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The Path Is A Circle

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The Path Is A Circle

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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The Path Is A Circle

While the pastoral environment that surrounds my studio is inspirational in itself, my treescapes and organic abstractions are reflections of referential places experienced along my life's path. Considering the constant onslaught of information in our increasingly rushed society, I hope my work, influenced by the natural world, may allow the viewer to slow down briefly and live in the moment.

The Path Is A Circle

Introduction

My father and I made a deal when I was a senior in high school: if I went to a liberal arts college for my undergraduate education, he would help me go to art school later in life. Eight years later, in the summer of 2002, I began the journey toward my Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (M.I.S.) with Virginia Commonwealth University's Off-Campus Graduate Art Program. What began as merely a teaching re-certification class evolved into an opportunity to pursue a life-long goal: to establish myself as a working artist. Even so, it would be another eighteen months until I would take my next class. Life has a funny way of bringing us back to our roots; my final studio class in this program brought me back to the same high school I attended when I made this arrangement with my father.

Personal Aesthetics

In college, my passion for printmaking was fueled by my love of textures and layers in art. The downside of printmaking was my exposure to harmful chemicals. My husband and I met during his cancer treatment for a malignant brain tumor while we were both in college. His cancer remission, my daughter's birth, and my own concern for the environment inspired me to pursue new non-toxic materials in painting and mixed-media work. During this program, I worked with acrylics for the first time and discovered a way to create visual layers in my work with computer emulsion transfers. My love for paper

led naturally to making handmade art books while another long-buried interest in textiles and fiber arts also re-emerged.

Answering The Voice Within

My first class was a summer painting class with Kurt Godwin and I produced some acceptable landscapes, but I was not happy painting them. I didn't want to make mediocre, meaningless art yet found it very difficult to paint anything that did not look like one of my elementary art lesson examples. Landscapes were not the right subject matter for me. Standing outside with a brush in my hand, I felt like I was supposed to be painting like one of the "Old Masters" or Impressionists and that was not what I wanted to be doing. I spent a great deal of time in that class feeling paralyzed by my own inner critic. After our class ended that summer, I visited Godwin's show, *Twelve Keys and the Glass House*, at the McLean Project for the Arts. His layering of images within his paintings, splattered and dripped paint, and large-scale was what I had been trying unsuccessfully to create in my own work. Standing in that gallery I realized that my days as a painter were just beginning.

My next class with Warren Corrado brought me back into the printmaking studio where I thought I would rediscover the same passion that I previously had for printmaking. Printmaking lacked the spontaneity that I now craved. I no longer had the patience to work through all of the meticulous steps required by printmaking and I still had not developed a focused theme for my work.

I found what I was looking for during my third class, a mixed-media and computer transfer course with Bob Worthy. I was able to combine layers, textures, and think outside of the box with media I had never used before. I found a quotation on the internet by the author Barbara Ueland that was helpful: "(w)e are always afraid to start something that we want to make very good, true, and serious." I wrote this quotation on my studio wall as a daily reminder to push through and just start working.[1] I had to ask myself what do I love and from where do I draw my strength. The answers -- family, relationships, and nature -- became the catalyst for all of my work.

Painting

My fourth class in the M.I.S. program was painting with John Figura. It was in this course I finally began to develop a focused body of work. I grew up in a neighborhood called *Bellevue Forest*, a community known for its surrounding oak, tulip poplar, sugar gum maple, cherry, and beech trees. My home and studio are also surrounded by woods and open fields. These pastoral and arboreal environments have had a tremendous impact on my work.

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[1] The Painter's Keys: Community for Artists official Web site, "Art Quotations: Fear," http://www.painterskeys.com.

Figure 1. *Pilgrimage*, acrylic on canvas, 40"x60", 2005.

