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Transience

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Transience

Documentation 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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Lightness and darkness pervades much of my work which is visible in images of abandoned, secluded spaces. Light symbolizes hope and joy. It can also reference the spiritual connotation of new life as well as the end of life. The physical movement of light, its ephemeral quality, and its reflectivity is the deciding factor in my choice for using a camera without a lens and using traditional painting techniques.

In my photographic mixed media work, I am drawn to the unique qualities of the pinhole camera, the exposure of light on the surface of film yields imagery that blurs the line between the familiar and the ethereal. Exposures from a pinhole camera materialize over time, perhaps seconds, perhaps minutes. There is no viewfinder to preview the image, which makes capturing an image pleasingly accidental.

In my oil painting, I use photographic references and a limited palette. Much like my photographs, I create areas of light juxtaposed against deep shadow. The processes of using overlapping layers of transparent glazes over a warm-toned ground are used to achieve this *chiaroscuro* effect. By using these approaches, a sense of the dramatic is conveyed sometimes in contrast to the quiet nature of the subject.

Transience

Introduction

For me, entering the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) was well overdue. I found myself unaccustomed to the apathy in the student body while teaching art in Virginia's Loudoun County Public School system. This school, in the eastern part of the county, was the most challenging high school in the area. The seven years I taught there drained my creative spirit.

I also felt that I lacked knowledge in some areas of the fine arts, having almost exclusively studied traditional fine art photography at George Washington University as an undergraduate in the early 1980s. I had little experience with painting. I decided to challenge myself and began using oils in an MIS-IAR painting course. Soon thereafter, I enrolled in the degree program.

Several painting classes later, I became interested in the old master's techniques and began studying the technique of layering and glazing the canvas with oils. I also sought out contemporary painters who used these techniques in their current work. In this process, I learned something interesting about myself. If I was to paint, my paintings had to symbolically echo something that was within me. The more I thought about it, it became evident that if my work was to be truthful it should resonate the quiet, moody nature of my spirit.

Aside from painting, my primary focus remained on photography. Here again, I returned to my earlier roots of darkroom photography and infused it with contemporary approaches. One approach I was drawn to was using warm-toned encaustics to bring warmth, three-dimensionality, and surface texture to my photographs.

Aesthetics

Bounded by the Blue Ridge Mountains and quietly tucked away in the northern extremity of Piedmont Virginia, lays Loudoun County. The ranges of hills, forest clad mountains, and valleys form a vast yet picturesque landscape that is as distinctive as it is beautiful. As I scan this timeless landscape, I am stirred by its rolling hills that are softly rounded silhouettes that gradually sink deeply into the meadows. This is home, and was home to my predecessors dating back to the Revolutionary War.

My research centers on western Loudoun County, regions unknown to the tourist, overlooked by natives, and forgotten by those who have since moved on. This familiar landscape is marked with crumbled stone and wood remnants of structures marked with history. The personal connection I have with this region, and a conviction to its preservation, stir me to record what remains of the rural landscape. Regrettably, the irresponsible decisions of what I term as the *outsiders* (real estate developers and non-residents of the county) could conceivably remove the origin of heritage and leave behind distant memories of this ever-changing landscape.

The universal element of my work is one that depicts quietness with an atmosphere of loneliness and abandonment. I have often been in this role, often alone. As I developed as an artist, I found that a theme of emptiness became more and more apparent in my work. This is in striking contradiction to the extreme contrasts of light and dark where I attempt to evoke a sense of mystery and timelessness. I am drawn to landscapes that reveal a peculiar or unique characteristic that is indigenous to the landscape of this region, such as a swampy wetland, undulating topography, or the distinctive vines that enmesh and intertwine centuries old trees.

