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Vignettes

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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Artist Statement

In my clay, mixed media, and photographic work I present vignettes of my life and aspects of my heritage to the viewer. While working with clay, I create houses that personify different aspects of my personality, depending on what was happening in my life at the time. I also make pots that reflect elements of my environment. My mixed media and digital photography work is a more intimate look at my Middle Eastern heritage from belly dancing to snapshots of my family.

Vignettes

Introduction

In 1975, my mom and I moved from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to the ocean front in Virginia Beach. A few months later my baby sister was born. We had a very close extended family and lived next door to my grandparents, PopPop was Lebanese and Meme was Armenian. In our matriarchal family, Middle Eastern traditions were passed down to Meme and in turn she passed them on to me. Our ethnic background and beach life would largely feature in my work. It seemed natural for me to focus my art on my life and my family.

It was very important to my mom to move back to our family home to raise me and my sister. As we were growing up, my mom did not work. She stayed home to raise us and when she was not there we were watched by our grandparents. My mom even took a job at Beach Day School, our preschool, in order to be close to us. She volunteered at our elementary school. She was always fun to be around and all of our friends wanted her to be their mom too. We remained close through junior high and high school. Our friends went through rebellious phases but we never did. When it was time to choose a college I chose Virginia Wesleyan College because it was close to home. I trained to be an art teacher and found a job nearby so that I could remain near my family.

When it came time for me to earn re-certification points for my licensure, I took a ceramics course offered by Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) Off-Campus Graduate Art Program. I shared a ceramic studio with a friend, where I had worked for years. I was confident I would sail through. This was not the case. I knew a lot about clay when I signed up for this class but I learned more than I could have imagined. I like a challenge and this class

stretched me in areas I thought I already excelled in. This rekindled my love for clay and eased my fear of getting back into the classroom. I was inspired, challenged, and so impressed with this class that I decided to apply to and was accepted into the MIS program.

On my quest for my degree I hit a few snags. I was also hit with life altering blows. I had some minor setbacks, like artist block and financial issues, but others were more devastating. It was during a mixed media class on March 18, 2008 that my younger sister, Amanda, passed away unexpectedly. This shook my family to the core. At this time, Meme was still alive and did not handle the news well. She went from a headstrong leader of our family to a frail, empty shell of a woman. Meme no longer had the will to live. She died on August 1, 2008, four days before her eighty-eighth birthday. Then it was just me and my mom. Mom moved into Meme's house and I will be moving into my mom's house where I grew up. Although smaller, our family unit remains the most important aspect of my life.

Working with Clay

In the beginning of my quest I revisited old techniques and learned new ones. I applied my new knowledge and confidence in handling the clay to my first work. I created a village of houses that personified different aspects of my personality. For example, some houses are dark and moody, such as in *Darker Days* (Appendix, 1), while others are happy and cheery, as in *Happy Home* (Appendix, 2). These houses reflected my emotions depending on what was happening in my life. Working with clay has always seemed to calm me but these houses enabled me to express my feelings and emotions.

Then, I turned my attention to the ocean and worked with the pottery wheel. I experimented with adding naturalistic sea creatures to finished pots. One of the first pieces in this

series was *Crab Pot* (Appendix, 3). In this piece, I threw a closed form on the wheel and fashioned a lid. When the pot was leather hard I sculpted a crab and added it to the lid to form a handle. I glazed this piece to mimic the ocean by using a glossy sea foam green for the pot and a matte dark blue for the crab. The contrast from gloss to matte lent itself to the textural contrasts of the ocean.

My next piece, *Star Fish* (Appendix, 4), was also thrown on the wheel. Again, I slowly air dried the pot to leather hard before adding a star fish to the rim. This piece was finished with a tan glaze. I dipped the pot in the glaze and then flipped it to create drips. I then rubbed some of the glaze off to allow the grain of the clay to show through giving it a sandy look. In this series I was able to show the ocean's beauty in a functional object, bringing aesthetics to a utilitarian container.

I began my coursework with a familiar subject matter and media. I was comfortable with clay as a medium and felt I had learned enough about clay and glazing to say I had mastered clay. Then, after three clay classes I was ready to try something new. I was aware of the boundaries of clay but other media seemed to have fewer limitations and technical rules. I was also apprehensive about how I would handle my subject matter. In clay I focused on the beach and home but I wanted to include more aspects of my life in my work.

