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Tinged With Fire

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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Bachelor of Arts, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, 1976

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May, 2006

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Tinged With Fire

I have created art that has evolved from my own personal experiences. Life is capricious, and with the changes wrought by age, joy, and grief, I have found this self-referential work inevitable. Here, I have documented the journey that has brought me through personal wars, battles, and truces. I have come to believe that although my individual experiences may be unique, my responses to them are not. Loss and victory are universal.

Tinged With Fire

Personal History

In 1959, too immature and confused to understand the direction or importance of my talents, I attended my first year of college at the University of Maryland, College Park Campus. The foremost thought in my mind was that school would keep me from having to go to work. That insufficiency of purpose led to the termination of my higher education after one year and a sabbatical from learning for fifteen years. After having three children, finding myself a single welfare recipient, and attempting my first year of sobriety since I was twelve, I enrolled again at The University of Maryland. A renewal of body, mind, and spirit gave me the strength to complete my Bachelor of Art degree. It was the beginning of a creative, educational journey that would be continuous. I chose to major in secondary art education. After graduation, I was hired in a junior high school. This baptism by fire, along with several years teaching middle school, led me to the high schools in which I found my true vocation and calling.

For twenty-eight years as an educator, I thrived. My summers were spent traveling and creating my own art. Teaching consumed most of my time and I was anxious to be an excellent teacher. I wanted to take classes that would help me in the classroom. I found that Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) was offering graduate classes in Montgomery County, Maryland, so I enrolled in their Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) program. Every class enhanced my knowledge and was applicable to my job.

Themes

I had become a technically proficient photographer but lacked the ability to communicate themes that were of importance to me. Photos, by themselves, were too literal. In *Mother at the Country Club* (Appendix, 1) I was able, through the combined media of photography and oil painting, to portray the feelings I had concerning my mother and her values with which I did not agree. She esteemed wealth and prestige, and practiced myopic silence in the face of grief, terror, and rage. To express my ideas, I lightly developed a photograph of my mother on a 14"x11" sheet of thick fiber paper. I then oil painted heavily with tinted colors and surrounded her with pale yellow-green negative space. Her look is vacuous and puerile. I also used this technique with success to photograph and paint my drug-addicted son, my friends, and places for which I had intense feelings. I often tell stories about child sexual abuse, suicide, spiritual fulfillment, women stunted by myth, the joys of loving grandchildren, and any other subjects that may capture and send me into a whirl of planning and creating. The art pieces all tell a story, give a warning, uncover a love or fear, and more often than not are accompanied by prose, or poems. I believe the words enhance my creations. They emphasize the themes and invite the viewer into an artistic discussion.

I studied Flash, Photoshop, Illustrator, and Painter in the MIS program. These computer classes helped me express my ideas in a variety of ways. *A Prince of a Guy* (Appendix, 2) is an example of computer-manipulated images coupled with text. The effect is surrealistic. I merged thirty-two layers of type and photographs to communicate the disgust I felt towards our culture's values concerning women and their quest for a

Prince Charming. In this piece I have placed a male nude looking over the shoulder of a female, also nude. Both are extremely soft-focused. Pictures of my cat, a poisonous tree frog from Costa Rica, and blurred images of houses and butterflies join with the words that communicate my feelings about cultural lies and the recognition of myth. Caustic humor within the words is edgy and close to anger. The images remain soft when they depict the unreality of myth and sharp when they speak of reality or truth behind the myth. The theme refers to the tale of the Prince-turned-frog waiting to be kissed by the maiden looking for her Prince Charming. My cat is in the upper left looking out with clarity. She is smarter than and a danger to the frog. A cottage appears softly behind the figures to depict the idealized dream of the cottage with the picket fence. I use the clear, sharp image of the butterfly to depict the truth a woman can know when she is willingly taught by her experiences. My piece is a rebuttal of this fairy tale and a satirical acclamation of the truth and reality of frog kissing.

