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Minimizing Chaos

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MINIMIZING CHAOS

by

MERRITT H. GILES

Under the Direction of Professor Bruce Little

ABSTRACT

The thesis works presented in this paper are mixed media paintings that explore the tension between artistic control and abandon in what is essentially an intuitive driven process of image making. With these thesis works I have sought to use additive and subtractive processes to create compositions that are as much an exploration of materials as they are an exploration of the formal elements of art. My work is focused on recreating the patterns, textures, and surfaces found in man-made objects and environments that I find in my daily life and I believe are often overlooked in their aesthetic value. In doing so, I hope to recreate for the viewer the moments of aesthetic discovery that I have found within the patterns, textures, and surface qualities of these objects.

INDEX WORDS: Formalism, Process, Composition, Minimalism, Donald Judd, Willem De Kooning, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Ryman, Antoni Tapies, Jackson Pollock, Anselm Kiefer, Aesthetic Discovery

MINIMIZING CHAOS

by

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B.F.A., Valdosta State University, 2004

M.F.A., Georgia Southern University, 2011

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in

Partial Fulfillment Of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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MINIMIZING CHAOS

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Electronic Version Approved:

Summer 2011

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents for always believing I would finish. It is also dedicated to A.C., N.N., and A.D. for their help along the way.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank thesis committee chair, Bruce Little, and committee members Marc Moulton and Patricia Carter for all their guidance throughout the writing of this thesis and throughout my time as a graduate student at Georgia Southern University.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Purpose of the Thesis

The purpose of this paper is to provide a critical analysis of the artwork presented in my thesis exhibition. This paper will examine the formal and conceptual content of these artworks as well as outline the artists and art movements that influenced the development of my aesthetic. In addition, this paper will discuss the methodology applied to the production of these works. This paper will include illustrations of the artworks in the exhibition as well as illustrations of relevant art historical references.

Autobiographical Origins of the Thesis Works

Making art has been part of my life for as long as I can remember; whether it was finger-painting, coloring in coloring books as a child, or sketching imitations of comic books as a preteen. Art making filled an innate desire to make marks and impose a sense of order on them. The visual impact of line, color, and form were what drew me to art and moved me to create. It was the elation of creating that made me produce art at a young age; the power to recreate my experiences when looking at the illustrations in books and comic books and the reward when reliving my responses to their formal properties.

Early in my art career I wanted to be a graphic designer. I was most interested in being able to use my artistic ability in an organized fashion because I saw other forms of art as lacking valid structure. My deep need for control and structure initially led me to avoid other types of art. I was content with the

structure and order of graphic design until I realized it was difficult for me to create when conditions were too controlled, too structured or dictated by an external source.

Due to this discovery I abandoned graphic design and moved to photography. The photographic art form's rigorous technical processes provided me with a desired level of structure. At the same time, the camera gave me the creative freedom I could not find in graphic design. Photography seemed well suited to me; I had an eye for it. I was able to find subjects that interested me like old dilapidated houses, junkyards, sidewalks, or an old boat. The lens drew me to objects that appeared to have been long abandoned, both literally and visually. Within these I was able to find certain compositions and surface qualities that moved me. I was unaware at the time that it was the visual character of these objects, rather than the objects themselves, that drew my interest and would influence my later work. Additionally, when I took photos of these objects, the objects became precious to me. By photographing these objects I was able to control them, lock them into a specific moment. I took pleasure in the mere discovery of these objects. This pleasure was heightened when I used the camera to capture that moment of discovery. I realized my photographs were not replications of any mere image, but were recreations of moments of discovery. In addition to my attempts to recreate the moment of discovery through photography, I found mixed media painting to be a way to satisfy my need for control while at the same time allowing myself to follow my artistic instincts. Through painting I was searching to find a balance between accident and controlled. Mixed media

painting allowed me to assert order on different aspects of the painting process while at other times it allowed me to let things develop randomly and organically. I have sought to use additive and subtractive processes to create compositions that are an exploration of materials and the formal elements of art. I focus on recreating the patterns, textures, and surfaces found in often-overlooked man-made objects. This process allows me to recreate the moment of aesthetic discovery for the viewer. The pleasure found in these moments of discovery drive me to recreate the visual nature of these objects and show them to be worthy of aesthetic attention.