Mosaics

At this point I began to explore mosaics and I started concentrating on my family as subject matter. My family had strong ties to our cultural background. My choice was simple, I would focus on my Middle Eastern heritage. Mosaics allowed me to express myself in new ways. My options seemed endless. I decided to work with glass and to explore different ways to

mix glass with other media. I wanted to offer my audience vignettes of my life and I found myself creating close up, intimate pieces to get my ideas across.

My first mosaic, *Dancers* (Appendix, 5), depicts me and my husband. First, I drew the image on a piece of wood. Then, I carefully cut shapes from sheets of colored glass. I placed these pieces to indicate movement in some areas and stillness in other areas. The movement was created by cutting the glass in organic shapes and placing the glass along curved lines. Stillness was created by cutting the glass in larger, more geometric sections for the railing behind the dancers. I used wood glue to attach the glass to the wood. While waiting for the glue to set I mixed sandalwood colored grout. Then, I applied the grout to the mosaic using a rubber trowel. This piece led me to experiment with glass and the illusion that elements of the piece were moving. The suggestion of movement then became a feature of my work.

Next, I created *Zebras* (Appendix, 6) using black and white stained glass for the zebras. This time I incorporated mirrored glass in the sky area of this image. I cut the mirrored glass into large pieces to reflect the viewers' real-time movement. This gives the false impression of movement in the mosaic. The pieces of glass were glued onto wood and the mirror was cut in large chunks to maximize reflection.

I had worked with mosaics and now felt comfortable with the medium. I would add these processes to my techniques and would explore more media.

Mixed Media

My first exploration into mixed media was *Dancing Feet* (Appendix, 7). In this piece I used glass mosaics for the feet and dress. Then, when I grouted the mosaic, I pulled the grout down under the feet onto the bare wood support. This created the textural feeling of sand. I later

added acrylic paint to the wood and grout to match the colors of the dress and sand. The painted grout helped make the green in the dress stand out. Again, I cut the glass into natural, organic shapes to create a sense of movement in the dress.

This first mixed media piece led me to develop a series on belly dancing. This was when I decided to delve deeper into my family's heritage. I had been belly dancing for years. Many women in my family belly dance and I have always loved the elegant movement and the slinky sounds of the skirts. I wanted to present this feeling to my audience. In *Hips* (Appendix, 8) I used tissue paper, watercolor, and text on wood. The floral stamp on the tissue paper makes it look more like fabric. I used tissue paper and transparent layers of watercolor to give the dancer a lighter look. I was able to manipulate the tissue paper to have softer edges, like flowing fabric. When the tissue paper was dry, I painted over the paper with watercolor to accentuate the colors. I outlined the hips using Armenian and Lebanese words that have special meaning to me. I repeatedly used the word *Habibi*, a term of endearment, which is used in a lot of belly dancing songs. This piece and *Dancing Feet* were both close up views of a dancer's body.

For *Beach Dancer* (Appendix, 9) I also used tissue paper and watercolor on wood. I glued down and painted string for the hair. I attached small pieces of magazines for the bangles and zills. The magazine pieces allowed me to add vibrant color and the string added another type of texture. For this piece I wanted to change the perspective view and show the entire dancer. This piece completed my series on belly dancing.

In the next piece, I decided to paint a portrait of me, my mom, and Amanda called *The Lee Girls* (Appendix, 10). I stepped away from mixed media for this piece and it was during this work that my sister passed away suddenly. This was the most difficult project for me to finish, but I did. After her death I altered Amanda somewhat to make her look a bit angelic. Using

acrylic paint and colored pencil I accentuated her green eyes and put a faint halo around her head. I painted my mom and myself somewhat abstractly. I wanted to make Amanda stand out and be the focus. I do not know how I did it, but I pulled myself together during this time and became even more focused on my work. Next, I decided to take the focus off of the sad aspects of my life and explore other features of my life and family.