After taking a printmaking course, I became anxious to experiment with various painting surfaces. *Nizkor* (Appendix, 3) contains the themes and mood I desired concerning my intense feelings about the Holocaust. The media used is computer-manipulated photographs and acrylic painting on a large board. It was created in reaction to a troubling conversation I had with my son and his Polish fiancée. They appeared at my home one afternoon to announce the date of their marriage, which was to be held in Poland. I knew I would be unable to participate in the wedding at that time. I harbor intense feelings about Poland's slave labor, deadly silence, anti-Semitism, and cold indifference to the suffering and criminality during World War II. The duplicity of her

family, both Nazi and Communist, and the exasperating anger generated by that shocking conversation are alive and kicking in *Nizkor*. I had to tell them both that I would not go. My therapeutic reaction was the painting. I used vibrant reds, orange, and yellow greens - angry colors, slashed across the large ragged board. *Nizkor*, Hebrew for *mark and remember this place*, is written prominently across the face of the painting. A list of Polish death camps, as if on a map, appears sporadically throughout the thickly painted surface. The blended photos are of Auschwitz, its rooms full of shoes, ragged prisoner's uniforms, and heart-wrenching, ceiling-high stacks of empty suitcases. I asked my son to visit Auschwitz and bring back the photographs. I wanted him to see and absorb this Polish horror. He is still unable to speak of the experience. Real barbed wire is wrapped around the board on the left and across the bottom of the piece. Blood-soaked cloth is caught on the wires as they intersect at the bottom left. I wrote a stream of consciousness poem reiterating our conversation and painted it in bright yellow on the left. There is a smooth stone wrapped in the wire. According to Jewish tradition, a stone is placed on the grave of a loved one in their remembrance. The word *shama* also appears on the right. It is Hebrew for the imperative, *Listen!* My son and his wife have seen the painting. We have developed, over time, an unspoken truce.

Development of Technique and Movement to Clay

I was taking many crafts courses in my MIS program and becoming enamored with three-dimensional work and clay. I wondered if the functional ceramic pots I had once made could be translated into meaningful art. This tactile, malleable substance was easy

for me to form into three-dimensional images that communicated humor. I have a rather caustic tongue and enjoy dry humor. *The Look* (Appendix, 4) is an example of one of my first hand built pieces. It was of a cat formed in white clay. I fashioned the cat to look like my own. She is eyeing two fish in a bowl. The fish bowl is on a table and obviously not within the cat's allowable territory. The impression I give is that two startled fish, painted to look exactly like the cat's two green eyes, are going to be her next stolen meal, and they know it.

I thought that if I was pleased with the humor I created I could also experiment with more serious subject matter and themes in clay. *Stained* (Appendix, 5 and 6), is the unusual presentation of a poem I had written. The poem is printed on a transparent decal and applied over a high-fired clay slab. The piece was inspired by a phone call I received from a young family member who was experiencing traumatic memories of childhood sexual abuse. His father had called him a liar. The horror I felt at his father's traitorous denial and the abandonment of his son, evoked the poem. I used acrylic to paint the colors of rotting flesh and the blood stained gauze hangers. The slab is irregular in shape, twisted like the story, and the putrid colors represent the death of innocence.

Salient Influences

Years ago I attended an exhibit of expressionistic paintings by Edvard Munch (1863-1944). The exhibit was extensive and most disturbing. I felt like a startled spectator at the scene of a hideous accident. I was stricken by this man's torment but unable to take myself away from his paintings. *The Scream* (1893) was recently stolen. I wondered at

such a theft. How could anyone possibly want to look at the agony in that painting for an extensive period of time? At one point, I stood in the center of the room and wept. He had painted my own hidden thoughts, fears, and pain. His method of paint application was startling. Harsh, broad slashes of paint illustrated his strangling depression. I was not surprised to learn that he committed suicide. The power of expressionism did not leave me. It has been an influence in my own work, as I too, when painting with oil or acrylic, use broad strokes and brushes loaded with paint. I seek to tell a story through feelings, paint, clay, glass, photography, and even words.

