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Visual Vessels

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

by

Theresa H. Ornoff
Bachelor of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA,
1979

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
December, 2011

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Artist Statement

In 1989 while our severely ill son lay in our arms my husband and I asked the surgeon what he would do if he were in our shoes. "Play the hand you're dealt." he replied. It was not this doctor's only reference to the gamble life holds for each of us. Based on his advice to us I began to investigate the role that fate and predetermination play in our lives and consequently how much control we have on the outcome of life's events. A cathartic family portrait piece laid the groundwork for a series of metaphorical portraits as I began to investigate *identity*.

The continued use of identity as my thematic approach has allowed me to record emotional waypoints and personal change throughout my life and to additionally pose questions about what constitutes a portrait. At times this approach thankfully led me to use my art as a visual vessel, a container in which to place my emotional burdens lightening the load while I continued on in my daily life

Visual Vessels

Introduction

Upon earning a degree in art education from Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), I spent years of my professional life in the public and private school systems. I have never regretted my decision to concentrate my creativity in the elementary and middle school classroom. For three decades my medium has been children and just as any visual artist plans, executes, and anticipates the outcome of a piece I did the same with each lesson that I taught. My name was as surely signed to the bottom of each piece as was each child's.

As required to renew my teaching certificate I took a variety of graduate classes, the majority of which were theory-based academic art education courses. Testing graduate school waters with these art education classes left me wondering about obtaining an advanced degree. I certainly enjoyed the academic challenge and the time spent with colleagues however there was no creative growth taking place within me.

Turning to museum-taught studio classes offered no acceptable alternative because they were long on technique but short on content. Continuing isolation as an artist was reinforcing my tendency to create in conventional ways and media. Consequently, my art said nothing. The mechanics were present but the message was absent.

The search for an advanced studio experience led me to a summer painting workshop offered through VCU. This graduate class created awareness that there were professional art educators who were professional artists. Interaction with individuals

who faced similar challenges compelled me to ultimately choose to pursue a studio art degree in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts (MIS-IAR) Program at VCU. The challenge offered through the MIS-IAR Program has given me an artistic voice, elevated my work product, and heightened my artistic perceptions and awareness. I have embraced the chance to create pieces that have a complex content in painting and mixed media and I look forward to creating and exhibiting artwork that can stand on its own on a professional level.

Art to Express Emotion

When our first child was born and subsequently diagnosed with cystic fibrosis (CF), the emotions that I felt were overwhelming. As salutary as creating artwork could have been it was out of the question because of the medical regimens and therapies that our son required on a daily basis, all in addition to my teaching responsibilities. Sketch books and journals were the closest that I could come to making art for a very long time and were the earliest visual outlet for my emotions. Later in my life, sorting through the journal entries I had made and peering back at that young mother, I realized how much responsibility she had taken for the situation. She wondered throughout the pages if all of this was her fault, if it was fate or predetermination, and if she would ever gain control. In reality the distillation of those memories afforded me the opportunity to speak about them in my work with a much higher degree of maturity.

Revisiting these emotions with the tempering of time and age laid the groundwork for the inaugural piece in my *Kaleidoscope Series*. *Life* (Appendix, 1) was the first fully developed piece of artwork that I had made in a very long time. The

kaleidoscope format which I used was instrumental in communicating what I wanted to say about the role of fate and predetermination in the lives of each of us. Just as the colors and shapes viewed through the eyepiece of the kaleidoscope can shift with the slightest rotation, each element of the piece is poised similarly. Arranged in color wheel sequence the primary, secondary, and complementary placements characterize the orderliness that life is supposed to possess. I chose to use children's game pieces and elementary art materials as the components of the design. The complex intermingling of the two is meant to remind us that even though fate can sometimes determine our circumstances each of us ultimately determines how we exist with those circumstances. This artwork became a cathartic family portrait and a precious visual vessel into which I could contain debilitating emotions. The use of inanimate objects as replacements for human subjects would become a common theme in much of my later work.

Art to Convey a Message

The catastrophic health events happening in our family began an intense introspection process and a period of deep spirituality. I continually questioned what this existence holds for each of us and how we should respond to situations presented us. Living with extreme circumstances has a tendency to focus one's senses like a laser beam, blocking out the extraneous and allowing concentration only on one's personal state of affairs. So it was with me when the words of a weekly homily converged over me like a beacon. So memorable was the message to me personally that I was compelled to investigate the broad theme of identity in *Baptism I* (Appendix, 2). The creation of this piece laid the foundation for certain symbolism that I still employ

in my artwork.

I began with the age-old genre of the self-portrait. Examining traditional forms of portraiture and understanding that these could not deeply enough convey my message on identity, I paused with a photograph of myself in my hand. Knowing that this visual recording was not the whole of me, I struggled to find the appropriate device to record the multiple layers of my character and reveal how I thought my portrait should appear. Intricately cross-hatching in graphite, I recreated the fingers of my right hand grasping the photograph as my left hand holds the pencil. The paper beneath my hands is blank. Layered beneath the smaller drawing of my hands is a larger drawing of a finely woven fabric. This fabric is our baptism garment worn as an outward sign of our invitation into Christ's life of service. Constructed with acts of love or acts of indifference the interwoven threads reveal the corporal works of mercy. The open weave symbolizes and celebrates our life as the baptism garment that is constantly being woven and unwoven by our actions. Bordering the cross-hatched fabric is a drawn geometric pattern superimposed with allegorical self-representations meant to extend the theme of identity.

The ability to convey personal messages and express emotions became a driving factor in these early pieces and created a framework for the production of artwork in the MIS-IAR Program. Where formal words were inadequate, images were becoming my vernacular.

Art and Internal Influences

In a letter, Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) laments that her education left her with

little to say as an artist except for the practice of using her art materials as a language. She writes “I had become so fluent with them [her art materials] when I was so young that they were simply another language that I handled easily. But what to say with them? I decided I was a very stupid fool not to at least paint as I wanted to and to say what I wanted to when I painted” (Zelanski, 42). Possessing an alternate language is a powerful privilege. Not unlike Georgia O’Keeffe, I wanted to not only be fluent but to be eloquent. To this end I began to examine influences on my being, how they shaped my identity, and to find ways to speak about them through my work.

Postcards From a Marriage (Appendix, 3 and 3a) addresses the theme of identity within a marriage. Through a series of eight mixed media landscapes designed to resemble vintage postcards, I compared the stages of my marriage to a lifelong trip. I chose to use photographic landscapes taken by my husband. A variety of images were printed on fabric as well as transparency film and then hand-painted. Using the various photographs as collage elements I underscored the phases of identity that each of us goes through during the course of a relationship. Hand-sewn embellishments add varying amounts of texture and visual interest. The border of the postcards was created by interpreting the landscape colors in fabric, sewing down scraps of material in crazy quilt style, recalling my continuing metaphor of life as a weaving. Scattered like mail dropped on an entrance hall table, *Postcards From a Marriage* emphasizes the importance of retaining identity within a partnership by being a complete work of art both separately and collectively.

Working within the concept of identity, I began a succession of family portraits using metaphorical objects in substitution for traditional portrait images. I incorporated

the previously used kaleidoscope format as the hallmark of the series. *Windward* (Appendix, 4) is an acknowledgement of my sister's love of sailing. Each design in the kaleidoscope series conceals the identity of the portrait subject due to the generalized nature of the icons yet discloses personal enthusiasms to those of us in the inner circle.

In *Compass and Cairn* (Appendix, 5) I compared my life to a journey taken without a roadmap. Responding to internal influences of fear versus courage, I documented the uncertainty of embarking on a future with ill children. Using the experience of a difficult hike and likening it to my life, *Compass and Cairn* speaks about finding one's own way. Contrasting the panic of an unknown future to life experienced, I created a metaphorical compass to celebrate the achievement of raising my two children to adulthood.

Art and External Influences

External influences caused me to move to less restrictive art forms. Using mixed media in *Ordination* (Appendix, 6), *Baptism II* (Appendix, 7), and *Martyrs of the Church* (Appendix, 8), I was able to communicate my thoughts on the progress of the Catholic Church as it moved into the new millennium. My Catholic faith has comforted me in times of great pain but I continually question the rationale behind some of its teaching. *Ordination* addresses the role of women in the Church's contemporary hierarchy. An exclusionist attitude towards female vocations in the priesthood has isolated many women who feel the need to answer God's call. This priestly stole incorporates Catholic symbols and the names of canonized women to exemplify the contributions waiting to be made by women clergy. The names of Catholic women who have been ordained

outside of the authority of the formal Church are inscribed on “X chromosomes” along with the date of their ordination. These are contained separately in a Marion blue pocket at the bottom of the stole to represent their excommunication from the Roman Catholic Church. *Baptism II* stresses the importance of thinking for one’s self and focusing the efforts of our Christian life in the right direction. The painted image of a baptismal garment hovers over the corporal works of mercy which are woven into a symbolic fabric with golden letters. A paraphrased quotation from *The Emperor’s New Clothes* is a humorous reminder to not end up like the emperor, naked for all to see. Finally, *Martyrs of the Church* criticizes the Church’s stance on condom use. A shrine to mourn the innocent victims of the AIDS epidemic in Africa depicts the symbolic Body of Christ ensconced in condoms with African women painted upon them. The incorporated text appeals to the Church to change its rigid stance on condom use.