In my photography, I have chosen the qualities of the pinhole and the Holga plastic camera to evoke melancholy images reminiscent of the images of the past. I want to elicit a sense of memory and timelessness that would invite the viewer to think and contemplate the images. These two cameras support my manner of *seeing* and working as it plays an integral role in determining the final outcome of the image. The pinhole photograph has distinctive qualities using infinite depth-of-field, an extreme wide-angle view, and long exposures that reveal soft or moving objects as slightly blurred. In addition, using black and white film questions the era the photograph was created, invoking a sense of displacement of time and place.

The plastic toy Holga camera I use has a unique characteristic in that the shutter can produce multiple exposures, sometimes unintentionally by the photographer. I often use multiple exposures in my work to reinforce the concept of transparency and softness. This technique helps me to convey an ethereal effect as a way to reveal a strong sense of light in the final image.

I often borrow from the past, both in my choice of camera and printing methods. This affords me the ability of combining early nineteenth-century techniques with contemporary methods using high-end printers and scanners. I find it imperative that I have the ability to interact with the creative process that I find absent in digital printing. Mixed media photography is and can provide me with a physical means to create images from my imagination or observational reality.

The moody, emotive landscapes I paint in oils are indicative of the images I capture on film. I use a classical oil painting technique of layering overlapping oil glazes to achieve a soft, highly reflective surface that reveals nuances of value and paint layers. For each painting, I use a limited palette or single color in markedly warm or cool temperatures. I often exhibit a painterly and expressive technique in the application of paint. In each painting, like my photography, I try

to establish an overall atmosphere or mood. Through the use of paint, I attempt to embed an aspect of abandonment and loneliness in the shadowy backgrounds and late afternoon light that I find difficult to record on film.

Influences

One important influence for my work is Sally Mann (b.1951), a contemporary photographer from Lexington, Virginia, who photographs lush yet ordinary landscapes in the rural South. She is unapologetic in her presentation of blurred, dark, and scratched images that have a desolate, haunting quality conveying a sense of loss and time. Mann's photographic approach is to use a hundred-year-old view camera, scratched lenses, and the wet-plate colloidal process. The wet-plate colloidal process was once used to document the battlefields during the American Civil War. This wet-plate process produces warm, dark images with acute detail. Due to the skin-like surface of the glass plate, these images also exhibit an eerie, hazy impression. Through this approach, she reveals her personal connection to and interpretation of the land. There is a haunting quality in Mann's landscapes, which correspond to the haunting memories of the Civil War battles fought in Loudoun County. As Mann stated, about nineteenth-century photography and her own processes:

The role of the photographer back then was to take images that they could bring back and sell to the public – especially images of the new Western frontier. In a sense their images were glorified, technically perfect, mammoth postcards. My work is quieter, sometimes just a field of grass or a fallen tree, I'm interested in the power of the quotidian whereas they were interested in the power of the extraordinary. (Mann, 20)

Like Mann, I also prefer to work in a straightforward manner photographing quiet scenes that seem unpretentious and tranquil. In my own work, I use a handmade wooden pinhole camera and traditional black and white film to evoke a similar emotion and contemplation of

time, as seen in Mann's work. The pinhole camera produces an image with a centralized focus and sharpness, which is similar to the inherent flaws of the 8x10 format camera that Mann uses. This effect of focus can give an image an ethereal feel, which I want to reflect in my own images.

In addition to Mann, the contemporary photography of twins, Doug and Mike Starn (1961-) of New York, has inspired my more recent work. I am engaged in the process of using a hands-on approach. I use their technique of layering photographic prints. In their work they cut, stain, disassemble, and paste images back together. Moreover, their work in layering their photographs with encaustic and lacquer has played a part in my more recent photographic works where I use an encaustic layer over digital prints. The Starn twin's mixed media processes also inspired me to print from film using traditional darkroom practices while digitally scanning images in high resolution. I then combine traditional and digital processes on archival inkjet and translucent papers in a mixed media approach.