Recently my work took an unexpected but timely turn when, quite inadvertently, I picked up a book owned by a colleague. The magnificent, intriguing pottery pictured was made by the Mimbres who were a regionally distinctive Mogollon people (pronounced muggy-own). They flourished from 300 B.C. until 1500 A.D. in the southeastern section of New Mexico. Broad line designs, cross-hatching, and a combination of the two were common on their pottery. The effect is stark and clean. Painting with wet, colored clay was particularly appealing to me. Some pots were placed over the faces of the deceased with a small hole punctured in them so that the spirit could pass through it and into the next world. This pottery is highly individualistic and it teases my mind to consider that among the geometric devices so often found that there may be hieroglyphs, which say something about the person to whom they belonged. Dances, initiation ceremonies, harvests, hunting events, pets, children, and celebratory occasions are all painted on the clay bowls (Appendix,7). Ants march, rabbits run, and deer leap through through woodlands and into hunter's snares. Women sing, gather, and weave together. Children

play with hoops and little mice march over decorative geometric rows.

I was so taken by the work that I arranged for a trip to New Mexico to see the bowls. I felt I was ready to try this kind of detail and design approach in my own work. I was allowed to enter the vaults of the archeology museum at The University of New Mexico in Albuquerque and also museums in Taos, New Mexico. I digitally photographed the bowls. I followed this experience with a visit to the Santa Clara and San Ildefonso Pueblos for two weeks. I was able to meet the Tafoya and Naranjo family potters who are world renowned for their black-ware. It was made known to me that every mark and design on his or her pottery represents an event of earthly or spiritual significance. I left New Mexico with my life forever changed. This new sense of spirituality and deep gratitude drove me to create a history of my own growth, which began with a seed planted by the help of a twelve-step program thirty-four years earlier.

The idea of a code, which depicted the life and experiences of individuals was particularly intriguing to me. I decided to create non-fictional stoneware bowls using the coil-and-scrape method. I covered my stoneware bowls with white porcelain slip while the clay was still moist. I used the techniques I had seen in New Mexico among the Pueblo Indians, the same used by the ancient Mimbres. When the pot was leather-hard I coated it again with white slip. Soft brushes were used to paint black slip over the white slip. The pots have a matte surface. Most areas eventually contained finished, scraped drawings. I used dental tools to scratch in details. The symbols designed were my own and represented significant people places, things, and events in my life. *Mother* (Appendix, 8) was my first attempt. The figure inside the bowl represents a mother, her

children, and her creative tools. She is in the center of the bowl and very much in the style of the women drawn by the Mimbres. The spirit hole is lined with silver leaf.

Keeper of the Earth (Appendix, 9) was the second bowl I made. It is less in the direct style of the Mimbres and more pictorial, or my own. The images are realistic but symbolically represent Pheasant, who is The Keeper of the Earth and Praying Mantis, her nemesis, or he who keeps her on guard and alert. As a woman, mother, grandmother, and wife I often feel like The Keeper of The Earth. My nemesis comes in many forms and has the ability to snatch at me from behind when I am most unaware.

The bowl shape felt restrictive, so I replicated *Keeper of the Earth* on a large (36" in diameter) circular slab and I added a small amount of colored slip for more detail. I was pleased with the greater scale and think it gives the viewer a better vantage point with which to view the piece.

Acceptance and Rejection of the Spirit (Appendix, 20) is another example of a large, painted and scratched circular slab (36" in diameter). On the right I show the power gained by embracing spirituality, God, or the Great Spirit. On the left side, is the decline experienced by a woman rejecting spiritual assistance. I have been on both sides of Eagle, who is the Native American symbol for the force that connects us to all things of The Great Spirit. I show every woman as myself in spiritual ascent or decline. The rejection is tumbling the woman into a downward spiral while acceptance has given her wings and is elevating her towards Eagle and the Upper World.

I have also created long oval triptychs (18"x18"x1") using the same methods. *Ascension* (Appendix, 10, 11, 12) was just such a triptych. The woman in this piece first

appears snared in briars. She is pierced and strangled within the trappings of the earth. The second woman is ascending with a strenuous reach upward. She is disentangling herself and rising but not yet free. The third has risen above the earth, is winged and flying upward, and she is joyous.

The women I painted first were of human form. They evolved into half human and half animal figures. I often use the animal forms of Eagle (man's connector to the The Great Spirit), Raven (cunning and lucky), Owl (wise and prophetic) and Pheasant (the keeper of the earth) in order to address the narrative aspects of the pieces. They are creatures with wings, able to rise above the earth and its snares and descend only when safety is assured. I have been blessed by spiritual principles practiced within my own life, so I often choose to depict figures in various stages of spiritual evolvement.