I focus on trees in my painting and consider my subject matter to be *treescapes* as opposed to **landscapes in the traditional sense. I** regard them as hybrids: a process using tree sketches and photos combined with brightly colored backgrounds created by layering paint and scraping it with those fake plastic credit cards that come in the mail. These cards are wonderful tools not only for scraping paint but also serve as an ironic reminder of our consumer-driven society and how quickly we replace nature with man-made materials.

My treescapes have three visual components that connect them: calling attention to detail by showing natural subject matter in its still state, flattening the image into a silhouette, and introducing fluid lines. I started my series of treescapes working on 30"x

40" canvases and was encouraged by Figura to work bigger. By combining two 30"x 40" canvases I created a diptych (see Figure 1, *Pilgrimage*) which led to building my own large-scale canvases which were much more satisfying on which to work.

As a former printmaker, I admire and am influenced by Japanese Ukyo-e (woodblock) prints for their large flat areas of color and their use of a bold outlines. These prints were most prolific during the early 1600s through the late 1800s and capture nature in its still state while emphasizing beauty. I flattened my trees into simplified silhouettes and used contrasting color fields to achieve this look in my own paintings. My favorite season is winter when the bare branches are silhouetted against the sky and layered with snow and ice. This influence is most obvious in the painting *Spiritual Sojourn* (Figure 2). It has the Asian aesthetic of "less is more" and was a very spiritual painting for me to create.

Figure 2. *Spiritual Sojourn*, acrylic on canvas, 48"x72", 2005.

Eventually, I asked myself how I could push the envelope further and thought of how Jackson Pollock (1912- 1956) and Jasper Johns (b.1930) used unorthodox painting devices. I created my painting *Timberline* (Figure 3) by pouring and throwing paint on a black-gessoed canvas, and by using a tree branch as my paintbrush to create the illusion of woods.

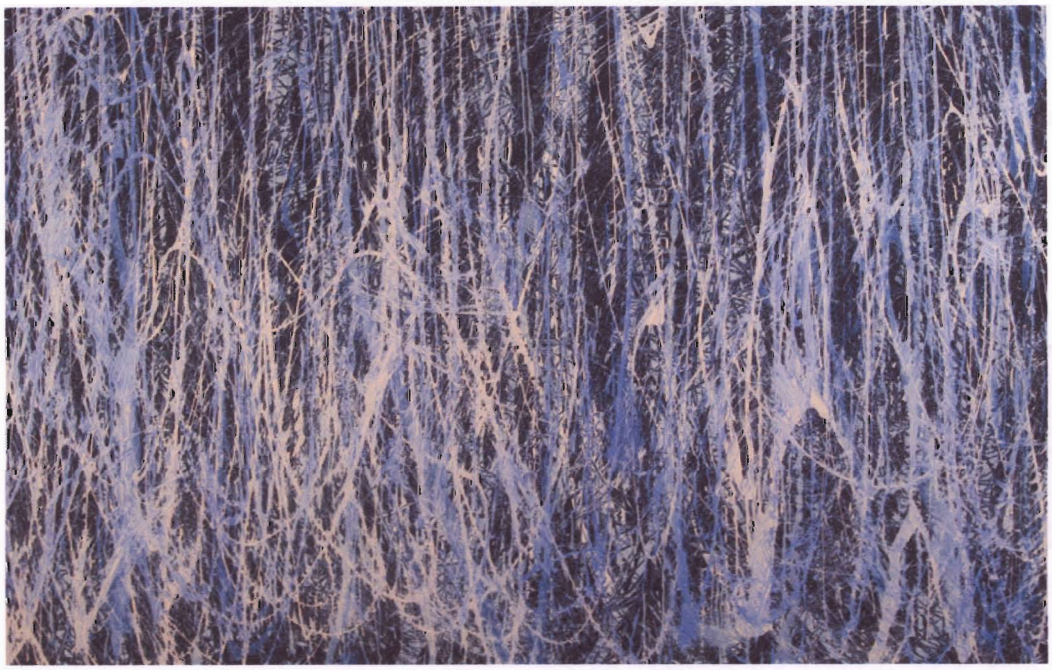

Figure 3. *Timberline*, acrylic on canvas, 48"x72", 2005.