The elation of creating has stayed with me through my advanced studies, even as I struggle to define my art. I have found it is the creative process and the act of discovery that drives me artistically. Through the building of a canvas, the application of paints and materials, and watching the canvas come to life in a slow painstaking process to yield something that exists on its own I am able to fulfill my need for control. Additionally, the surprises that come about through accidents and innate responses to the process are further rewards. To me art is a creative formal exercise that is as much an intuitive, visceral process as it is structured.

As an artist, I am drawn to certain visual experiences that are often disregarded on a day to day basis. Things others might not see as being worthy of aesthetic attention, inspire and move me. I see these “discovered compositions” every day; they can be found in the restroom of the local restaurant or in the sidewalk of a library. These “discovered compositions” are common materials that come together to trigger an aesthetic response that I, as a trained artist, can

see and appreciate. I am not usually attracted to what most would consider beautiful; pristine objects do not generally move me. Although, I can appreciate them for some of their characteristics, they do not inspire me. I am inspired by the subtle textures on the wall of an old building, or in the piles of discarded materials found at the construction site down the road from your home. These compositions can be made from anything, such as pieces of cardboard with paint and concrete splattered across them, pieces of metal that have been thrown away and covered with sand, or postage stamps arranged on a box with postmarks and water stains. The arrangements are both organic and structured; within each are many subtle textures, marks from past owners, and strong focal points that create interest and give the composition a life of its own. These objects represent a synthesis of accident and intent, which I attempt to incorporate in my artistic process and provide opportunities for moments of discovery.

Statement of Artistic Problem

The thesis works are mixed media paintings that document my creative process in which I search for the right balance of imposed order and chance effects that recreate, first for me and then for the viewer, the aesthetic response I experience when discovering chance compositions found in the materials from man made environment around me. These works explore how the tension between control and abandon can be directed toward image making. They attempt to translate, into my artistic processes, my innate need for control while embracing the accidental and unexpected to such a degree that the structure does not become predictable and uninteresting. The inspiration for the works stems from my

aesthetic experience when witnessing these “discovered compositions” in my surroundings.

Summary

In summary, the thesis works address my innate need for order in my life and how order translates within my artwork, while at the same time creating interest by embracing the unexpected within each artwork. After trying my hand at other forms of art I have found that mixed media painting provides me with the structure and order for which I search; while simultaneously allowing me to trust my artistic instincts and embrace chance effects that keep a painting interesting and fresh. By using what I find artistically stirring in the man-made environment surrounding me as inspiration, I am experimenting with various materials to produce a desired surface that recreates these experiences. Through this approach I am creating visually poignant compositions inspired by my surroundings and putting them on display to evoke the same emotional response and experience that I have felt at the moment of discovery. In my work I hope to create a space that will provide my audience with the opportunity to experience these moments of aesthetic discovery.

Chapter II

Historical Influences

Introduction

Many different artists have influenced the body of work created for my thesis exhibition. The following chapter will examine the art and artists that have influenced my thesis works, both directly and indirectly. Being an artist I am attracted to other artists predominantly by the visual experience I have when viewing their work. I am drawn to works that focus on texture, surface, and materials as well as works that are engaging when viewed from close range as from across a gallery. The artists I respond to most favorably use materials and compositional elements that draw me into the piece, move my eye through the composition driving me to look for aesthetic discoveries and at the same time present well-ordered compositions that satisfy my innate need for order.

Indirect Influences

I first discovered mixed media painting in undergraduate classes when I was shown the work of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. These two artists are the catalyst for my exploration of mixed media and common materials. Their use of everyday materials from their surroundings to create interesting and artistically successful objects struck a sympathetic chord with me. I was intrigued by these paintings that were not paintings in the traditional sense. This idea of taking everyday found materials and combining them together to create a visually interesting and successful artwork led me to experiment with mixed media painting. Jasper Johns' work, *Painted Bronze, 1960* (Figure 1) was one of my first

introductions to works that engaged ordinary subjects, like the cans of beer in the sculpture. I was inspired by the connection between the abandoned objects I found interesting and Johns' use of ordinary objects. Additionally, his surface treatment for the sculpture reminded me of the surfaces of the abandoned objects I had made the subject of my work. Rauschenberg's work, *Canyon, 1959* (Figure 2), also appealed to me due in part to his use of rough and uneven paint application. This "combine", as Rauschenberg called it, was also appealing because it reminded me of an aesthetic discovery I might stumble upon in an abandoned house. After exploring the works of Johns and Rauschenberg I began to experiment with using found objects as these items lent themselves to my aesthetic interest. However, in time I moved away from using found objects as they did not satisfy my need for control within the artistic process. Found objects are items that have already experienced an aging process, much like the process I reconstruct when creating my current artwork. Today, I will occasionally use found materials in my work, when it is called for, but I have found that it is more artistically satisfying to discover a composition through an additive/ subtractive process than to use a found object. With the found object the history of the piece is already there, in some cases it is ready for display, but with a new object, one must give it a life, and one is afforded the process of discovery. By reproducing the aging process it allows me to physically manipulate the materials, which satisfies my need for control, as well as artificially aging the artwork.

My use of materials has been influenced by artists such as: Willem De Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Anselm Kiefer and Donald Judd. Although each of



Figure 1. Jasper Johns, *Painted Bronze*, 1960. Cast bronze, paint, 5 ½" high, 8" wide, 4 ¾" deep. Museum Ludwig, Cologne.



Figure 2. Robert Rauschenberg, *Canyon*, 1959. Oil, pencil, paper, fabric, metal, cardboard box, printed paper, printed reproductions, photograph, wood, paint tube and mirror on canvas, with oil on bald eagle, string, and pillow, 6' 9 ¾" x 5' 10" x 2'. Sonnabend Collection.

these artists differs conceptually from one another and from me; I find their treatment of surface and use of materials appealing. When viewing their works, I choose to focus on the formal qualities within each artwork. The works created by each of these artists has triggered an aesthetic response with me. Their works are all object-centric; more specifically, the surface qualities created by De Kooning and Pollock's paint application, the textures and scale of Kiefer and the focus on the object by Judd, all appeal to my concern with the viewer's sensory experience with the object.

Pollock and De Kooning's very physical Abstract Expressionist application of paint captivated me from the first time I was introduced to their work. They both had the ability to control the paint while at the same time giving the appearance of a vigorous and organic application. De Kooning's process of layering intrigued me; the energetic brushstrokes and active surfaces caused me to explore more painterly compositions and the same can be said for Pollock's work. Simultaneously, the all over compositions, globs of paint, and the physical slashing strokes, which are visceral and primal, engaged and moved me as a viewer. In the surfaces created in works like De Kooning's, *Woman 1* (Figure 3) and Pollock's, *Number 1* (Figure 4) I found aesthetic discoveries that excited me and drove me to want to recreate experiences in my own paintings.

Kiefer's works are visually powerful due to their size and use of materials. His works draw viewers in with their sheer scale, and once drawn in the viewer is given the opportunity to more closely examine the very excited active surface of these paintings. These works are only made more complex by his use of materials

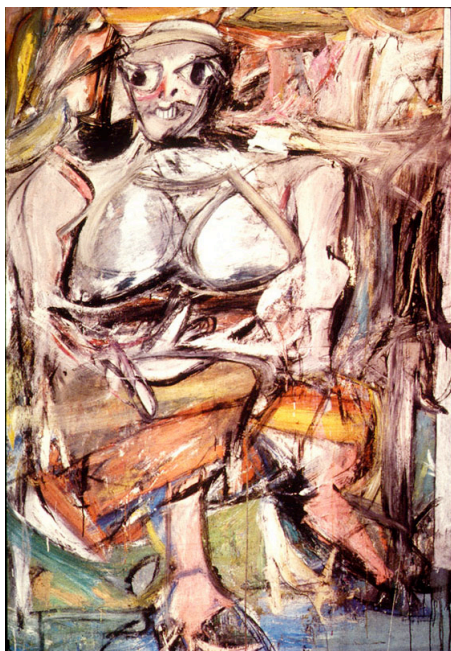


Figure 3. Willem De Kooning, *Woman I*, 1950-52. Oil on Canvas, 6' 3 7/8" x 4' 10". Museum of Modern Art, New York



Figure 4. Jackson Pollock, *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)*, 1950. Oil, enamel, and aluminum paint on canvas, 7' 3" x 9' 10". National Gallery of Art, Washington

such as straw, tar, and fabrics to achieve hardened and crusty surfaces. Kiefer's piece, *Nigredo* (Figure 5) is monumental in scale depicting a scarred landscape, which is full of textures and surface. Seeing his works in person had a tremendous effect on my experimentation with similar materials and his influence can be seen in most all of my thesis works in my focus on texture, surface and use of materials. After seeing his works as an undergraduate I began experimenting with canvases coated in tar, which led me to incorporate the material on a regular basis. The textures created with roofing tar in its various forms helped me to achieve a surface that contained aspects of the man-made discovered compositions to which I referred earlier. This can be seen in *Composition #14* (Figure 13) with my use of tar to contrast the smooth fibered material against the rough textured white background.

The Minimalist sculptures of Donald Judd, which use the form and order of the pieces as the subject matter, also influenced my conception of art. Judd's work does not intend to be metaphorical or symbolic but a declaration of the sculpture's objecthood¹. This can be seen in his artwork, *Untitled, 1969* (Figure 6). I find his powerful use of economy captivating and have incorporated this economy in my works through simple geometric shapes. These simple geometric shapes can be seen in my thesis work with the circles in *Composition #23* (Figure 15) and the repetition of the square in *Composition #14* (Figure 13).

¹ Fred S. Kleiner, Christin J. Mamiya, Richard G. Tansey, *Gardner's Art Through The Ages*, ed. David Tatom, 11th ed., (Orlando: Hartcourt College Publishers, 2001), 1084



Figure 5. Anselm Kiefer, *Nigredo*, 1984. Oil paint on photosensitized fabric, acrylic emulsion, straw, shellac, relief paint on paper pulled from painted wood, 11' x 18'. Philadelphia Museum of Art

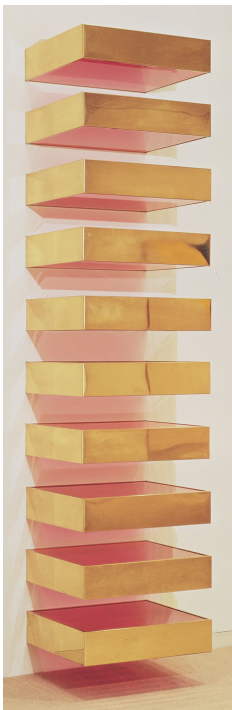


Figure 6. Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1969. Brass and colored fluorescent plexiglass on steel brackets, ten units, 6 1/8" x 2' x 2' 3" each, with 6" intervals. Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington

Each of these artists has had an indirect influence on my use of media and materials. The techniques and paint application, surface treatments, and focus on the object inspired my early experiments, and helped me to develop my own aesthetic path.

Direct Influences

The two most direct influences on my thesis work are Antoni Tapies and Robert Ryman. These artists are very different conceptually, but are very similar visually. Both artists are concerned with the exploration of the painting as an object and exploring various materials in search of rich surfaces.

Antoni Tapies is a Spanish artist who visually has influenced my thesis work with his use of mundane, weathered materials including dirt, tape, marble dust and pine straw. Tapies strives to capture the beauty in such common things in his surroundings, like walls or sidewalks. He depicts abandoned scarred walls from his homeland which stir up emotion and curiosity about each piece. Tapies also has a strong affinity for graffiti and calligraphic marks in his paintings².

According to Robin Cembalest, Executive Editor of Art News :

Tapies style is characterized by the juxtaposition of weighty symbols, such as a cross, with the mundane, the weathered, the dirty – sand, string, straw, furniture, even earth. He assaults his canvases – he scratches, scrapes, and gouges, he leaves footprints and handprints. Names, letters, numbers, words are urgently scribbled like graffiti. At the same time, his work has a physical appeal that many observers describe as sensual or seductive.³

² Hilton Kramer, “Heart of the Matter”, *Art and Antiques*. April 1995. 82-83

³ Robin Cembalest, “Master of Matter.” *Art News*, Summer 1990, 142-7



Figure 7. Antoni Tàpies, *Lateral Matter with Lateral Papers*, 1963. Mixed media on canvas on wood, 102 3/8" x 76 3/4". Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona

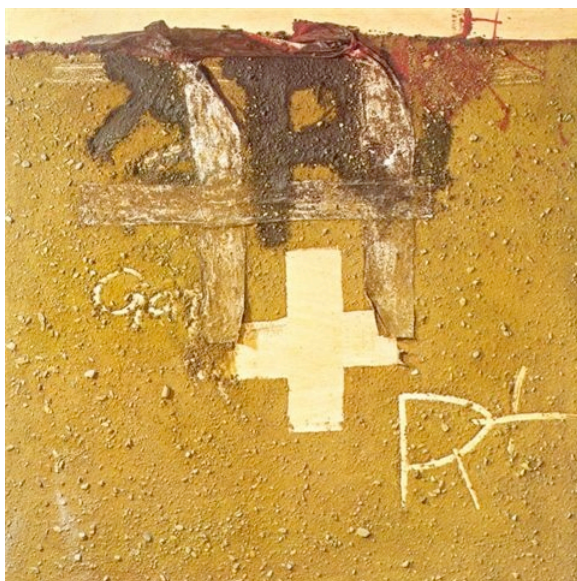


Figure 8. Antoni Tàpies, *Creu I R*, 1975. Mixed media on wood, 165.5 x 162.5 cm

His work is about the city he grew up in and about his current surroundings. By expressing his feelings about these he hopes to liberate himself and his viewer⁴. With my body of thesis works I also strive to engage the viewer, however not on an emotional level, but rather to focus their attention on the surface and texture of the work, in an effort to cause an aesthetic discovery. Tapies' use of mundane materials, gestural marks, and intuitive compositions are what spark my imagination and inspire me to make my paintings. Works such as *Lateral Matter with Lateral Papers*, 1963 (Figure 7) and *Creu I R*, 1975 (Figure 8) influenced my use of tar, sand and many other materials. A composition similar to the layered composition of Tapies' *Creu I R*, 1975 (Figure 8) can be seen in my artwork *Composition #13* (Figure 12). These works epitomize his use of mundane materials, physical marks and subtleties like those Cembalest mentioned. Within each of his very physically weighty artworks he achieves a very powerful visual result while at the same time drawing the viewer in with sensitive subtleties. His mastery of mundane material and the aged look sent me in search of such things in my own surroundings to inspire me and for use in the development of my own visual vocabulary.

Robert Ryman is another significant artistic influence on my thesis works. Art critic, Martha Schwendener, states that Ryman's "subject matter is boiled down to three elements: support, color, and brushstroke"⁵. His Minimalist paintings about the application of paint pushed me to explore these qualities in my

⁴ Robin Cembalest, "Master of Matter." *Art News*, Summer 1990, 142-7

⁵ Martha Schwendener, "Robert Ryman: Paceywildenstein- Reviews", *Artforum*, New York: Feb. 2003, vol. 41, Iss. 6, p. 138

own work. He chooses to paint around the sides of the canvas to push the piece away from the wall, to emphasize the painting's "object-ness" and how the paint is applied to the canvas. I too employ this strategy of applying my materials on all sides of the support. Also by using 1 inch x 4 inch pieces of wood for my stretchers I create actual depth with the artwork, which further reinforces the physical nature and object-ness of each of my works. Ryman has stated "there is not a question of what to paint but how to paint it"⁶. This statement relates to my work in that I also focus heavily on process. According to Tuchman, Ryman prefers to create his paintings in a square format to avoid using the more typical rectangular composition⁷. Ryman's works *Untitled 1958* (Figure 9) and *Untitled, 1960* (Figure 10) both show his application of paint, square compositions, and his pure Minimalist aesthetic. As for me, it is a personal preference to work in a square format. The square format has always been a challenge for me to control compositionally, I believe by challenging myself, I am more open to the unexpected and accidental elements that lead to a more compelling artwork. Furthermore, Ryman's visual sensibilities are very similar to mine with regard to his physical, painterly application of paint and materials. This painterly style of applying paint can be seen in the thesis works, *Three Bars* (Figure 14) and in *Composition #14* (Figure 13) in the background of both artworks and most notably with the tar in the foreground of the latter work. Ryman's minimal use of colors also influence me because I feel a very minimal color palette focuses the

⁶ Robert Ryman, in *Art in Process*, vol. 4 (New York: Finch College Museum of Art/ Contemporary Wing, 1969-70), n.p.

⁷ Phyllis Tuchman, "An Interview with Robert Ryman," *Artforum*, no. 9 (May 1971), p. 53

viewer's attention more on the materials themselves and how they interact with one another. Ryman's works elicit an aesthetic response from me because they are reminiscent of the textures and surfaces of the abandoned objects that captured my attention at the beginning of my artistic career.

The ideas, processes, and techniques of Tapies and Ryman greatly influenced my thesis work. Focusing on the use and application of materials while still making a resolved and interesting composition has been my major goal. I strive to create paintings from and inspired by the recognizable world and that challenge my innate need for order. At the same time I push to break the painting down to the simple forms, textures, and surfaces while still achieving an engaging and resolved composition. These artists discussed were my guides as I worked to address my need for order within my artwork while still accomplishing my goal of providing my audience with the opportunity of aesthetic discovery.



Figure 9. Robert Ryman, *Untitled*, 1958. Gouache on wallpaper.



Figure 10. Robert Ryman, *Untitled*, 1960. Casein, graphite pencil, and tracing paper collage on bristol board.

Chapter III

Presentation of Thesis Works

Introduction

This chapter will discuss selected artworks from the thesis exhibition and how they relate to the subject matter and historical sources discussed in the first and second chapters. Rather than discuss every work in the thesis exhibition I have chosen representative works to demonstrate various approaches to my artworks.

The artworks in the thesis are unified through their materials, surface quality, compositions and process of creation. To create my works I go through various stages of action, reflection, and refinement. This method of production is in constant transformation and reflects the processes of aging and decay that can create the “discovered compositions” found in the abandoned objects and mundane spaces that inspire my work. I typically begin my work by meticulously building the canvas support with attention given to ensuring that it is not only structurally sound, but also pleasing to the eye and well crafted as the finished work. This care in constructing the support goes beyond good craftsmanship; it satisfies my need for control. Additionally, my stretchers must be well built because they will ultimately be put through an intensive process of building up and breaking down of each layer of media. If they are not sufficiently strong they will structurally fail early in the process. Adding multiple layers of materials such as joint compound, tar, exterior latex paints, polyurethane, acrylic paints, dirt, sand, fabrics and many other products is a slow process due to the time it takes for

each layer to dry. The subtractive layers are just as crucial to the end product. These subtractive layers are achieved by sanding, scraping, hammering, ripping, and sometimes dragging a piece along concrete. When subtracting layers I am searching for previous marks or textures that will help to mold the future composition. With each successive additive or subtractive layer the piece moves closer and closer to the finished state. Each artwork calls for different techniques, but all are considered finished when I feel they are formally resolved.

My pieces begin intuitively and evolve through both additive and subtractive processes. Each layer is produced as a reaction to the last. Relying on intuitive reactions, I invite an organic process in which forms and marks are made and destroyed, covered and uncovered with different layers of material. This process of layering allows me to interact and respond to each layer as the process moves forward. The layers as they are covered and uncovered mirror the history of the creation and life of the objects that inspire the artworks. This sense of history is accelerated in my artistic processes. This allows me to give each piece its own unique history, to mimic the processes in my surroundings that provide the discovered compositions that inspire me. Through doing this I am subjecting each piece to an accelerated aging process to achieve the visual effects I desire. Producing my art in this way also allows for the survival of the “chance effects” in each work, so integral to the success of each. These chance effects help to recreate the moment of discovery for myself and help to accentuate the interaction of the materials. Employing a structured process that prevents me from fully knowing and controlling the end result of each piece imbues each one with a

sense of suspense and unexpectedness that I strive to convey to the viewer.

During this process I become surprised by the aesthetic discoveries that can occur and I hope the viewer is able to experience. Aesthetic discoveries are the reaction between the material and textures that create a surface full of subtle interest points that cause sensory experience for the viewer. In the following sections of this chapter I will discuss selected works that representing the body of my thesis works.

Composition #17

All of the thesis works are derived from compositions I discover in objects in my surroundings, so, to me; it only seems natural that my paintings become objects themselves. At times they can become very physical and three dimensional, such as in *Composition #17* (Figure 11). The painting has a very active surface on a background of varying values of unbleached titanium and parchment colored acrylic paint. Repetitive gouges create the active surface along with slashes, produced by a hammer and chisel, in contrast to clumps of painters putty or textured paint. Various fabrics are layered in the bottom right and lower left of the square with matching acrylic paint and polyurethane applied to unify to the surface. The strongest pieces of the all over composition are the primary red colored slashes that were added as the final layer.