Working with Digital Photography

My next exploration was with digital photography. I used an old digital camera that did not have all the bells and whistles that the other students had with their newer versions. I felt like a rookie in a class of experts. Because of financial issues, I had no choice but to stick it out with my out-of-date camera. As it turns out I was able to get great shots. I started to get more involved in the manipulation of the digital camera and found myself attracted to portraiture. I began by taking shots of my step-daughter, Mckenzie, while my husband held the spotlight. I had framed Mckenzie in the foreground and my husband in the background. The lighting was such that a viewer could see my husband's face looking at his daughter. We only see Mckenzie every other weekend and she grows with every passing week. In this picture Mckenzie was only eight years old but she looks much older. We feel she is growing so fast we can't keep up. This picture says to me that we are watching her from the background with no control over how fast the time flies and how quickly she is growing. The picture *Father and Daughter* (Appendix, 11) ended up being my personal favorite of all my photography because it reflects another aspect of my life that adds to my focus on family.

In my next series I decided to photograph churches. It seemed natural to choose churches because they are a gathering place for my family. One rainy day I drove out to Norfolk to get

pictures of the church where some of my extended family attend. The last time I visited that church was for a funeral of a good friend. It only seemed fitting to take pictures on a dreary day. Again, I created pieces that were intimate glimpses into my life, as well as elements of my heritage. Some were dark and gloomy views of cemeteries and gravestones, as in *Graveyard* (Appendix, 12), others were more inviting like the sunny day in *View of the Cross* (Appendix, 13). These particular photographic works seemed to parallel my earliest clay houses that reflect my personality. Now, I was reflecting more complex aspects of my life and my history.

Whatever media I explored I followed my theme of family and found that I could express my ideas. From being raised at the beach with my grandparents to starting my own family, and from joy to heartbreak, I believe my art work follows my life's journey. Overall, I feel my works express pieces of myself within them and are intimate vignettes of family and heritage.

Conclusion

At the beginning of my studies I struggled with subject matter. I would flip from beach to home to heritage. It wasn't until after the death of my sister that everything fell into place and I decided that these subjects comprised my work because it was a reflection of my life. I felt that honoring my family and our heritage would keep family close, even if it was in memory only.

I now have a new appreciation for my students' point of view. I was pushed to the edge and beyond during my experience but found myself to be a better artist for it. My hope is that when I carefully encourage my middle school students to experiment and challenge themselves that I am making them better artists and broadening their minds. I like to see the excitement in their eyes when they master a concept or skill, especially when they first doubted themselves. I find it fulfilling to in turn help nurture creativity in the next generation. I want to help my

students find their inspiration as I have found my own.

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Appendix

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- Figure 2. *Happy Home*, clay, 6"x 6"x 3", 2005.
- Figure 3. *Crab Pot*, clay, 6"x 5 ½"x 5 ½", 2006.
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Figure 1. *Darker Days*, clay, 8"x 6"x 5", 2005.



Figure 2. *Happy Home*, clay, 6"x 6"x 3", 2005.



Figure 3. *Crab Pot*, clay, 6" x 5 ½" x 5 ½", 2006.



Figure 4. *Star Fish*, clay, 6"x 7 ½"x 7 ½", 2006.



Figure 5. *Dancers*, mosaic on wood, 36"x24", 2007.



Figure 6. *Zebras*, mosaic on wood, 36"x24", 2007.



Figure 7. *Dancing Feet*, mosaic and acrylic on wood, 23" x 23", 2007.



Figure 8. *Hips*, mixed media on wood, 23" x 23", 2007.



Figure 9. *Beach Dancer*, mixed media on wood, 23" x23", 2007.



Figure 10. *The Lee Girls*, acrylic and colored pencil on canvas, 42"x 64", 2008.



Figure 11. *Father and Daughter*, photograph, 8" x 10", 2009.



Figure 12. *Graveyard*, photograph, 10" x8", 2009.



Figure 13. *View of the Cross*, photograph, 8" x 10", 2009.

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Education

2010 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies,
Virginia Commonwealth University,
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Study in Clay and Mixed Media

1995 Bachelor of Fine Arts,
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Norfolk, Virginia
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Teaching Experience

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1999-2000 Art Teacher, Bettie F. Williams Elementary
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Professional Organizations

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Exhibitions

2010 *Vignettes*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis Exhibition,
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, HFFA
Gallery, Virginia Beach, Virginia

2006, 2007 *Teaching Artist Exhibit*, Annual Exhibit,
Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, Virginia Beach,
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2001-2005 *Teaching Artists Exhibit*, Annual Exhibit, Frame Up Art Gallery
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Awards and Honors

2008-2009 Volunteer of the Quarter, Landstown Middle School,
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