Combining Painting With Computer Emulsion Transfers

After experimenting in my first computer transfer class followed by a painting class, I became interested in combining the two mediums. I discovered that the layered imagery of contemporary artist Lynne Perrella's assemblages and collages have a great

deal in common with my monoprints from my undergraduate work.[2] Her Jasper Johns-like pieces inspired me to merge my painting and computer transfers in any way that I could imagine.

During an independent study with Bob Worthy I created a few canvases combining painting and transfers. The most successful one is *The Journey Home* (Figure 4) because it fully incorporates my interest in layering both content and media. This textured canvas combines tea-dyed handmade paper with computer emulsion transfers. This led to a new series based upon this piece.

Figure 4. *The Journey Home*, mixed-media on canvas, 15"x30", 2005.

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[2] *Somerset Studio,* May/June 2005 Volume 9, Issue 3.

Evolution Into Bookmaking

During that same independent study course, I started experimenting with handmade and altered books. With **my first effort**, I layered emulsion transfers of trees over the pages of an old artists' manual. On the facing page I created a small diorama by cutting a hole in the center of the book (*The Materials of the Artist,* Figure 5). Emulsion transfers and books were becoming my preferred materials for creating art.

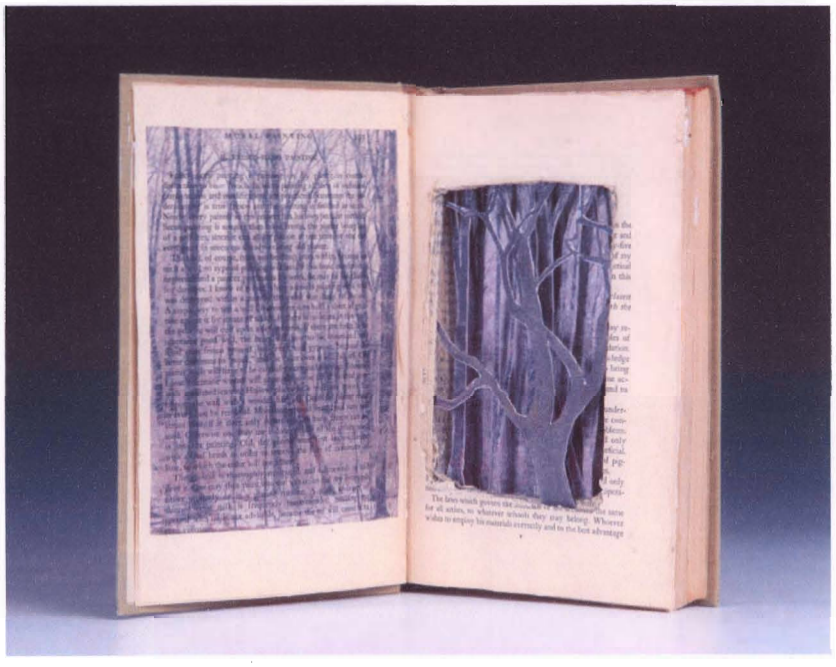

Figure 5. *The Materials of the Artist*,
altered book with emulsion transfer, 9"x6", 2005.

My bookmaking venture led me to my final studio course in the M.I.S. program, Ginna Cullen's wonderful bookmaking class, which has transformed my art forever. Books allow me to work through many different ideas while experimenting with various media. The intimate scale allows me to sit quietly and reflect upon each book while holding it in my hands.

I was able to combine many of my past techniques with my *Birches* book (Figure 6). I layered watercolor paintings with computer text and created rudimentary botanical prints throughout the pages of the book by pounding leaves and herbs with a hammer into the soft Arches paper. I created the cover using the scraps of raw canvas from my paintings and stitched monochromatic patterns into the cover with my sewing machine. I finished the book by hand-sewing a Coptic binding.