In both Mann and the Starns' work there is simplicity in choice of subject matter. These artists often photograph the seemingly mundane and ordinary. Like them, I place emphasis on simplicity. Like them, I use a variety of traditional and non-conventional approaches. These artists have influenced me to revisit my own boundaries and have challenged me to participate in using imperfect qualities of technology and mixed media in making a statement.

Another influence, Albert Ralph Blakelock (1847-1919), was an American painter who was often labeled a visionary. His landscapes were notably filled with atmospheric effects that were typically illuminated by twilight and moonlight. He would characteristically compose a painting with dark silhouetted trees against the light of a night sky or early twilight creating a

backlit scene. Blakelock's use of light and dark was often interpreted as a metaphor for his emotional state at the time, which fluctuated between hope and despair.

Blakelock's influences on my recent paintings are due to his use of "muted, dark palette and carefully controlled tonalities that earn him the title of painter of darkness" (Smith). Like Blakelock, I often paint landscapes that have silhouetted trees backlit by a slowly descending sun on the horizon. Similarly, my palette is muted and dark. Blakelock often repudiated realism in an effort to communicate a mood. Heavily influenced by the landscape, I also use my imagination in developing a scene.

Mixed Media Photography

The Catocin Creek Bridge over Goose Creek in Loudoun County is a nine-panel iron Pratt truss bridge originally erected in 1899. I initially set out to photograph the bridge mostly due to its historic significance. However, once standing on the bridge I was caught by the numerous reflections of the trees flickering in the sunlight in the rippling water as it traveled past me. I wanted to record the scene before me but the full essence could not be captured in a single frame. The Holga camera and its unique flaw of capturing a series of overlapping views afforded me the panoramic view seen in *Goose Creek* (Appendix, 1). Printed on watercolor paper using a high-end inkjet printer, I used an archival paste to adhere the image to a birch wood cradled panel. The application of warm-toned encaustics was brushed on to the surface in multiple layers.

I used a similar approach in photographing *Red Rock* (Appendix, 2). Red Rock Wilderness Overlook, situated over the banks of the Potomac River, consists of ruins that date to 1869. I pass these ruins each day taking the back roads on my drive to and from the high school

where I teach. In the later part of the afternoon, when driving home from school, the sun is near setting and a warm light can be seen shining through the vacant barred windows of the stone buildings. The leaves have dropped by late fall and their gnarled branches have formed a repetitive pattern against the dark sky. Again, using my Holga camera, I photographed multiple images creating a panoramic effect. I can overlap multiple images by partially winding the film to the next frame. I often like the surprising results from the Holga camera. In *Red Rock*, the image was printed on watercolor paper using a high-end inkjet printer and pasted on to a wooden birch cradled panel and covered with encaustics.

I often roam the Izaak Walton Park area with my greyhound circling the three-acre pond, which attracts woodland birds, geese, and herons. The area is part of the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy, an all-volunteer organization that promotes the preservation of healthy wildlife habitats throughout Loudoun County. Often attracted to the pond, I wanted to photograph it using my wooden pinhole camera to capture the sun glistening on the water. In *Izaak Walton Pond* (Appendix, 3), the long exposure required with the pinhole rendered the cattails and the gnarled branches in the foreground with a sense of swaying movement. The sun's rays struck the water diagonally and complemented the swaying cattails. The final image was pasted onto a 24"x24" birch cradled panel using archival paste and was coated with a warm-toned encaustic.

Similarly, in the image *Green Pond* (Appendix, 4), I recorded the image of the tree that hovered over the pond, and was saturated with green algae. The sun was low on the horizon casting a dappled pattern on the pond's surface. The long exposure used with the pinhole camera recorded the pattern as a soft, fluid-like watery existence. The image was scanned at a high resolution, printed on watercolor paper, pasted on a 24"x24" birch panel, and coated with encaustic.