In *The Deception* (Appendix, 13) I dealt with immediate emotions. I was enraged by an experience that led to a shattering breach of trust. The near-cartoon aspects of the illustration help to portray the elemental animal rage I felt and the frustration over my powerlessness to change the unchangeable. This pot is completely un-useable. If filled, it would leak, leaching out its contents the way rage can consume and deplete us. The interrelating images appear as an aftermath, not to be re-charged or changed.

Latest Work

Two pieces newly completed are sculptural in form but still contain clay as their major media. *People I Have Known* (Appendix, 15) is a sculptural piece ten feet high. It was built in wood to the specifications of two attic trusses, which are painted black. It

briefly tells the story of twelve people I have known well who committed suicide. The piece at first was for Steven, a friend who hanged himself in his attic. I realized during the design process that I was not only mourning Steven but also all those I had known who had ended their lives. I created a ceramic hanging figure six feet tall. A black toppled chair is at its feet. It hangs from a brown rope thrown over the uppermost beam of the attic trusses. It has a hangman's noose about its neck. It is an androgynous figure representing all twelve suicides. The figure is dark, slashed, and fragmented. It was gas fired with salt, a caustic substance that gives a particular pallor to the surface of the clay. The threads between the clay body parts are strung with glass beads that I lamp-worked with a hot torch. The idea of poison, flames, breakable substances, and hanging by a thread were meant to convey the fragility and tragedy of my friends' purposeful and violent termination of their lives. One sentence describing each of the twelve events was written across individual beams.

Grandma's Heart (Appendix, Figure 17) is a work that shows the indomitable ties I have to my grandchildren. The upper child's head is of my first grandchild, my son's daughter, who died at the age of two. The colors and metallics I used on the six faces are those I think relate to the personalities of each of these very different children. The fact that I do not remember my own children when they were infants plays a significant role in my attachment. I have a second chance to be attentive and love children. I was unable to do so for my own three. I allowed alcohol to rob me of my senses and memories. The painted cords are made of silk, the material of royalty, and one that is exceptionally strong. The individual cords are colored to match each face and run directly to the full

sized replica of a human heart below them. The faces and heart were constructed from a formula I developed from clay, fiberglass, sand, and paper.

My daughter's triplets (represented by the three heads on the right) have become a major part of my life. They fascinate me, and I love them deeply. The triplets are colored brightly and stand apart. The two boys, represented by the two faces on the left, are my son's surviving children.

Deflecting the Crack (Appendix, 18) is 4.5 feet in diameter. It is a piece I recently finished and was made with molten, clear glass. I had to reflect back to those summers in Richmond at VCU learning the proper temperatures and annealing points for glass. I pressed my face and arms into sand, stabilized the sand, and filled the molds with molten glass. Three baby doll faces were also pressed and poured. They symbolize my son's three children. The child's face with the red "x" represents my deceased granddaughter, a death caused by her parent's drug addiction. I depict myself with my arms thrown over my face and one arm is dangerously cracked. Drug (crack) paraphernalia surrounds the shielded face. The piece depicts a disoriented and desperate person stabilized by a large, clear background. The figure, overwhelmed by her surroundings, is deflecting the onslaught with bare, clear arms. I was unable to deal with the emotional aftermath of those years of waste and torment for a very long time because the toll paid by our family was astronomical. This was my first attempt to communicate my feelings in glass. I believe that glass was the best material to use. It represents fluidity, clarity, fragility, and can have dangerous edges.

As a counterpart to my more emotionally involved pieces, the functional pottery that I create is not intellectually demanding and often serves to sharpen my technical skills, as seen in *Bowl #1* (Appendix, 17), *Platter #2* (Appendix, 18) and *Bowl #2* (Appendix, Figure 19). I think of them as craft rather than art. They are typical of the designs I paint on these pots. They are decorative and functional. I sell all of them because they are useful, bright, and cheerful. I cannot say the same for all of my art. The distressing and emotionally charged images are appreciated by those who are able to delve into uncomfortable feelings and can identify with what I am communicating. I know some of my peers do not like much of my work because of the distressing feelings that it often evokes. That has never stopped me. They are surprised by that little sixty-something, cheerful old lady in the ceramics studio who can speak to such terrifying areas of life. My happy-pots are more comfortable to view. I feel I would be woefully remiss if I did not create all the pieces I do. Because I need to communicate responsibly when using my talents, I speak to all areas of concern to me. I dare not leave out any pieces that I am excited over and plan with care.