Figure 6. *Birches*, watercolor, stitched canvas, computer text, 12"x12", 2006.

In *Crossing Paths* (Figure 7) I was inspired by Jasper Johns' *Fools House* (1962) to use a rudimentary tool, in this case a small branch, to splatter ink and paint on the pages and then incorporate it into the binding on the cover as Johns did with the broom in

his painting. The layered criss-cross pattern of the pages allowed me to paint a neutral color palette on one side of the book while allowing a shock of vivid orange and crimson red to be hidden within the pages.

Figure 7. *Crossing Paths*, mixed-media book with branch, 6"x9", 2006.

With the portfolio book, *Closer To Home* (Figure 8), I combined emulsion transfers and handmade papers with the archetypal symbol of a house. I incorporated stitching with my sewing machine as a symbolic historical connection to the generations of women in my family who sewed to provide income and clothing for their families.

I am the second woman in my family to pursue a post-graduate degree and am reminded of my female ancestors when I have the luxury to create art in my studio. Historically, wealthy women learned needlework as a pastime while poor women sewed

out of necessity. My grandmothers and great-grandmothers sewed not for recreation but out of need.

Figure 8. *Closer To Home*, mixed-media book, 8"x8", 2005.

Combining machine stitching and hand stitching with my computer transfers is also meant to remind the viewer that this is a handmade piece of art and not completely computer generated. It is handcrafted like clay pots or woven baskets that also hold the marks of their makers.

The star book format seemed most appropriate for my *Mother to Daughter* book (Figure 9) because its circular shape, when open, symbolizes our inter-connectedness. This was truly a collaborative piece which combined my daughter's artwork with my own. I handed her a paint brush and a palette of acrylic paint before her second birthday.

My mother was my first art teacher as well. My daughter loves painting in my art studio on my easel. I find the natural freedom of her abstract paintings very refreshing. I scanned one of her paintings on my computer and transferred it onto one of the towels I used to clean my paintbrushes on from my studio. I then cut up the pieces and stitched the sections to paper and bound them into the star book format. It is a gift that I hope to pass along to her one day when she is older.

Figure 9. *Mother to Daughter*, mixed-media star book, 12" diameter, 2005.

I wanted to create contemporary versions of traditional women's art forms with my quilted wall hanging, *Wildwood* (Figure 10), and my sculptural basket book, *Nest* (Figure 11). *Wildwood* is hand-beaded, embroidered, and machine stitched; skills passed down to me by my mother. It hangs from a branch found in the woods where the photographic images were taken.

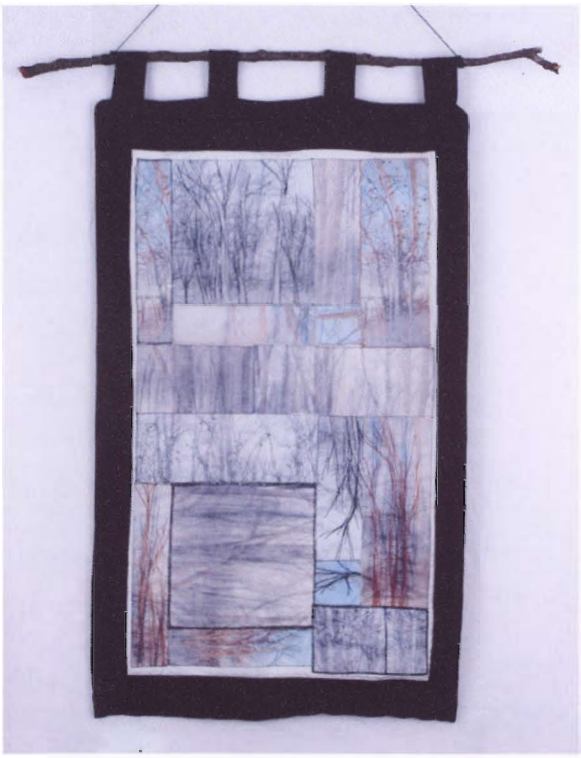

Figure 10. *Wildwood*, emulsion transfers on cotton, machine stitching, hand embroidery, beading, and branch 36"x20", 2004.