Traveling in my car, one late afternoon in October, I decided to take the historic and scenic route of Old Waterford Road near Paeonian Springs, Virginia. This hilly road remains unpaved as it meanders between Leesburg and Waterford, Virginia. Most of the area remains with one hundred acre farms, and few areas have been developed with the distained McMansions of greedy developers. The sun was setting quickly as I stopped my car in a deep, narrow gap to photograph *Old Waterford* (Appendix, 5). The view of the farmland was expansive. I used two images and placed them side-by-side in diptych format to convey the entire scene. Both images were scanned in high resolution and printed on watercolor paper using a high-end inkjet printer. Lastly, each image was adhered to a 24"x24" birch wood cradled panel and I applied encaustic giving the image a warm-toned appearance in keeping with the original scene.

In my mixed media photography, it is the rural environ that surround the county that inspires me to document the land. My personal memories and thoughts of these places are significant because I see this land as transient, passing quickly out of existence. I want the viewer to interpret the melancholy of the scene. Using a warm-toned encaustic applied to my photographs, I try to bring a sense of mystery and intrigue, and a sense of timelessness.

Painting

The daunting experience of taking a graduate painting class with limited experience became even more challenging when choosing to use oil. Painting plein-air was even more taxing considering all the influences that played a part in working with nature or in some cases against nature. Nonetheless, I enjoyed being in the outdoors. Most memories of my adult life had been spent backpacking in the mountains or camping by a river. These rustic experiences benefited my keen observational skills and knowledge about nature's shifting temperament.

Following the completion of my last plein-air class, I returned to a studio setting. I decided to take a second look at my landscape work, in particular a painting that appeared unfinished. I decided to go back and rework the painting *Potomac River* (Appendix, 6). The cool palette with subtle nuances of light, that were reminiscent of light in the late afternoon, energized me. I discovered that I had imagination and memory as two key components that could affect this painting, which became my springboard for all my other works. Working with a palette knife and brush, I transformed the painting from late afternoon to an early evening setting. I reworked the scene to include a low setting sun that created a backlit line of trees. Often, with brush in one hand and a palette knife in the other, I would rework the scene. Often, I studied books on the paintings of Blacklock and I marveled at the luminosity and atmospheric effects he brought to his work, and his lack of specific details. Similarly, I attempted to adapt this approach in *Potomac River*.

In *Oatlands* (Appendix, 7), I was inspired by a photograph I had taken with my Holga camera and wanted to recreate the scene using oils. Looking back, the black and white photograph exhibited a high contrast scene with a strong vertical element of sunlight that was centrally located in the image. The square-shaped negative used in the Holga camera influenced my choice of a square 24”x24” canvas. The toned ground I chose was used to create an atmospheric mood of light and to indicate the heat of a summer’s day. A transparent limited palette consisting of warm, reddish-brown hues was used to define the shadows. I allowed the toned ground to determine the highlights and used transparent glazes to create softer transitions between the dark areas.

In *Pond Reflection* (Appendix, 8) I used a *bistre* method. The *bistre*, or wipe-out, method involves creating an underpainting using warm browns. A thin wash of raw umber is painted

over a white canvas and then wiped out to create a tonal underpainting. The shadows are built up using thin color allowing the warm of the brown to show through while the lights and mid-tones are applied as opaque color. The bistre method lends itself very well to *chiaroscuro*.

(Baker) First, I covered the ground in a brown pigment of burnt umber to create a warmer effect. I then wiped out features of the composition leaving the preliminary drawing or plan. I used a muted, warm-toned ground to indicate a low setting sun. I wanted the trees to appear backlit while they created reflections in the pond in the foreground. In similar fashion to my previous work, I used a limited palette of transparent oils. It was my intention to give the viewer a visual sense of an all over warmth to the scene. So, I incorporated several glazes of Indian yellow to the final surface.

Having incorporated several traditional oil painting techniques, I wanted to take it a step further and prepare my own canvases in keeping with old master practices. However, I used contemporary products in the preparation of the supports. In *Snickersville Pike* (Appendix, 9), I prepared a canvas with PVC glue and attached it to stretcher bars. Then, I used a large palette knife to apply two coats of alkyd resin, titanium dioxide, and barium sulfate to the ground. This particular recipe was used because I did not want to use toxic lead-based ingredients. I then used subsequent layers of Prussian blue, transparent white, gray, and violet to recreate the dusky, nearly black sky.

In *Pond* (Appendix, 10) I used the bistre method again, developing an underpainting by applying burnt umber. Then, I let the canvas dry somewhat before wiping out with a cotton cloth the areas that were to be the highlights. When I returned to my painting, the thinned raw umber mixture had dripped down the surface of the canvas. At first, I was upset at the result and thought it was ruined. However, a closer look at the effects of the drips created shadows in all the

right places. Quickly, I turned my canvas 180 degrees and allowed the same dripping process to occur. I had used the wipe-out method to determine the highlights and mid-tones. Lastly, I glazed the canvas with a high-viscosity glazing medium to create an enamel-like surface quality. The final result was very similar to the monochromatic photograph I had used as a guide for the painting.

My love of history, tradition, and antique processes has guided my choice of using traditional oil painting techniques in my paintings. The timely process of preparing grounds, layering thinly applied paints, and glazing are processes that allow contemplation at each level.

Conclusion

The MIS-IAR Program has helped me make the transition from being an art teacher to emerging as a self-confident artist. This experience has enabled me to develop both artistically and professionally. In particular, the professors in the program encouraged my development, challenged my intent, and helped me to think more deeply about why I do what I do. I now have a direction in my work where I feel confident in artistic exploration and personal self-discovery. My artistic voice has emerged with clarity and reflects a visually aesthetic experience.

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Appendix

List of Figures

- Figure 1. *Goose Creek*, photographic sequence and encaustic, 12"x24", 2010.
- Figure 2. *Red Rock*, photographic sequence and encaustic, 12"x50", 2010.
- Figure 3. *Izaak Walton Pond*, pinhole photograph and encaustic, 24"x24", 2011.
- Figure 4. *Green Pond*, pinhole photograph and encaustic, 24"x24", 2011.
- Figure 5. *Old Waterford*, diptych, pinhole photograph and encaustic, 24"x24" each panel, 2012.
- Figure 6. *Potomac River*, oil on canvas, 24"x36", 2010.
- Figure 7. *Oatlands*, oil on canvas, 24"x24", 2010.
- Figure 8. *Pond Reflection*, oil on canvas, 24"x36", 2011.
- Figure 9. *Snickersville Pike*, oil on canvas, 30"x48", 2011.
- Figure 10. *Pond*, oil on canvas, 24"x24", 2011.



Figure 1. *Goose Creek*, photographic sequence and encaustic, 12"x24", 2010.



Figure 2. *Red Rock*, photographic sequence and encaustic, 12”x54”, 2010.



Figure 3. *Izaak Walton Pond*, pinhole photograph and encaustic, 24"x24", 2011.



Figure 4. *Green Pond*, pinhole photograph and encaustic, 24"x24", 2011.



Figure 5. *Old Waterford*, diptych, pinhole photograph and encaustic, 24”x24” each panel, 2012.



Figure 6. *Potomac River*, oil on canvas, 24"x36", 2010.



Figure 7. *Oatlands*, oil on canvas 24"x24", 2010.



Figure 8. *Pond Reflection*, oil on canvas, 24”x36”, 2011.



Figure 9. *Snickersville Pike*, oil on canvas 30"x48", 2011.



Figure 10. *Pond*, oil on canvas 24"x24", 2011.

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EDUCATION:

- 2013 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art, Virginia Commonwealth University. Richmond, Virginia. Emphasis in Mixed Media and Painting.
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- 1981-1984 Freelance Photographer, Washington, D.C.

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