Conclusion

The MIS program has facilitated my professional and artistic growth by offering me the opportunity to learn varied techniques and use them successfully. My participation in MIS classes has not only exposed me to excellent professors but also a community of artistic peers who have been stimulating and challenging. I presently teach only one University art course, so I am able to spend much of my time learning and creating. The

reality of this luxury is that I have matured artistically and am able to produce work that not only pleases me but also successfully communicates to others. A creative life is most assuredly one that is tinged with fire.

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Appendix

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Figure 1. *Mother at the Country Club*, hand painted photograph, 14"x11", 2002



Figure 2. *A Prince of a Guy*, computer manipulated photography, 24"x18", 2002

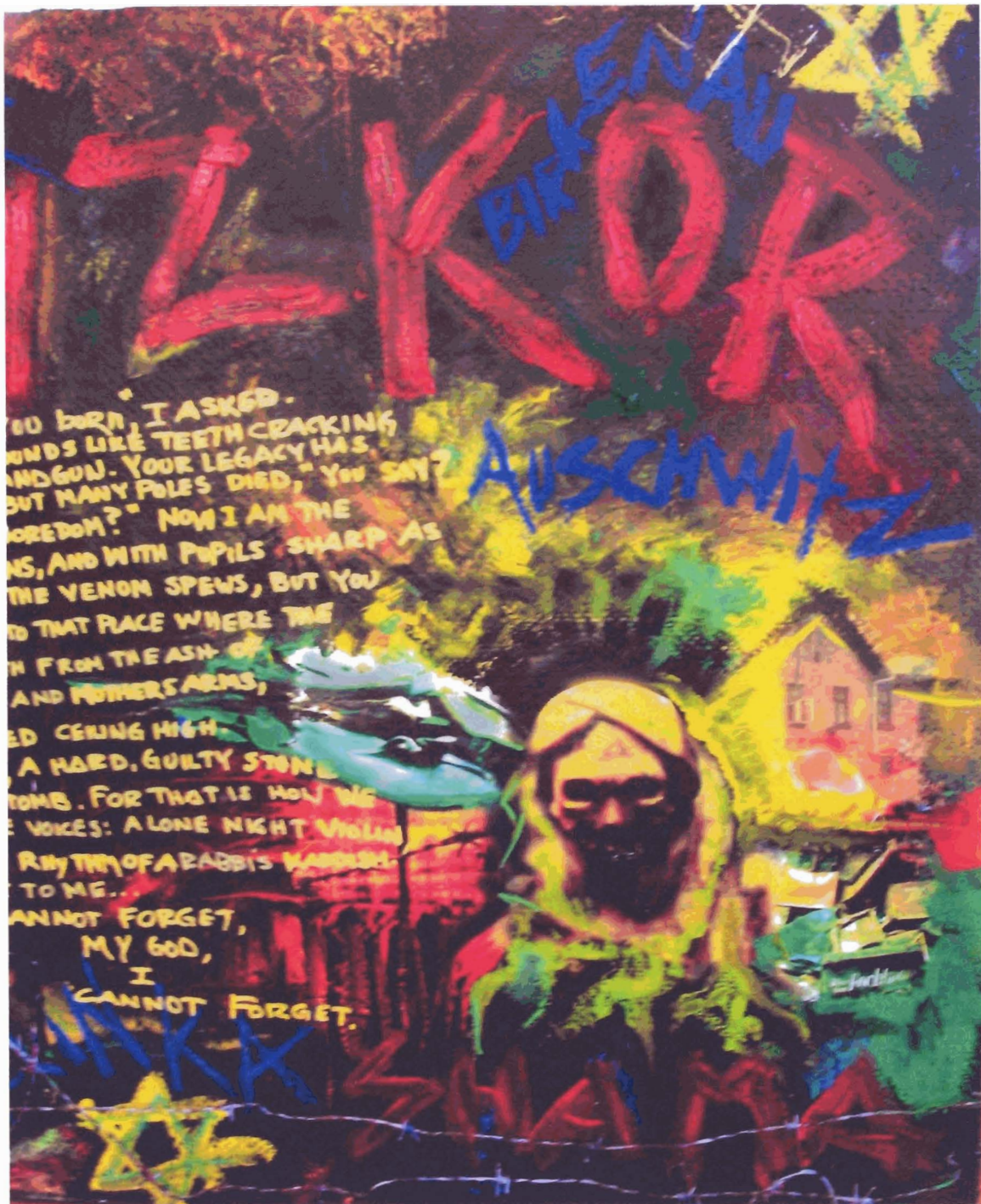


Figure 3. *Nizkor*, (detail), photographs and acrylic, 60"x60", 2003.



Figure 4. *The Look*, hand built slab, 48"x48"x5", 2001.



Figure 5. *Stained*, printed decal on stoneware slab with acrylic, 2004



Figure 7. Slip painted stoneware, 12"x12"x6", 1100 AD, photographed at the museum of archeology, The University of New Mexico



Figure 8. *Mother*, silver leaf and slip painted stoneware, 14"x14"x6", 2004



Figure 9. *Keeper of the Earth*, slip painted and carved stoneware, 36"x36"x1", 2005.



Figure 10. *Ascension* (part 1), triptych, slip painted and carved stoneware, 18"x8"x1", 2005.



Figure 11. *Ascension* (part 2), triptych, slip painted and carved stoneware, 18"x8"x1", 2005.



Figure 12. *Ascension* (part 3), triptych, slip painted and carved stoneware, 18"x8"x1", 2005.



Figure 13. *The Deception*, slip painted and carved stoneware, 18"x8"x18", 2005.



Figure 14. *People I have known*, wood, silk, and salt fired stoneware, 120"x72"x72", 2005.