Figure 11. *Nest*, sculptural book with yarn and altered Tyvek, 8"x12", 2006.

The basket form for my *Nest* book (Figure 11) was inspired by my collection of traditional African Zulu Wedding baskets as well as the role of women building a metaphorical nest in their homes. The shredded pieces of altered Tyvek tied to the outside of the basket and filling its middle have dictionary definitions for various nests and vessels printed on them.

Conclusion

The path I have traveled through the M.I.S program has been a circular journey of self-discovery. I have re-learned my identity as an artist in this process. I have found peace and contentment in my studio making art for myself as well and have gained confidence as an artist. I have learned that it is important to experiment and that understanding failures often leads to new opportunities for a chance to create art beyond the original intentions.

My future plans include continuing to show my work as well as submitting scholarly articles to arts magazines. I am continuing to make gallery contacts and want to pursue networking opportunities with art magazine editors. In the absence of studio time spent in the company of fellow artists, I plan to create an artistic exchange with people I have met in these classes. This will help fight isolation and artist's block. I may return to teaching someday but am quite content for now focusing on my own art and giving some much-needed attention to my inner creative spirit. I know that if I do return to the classroom in the future, my students will benefit as much as I have from this program.

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Figure 2. *Spiritual Sojourn*, acrylic on canvas, 48"x72", 2005.

Figure 3. *Timberline*, acrylic on canvas, 48"x72", 2005.

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MaryLea Martin Harris

[redacted]

EDUCATION:

2006	Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.(Painting and Computers in the Arts).
1998	Bachelor of Arts, Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, Virginia. Major in Studio Art (Printmaking concentration), Minor in Art History.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE:

1999 - 2002	Art Resource Teacher, Greenbriar West Elementary School, Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax, Virginia.
1998 - 1999	Art Resource Teacher, Garfield Elementary School, Fairfax County Public Schools, Springfield, Virginia.
1999	Art Resource Teacher, Haycock Elementary School, Fairfax County Public Schools, Falls Church, Virginia.

VIRGINIA LICENSE:

1999 – 2008	Art Education Certification NK – 12.

RELATED EXPERIENCE:

2001 – present	Volunteer Art Teacher, Arlington County Adult Day Care Program, Madison Center, Arlington, Virginia.
2000 – present	Mural Artist, Fairfax and Loudoun, Virginia
2000 – 2002	Art Teacher, Private Art Lessons, Fairfax, Virginia.
1995 – 1998	Gallery Docent, Ann Gary Pannell Art Gallery, Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, Virginia.
1997	Intern: Summer Teacher Institute, Department of Teacher and School Programs, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS or MEMBERSHIPS:

1998 – 2002	Member, National Art Education Association.
1997 – 2002	Member, National Education Association.
1996 – 2001	Member, Art League, Arlington, Virginia.
1998 – 2000	Member, Virginia Art Education Association.
1998 – 1999	Participant, Virginia Art Education Association Annual Conferences.
1996 – 1998	Board Member, Friends of Art, Acquisitions Committee for Permanent Collection, Sweet Briar College,

Sweet Briar, Virginia.

EXHIBITIONS:

2006	*The Path Is A Circle*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis Exhibition, The Lee Arts Center, Arlington, Virginia.
2005	*Farms and Barns of Loudoun County*, Franklin Park Performing and Visual Arts Center, Round Hill, Virginia. Curated by Barbara Sample.
2004	*Prints! Prints! Prints!*, The Ellipse Arts Center, Arlington, Virginia. Juried by Warren Corrado.
1998	*Senior Art Show*, Pannell Art Gallery, Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, Virginia.
1996	*1996 Student Invitational Show*, Jewett Student Gallery, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts.