). I placed this glass piece over the bottom, smaller opening.

Lastly, I used colored pencils to further mark up the sides of the box and sponged on white and yellow acrylic paint to represent bird droppings. I wanted the box to look like something a bird would have actually lived in. This piece is presented as a stand alone sculpture. Sticks were attached along the top of the piece to symbolize the environment in which birds would be found.

While in the process of creating, I try to clear my mind in order to intuitively and spontaneously work with my materials. As I work, I pull from my palette of paint, glass, images, and objects the elements that have become symbols of nature to me. As I respond through these expressions and manipulation of materials, I am able to relay my responses to and observations of nature.

**Conclusion**

Throughout the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Program at Virginia Commonwealth University, I have gained knowledge and inspiration from fellow students and instructors. The processes and techniques I experimented with allowed me to
further explore media in my work and in my classroom instruction. I have used some of the painting and texture techniques with my students. My abstract and expressionistic pieces have allowed me to convey my connections with nature to the viewer. I intend to continue to explore and challenge myself as I work in painting and glass.
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