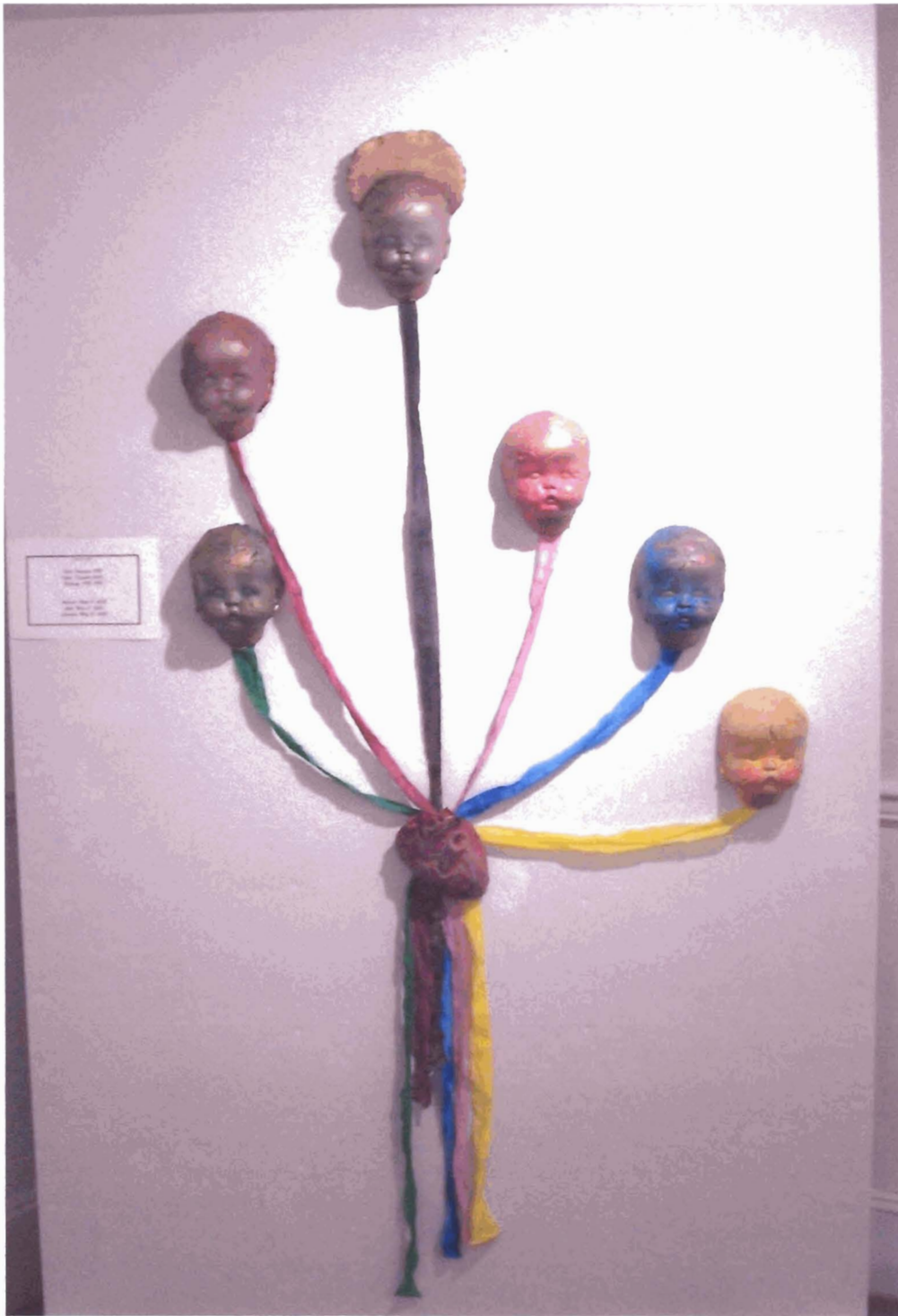


Figure 15. *Grandma's Heart* (installation), acrylic, silk, and stoneware molds, 72"x40", 2005.



Figure 16. *Deflecting the Crack*, molded glass with mixed media, 48"x48"x6", 2005.



Figure 17. *Bowl #1*, slip painted stoneware, 20"x20"x18", 2005.



Figure 18. Platter # 2, (*El Gato*), slip painted stoneware, 15"x15"x3", 2005.