Traditional and Nontraditional Processes

I also worked in traditional portraiture. I used my own family and friends as subjects while I worked in oils and pastels. *The Heath Children* (Appendix, 9) exemplifies my style showing my admiration for John Singer Sargent’s (1856-1925) “rapid, summary brushwork” (Gallati, 106). Outside of traditional portraiture I made remembrances for friends whose children passed away. *Remembering Matty* (Appendix, 10) and *How Do You Keep on Dancing?* (Appendix, 11) record the images of the deceased as well as family members’ personal reminiscences. I found once again that just recording the image of someone could not begin to tell the story of who that person was. In *Remembering Matty* strips of paper were given to anyone who

wanted to write a memory about Matty. I was overwhelmed by the number of responses. The memory papers were wrapped around twigs and tied off like small scrolls. These confidential memories reside with Matty inside the frame as new growth sprouts from it. Maternal words help define the background in *How Do You Keep on Dancing?* A mundane portrait is made more meaningful with tender words from a mother to her son and the grandson she is left to raise. The layers in the piece represent the physical separation death brings. It is interesting to find that I can divert my own sadness by detailing another's.

The transition between traditional painting processes and a mixed media approach sparked in me an excitement for the landscape genre. The manipulation of the paint on a nontraditional surface resulted in an abstraction of the subject matter that has a freshness that I had been looking for. In *Landscape I* (Appendix, 12) I employed a childlike approach to the paint, playing with it to communicate the joy that I felt in initially seeing the represented place. By setting different goals in making this landscape series I was able to be less representational and more emotional.

Extending the landscape genre into my mixed media work allowed me to create a series of works that communicate ideas about power. In the sculptural paper piece *Water Versus Rock* (Appendix, 13), bas relief panels represent a flowing river colliding with horizontally placed rock walls. Both elements struggle for power over the other, pushing and resisting the other's will. The water yields initially but the rock yields ultimately. By personifying the natural elements I can comment on the personal battle for power in human relationships. This struggle is both universal and eternal.

Movement in and out of traditional art media, as I incorporated new techniques and technology, gave me new freedom. I liked the way that I could mix the media to match the message. I have enjoyed becoming more fluent and being able to place content over form. It has given my artwork more power and maturity.

Conclusion

Having gone through the MIS-IAR Program I now look for a deeper level of communicating when I approach a piece of artwork. Physical layers as well as symbolic layers in a variety of materials reveal and conceal messages for me. The act of journaling my thoughts in anticipation of a piece has helped me come to terms with life. Each artwork becomes a visual vessel, storing the experiences of life and making the journey's load a little lighter.

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Figure 5. *Compass and Cairn*, mixed media, 12½" x 12½" x 2", 2010.



Figure 6. *Ordination*, mixed media, 34" x 17", 2009.



Figure 7. *Baptism II*, mixed media, 15" x 15" x 1½", 2009.



Figure 8. *Martyrs of the Church*, mixed media, 9½" x 10" x 2 ¼", 2010.



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Figure 13. *Water Versus Rock*, mixed media, 17½ " x 17¾", 2008.

TERESA H. ORNOFF

EDUCATION

- 2012 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.
- 1979 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- 1999-present Art Teacher, Southeastern Elementary School, Chesapeake Public Schools, Chesapeake, Virginia.
- 1988-1997 Art Teacher, Baylake Pines Private School, Virginia Beach, Virginia.
- 1979-1987 Art Teacher, Mechanicsville Elementary School, Hanover County Public Schools, Mechanicsville, Virginia.

RELATED WORK EXPERIENCE

- 2007 Illustrator, Heath, Kathy and Karla Martin, *Logan's Journey*. Chesapeake, Virginia: bPlus Books, 2007.
- 1998-1999 Adult Art Instructor, Chesapeake Public Schools Adult Education, Chesapeake, Virginia.
- 1998-1999 Art Teacher, Summer Diabetes Camp, Chesapeake Regional Hospital Lifestyle Center, Chesapeake, Virginia.
- 1997 Master Teacher, Norfolk Botanical Gardens, Norfolk, Virginia.

EXHIBITS

- 2012 *Visual Vessels*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia at Oak Grove United Methodist Church, Chesapeake, Virginia.
- 2007 *Tidewater Virginia Art Education Association Annual Exhibit*, Cape Henry Collegiate Private School, Virginia Beach, Virginia.
- 2005 *Tidewater Virginia Art Education Association Annual Exhibit*, Hermitage Foundation Gallery, Norfolk, Virginia.
- 2004 *Tidewater Virginia Art Education Association Annual Exhibit*, Norfolk State University, Norfolk, Virginia.
- 1999 *Tidewater Virginia Art Education Association Annual Exhibit*, Old Dominion University Student Gallery, Norfolk, Virginia.