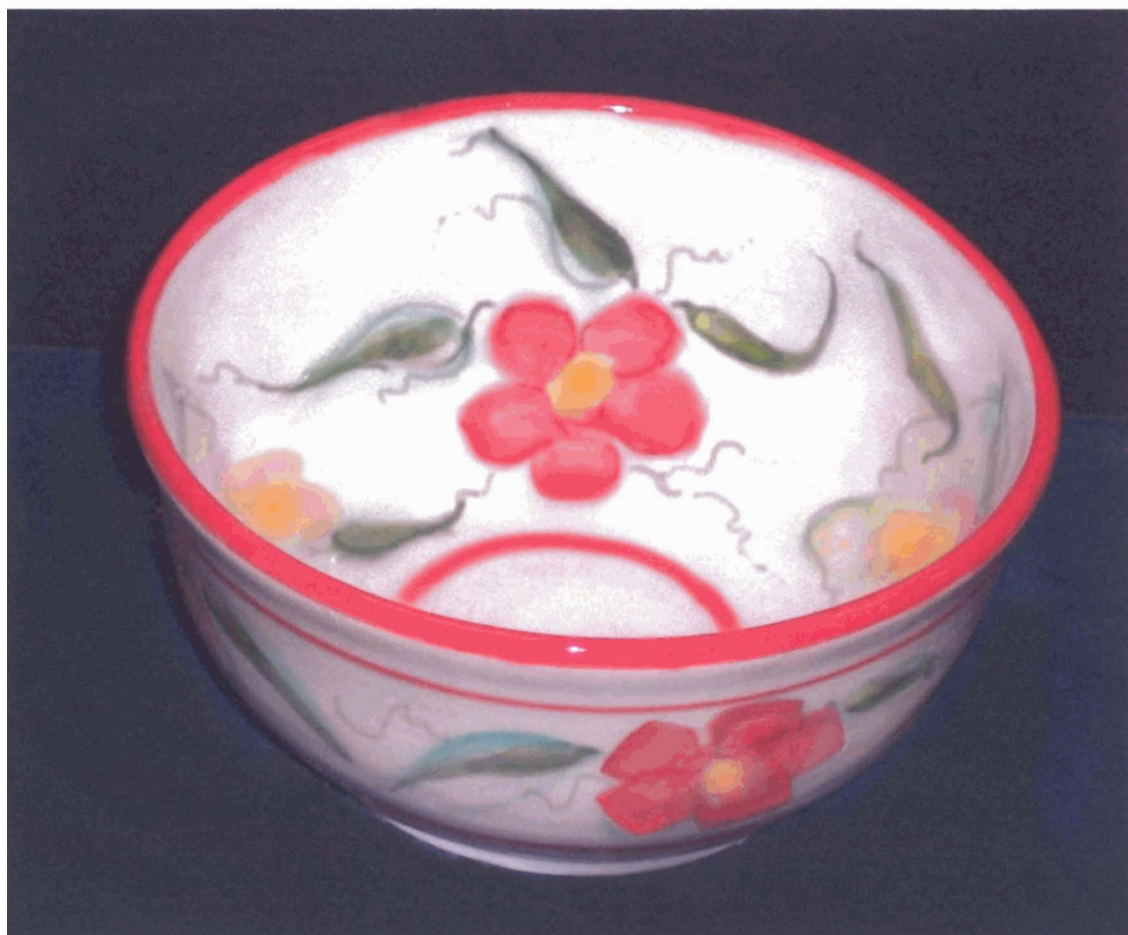


Figure 19. *Bowl #2*, slip painted stoneware, 15"x16"x15", 2005.



Figure 20, *Acceptance and Rejection of The Spirit*, slip painted and carved stoneware, 36"x36"x1", 2005

20. *Acceptance and Rejection of The Spirit*, slip painted and carved stoneware, 36"x36"x1", 2005.

He told me,
 on that day of heat, sweat, and the remembered smell of urine,
 over shocked lines,
 states away from my tears, he told me.

He told me,
 that when he was wounded and too young, he had clung to that old arthritic dog,
 his wirehaired solace, and let her sleep at night, warm on his arms.

Until his brother,
 made clandestine, nocturnal visits and stabbing enterings.
 At night, always at night, and even she would cry,
 he told me.

So, at six, imploring the god who had left him, he begged for death, a release.
 Mormon-Prayers, he told me.

He told me,
 that when she died, alone a small heap upon the floor,
 you, the pernicious father, simply said,
 "Your dog is dead",
 and left, shifting your cataract-eyes, (of the same granite as your mother's
 covering a face with a smile that is not a smile),
 a turning from death, love and any forgiveness.

He told me,
 he was inside himself then, a void. For three days she lay dead,
 leaking on bare floor boards,
 cold as his dreams of rescue, cold as a night-brother's sex,
 or a father's blindness.

He told me,
 that from a place of hollow and suffocation, he alone took her to that small, unkempt, back yard and
 buried her.
 The grave was not deep enough, as those who suffer such tire easily.

He told me yesterday,
 that when dead and abandoned for so long,

you leave

a stain
 on the floor.

Figure 6. *Stained*, poem printed on decal for stoneware slab, 8.5"x11", 2004

Margo Joyce Nolan



Education:

- | | |
|------|---|
| 2006 | Master of Interdisciplinary Studies
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Professional Organizations/Memberships:

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| 2005-2006 | National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts

Salisbury Clay Guild |
| 2004-2006 | Board Member Newtown Historic District, Salisbury, MD |
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Professional Organizations/Memberships (continued):

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Exhibitions:

2004-2006	<i>Ceramics Show and Auction</i> Salisbury Clay Guild Salisbury, MD
	<i>Artists of The Eastern Shore</i> Ward Museum, Salisbury, MD
2005	<i>Tinged With Fire</i> , Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis Exhibit, Salisbury University Art Center, Salisbury, MD
	<i>National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts Eastern Shore Exhibit</i> , University of Maryland Eastern Shore, Princess Ann, MD
2004-2005	<i>Member Show</i> , Art Institute and Gallery, Salisbury, MD
	<i>Faculty Show</i> , Fulton Gallery, Salisbury University, Salisbury, MD
1999	<i>Photography</i> , Art Institute and Gallery, Salisbury, MD
1995	<i>Margo Nolan, a Retrospective</i> , Adams Morgan Gallery, Washington, D.C.