This painting measures 4' x 4' and is 5" deep; I mention the depth of the piece because this moves the piece away from the wall and emphasizes the objectness and materiality of the piece. This artwork was one of my first compositions produced at Georgia Southern and in my studio in the Fine Arts Building. Being

in a new place and becoming fascinated and overwhelmed by new textures and materials in my surroundings was reflected in my work. I began experimenting with denim fabric and paper during this time. *Composition #17* (Figure 11) was constructed from four 4 ft., 1 x 4 inch cuts of pine wood nailed together with two 2ft x 4ft panels of luan attached to the front, which created a structurally sound backing for the painting. Once the backing was constructed I proceeded to cover it with numerous successive layers of wall joint compound intended to create texture and look of stone or concrete, much like the walls or sidewalks around the campus. These layers were weathered by beating, sanding, and mixing found dirt into the joint compound. The additive/ subtractive process allowed me to react to the composition as a way of directing the composition. My goal with *Composition # 17* was to use a variety of materials and applications of the materials to create a surface that is aesthetically pleasing. The physical presence of paintings such as this one underscores the physicality of the materials used. This specific artwork contains numerous textured paints on top of panel, fabrics, oil paints and mediums, all integrated with each other in the attempt to create unity and harmony. I do not consider this to be one of my most aesthetically successful works, but it was incredibly valuable as an experiment and is included here as it demonstrates my starting point and hence the evolution of my work. As a compositional problem this piece failed. The red slashes were an attempt to create movement to draw the viewers eye through the entire work but due to the use of primary red, the marks become too dominate. *Composition #17* was instrumental in the development of the thesis works from the standpoint of beginning a dialogue with painting.

Composition #13 (3 rectangles)

Composition #13 (Figure 12) employs various materials including wallpaper, joint compound, fabric, oil paint, numerous latex house paints, concrete patch, and polyurethane. *Composition # 13* measures 3.5 feet x 5 feet with a depth of 5 inches and is constructed of luan plywood with 4 inch by 1-inch pine boards. Three rectangles in a vertical arrangement serve as the focal point on a background of neutral green with remnants of wallpaper, denim and joint compound peeking through. The artwork began as an experiment attempting to recreate the surface of an old dilapidated wall, much like the ones I photographed in my undergraduate work, and progressed to include formal experimentation in controlling a very forceful all over composition. The piece of luan was taken from an old theater set and had several layers of wallpaper already on it. The method of production started by trowling joint compound over the existing surface to cover up selected areas of wallpaper for excavation later in the process. Next I began stapling denim to the surface to add another layer of material and to expedite my reactions to the existing composition. As the painting progressed it became a struggle to control a very un-unified surface, the materials were not working together and caused the piece to be sectioned. In an attempt to control the surface I chose to apply a neutral green latex paint to subordinate and unify the background while simultaneously creating an opposition in textures to enhance the piece. Once the surface was covered with the neutral green I began a subtractive process of peeling sections of paint off and sanding joint compound to reveal the wallpapered wood surface underneath. After stripping areas down to



Figure 11. Merritt Giles, *Composition # 17*, 2005. Mixed media painting, 4' x 4' x 5", Artist's Collection.



Figure 12. Merritt Giles, *Composition # 13*, 2005. Mixed media painting, 3' 6" x 5' x 5", Artist's Collection.

their original surface, the painting began to take shape. Before the green house paint was applied the piece had a very raw feel that overwhelmed the work and once the latex paint was applied the neutral color was able to subdue the very active base layer. Unfortunately, this still did not solve the overactive and unharmonious compositional problem. After weeks of contemplation as to how to resolve the composition of the work I felt it needed a strong focal point to bring unity and I chose to use latex paint colored with India ink to create three horizontal rectangles that echoed the shape of the panel. The three rectangles are left unfinished to allow the background to show through maintaining a unified and interesting textural surface. *Composition #13* has a very physically textural surface that integrates many different materials into one unified surface. The juxtaposition of rough wood surface, concrete patch and a very smooth latex paint surface with clear glossy polyurethane adds contrast and depth to the piece. Also, through the process of layering the materials, the depth created in the piece is engaging both from a distance and in an intimate setting. In the end, to make a successful piece, it was necessary to have a strong focal point that unified the disparate materials and surfaces while accentuating the raw physical qualities of the materials used.

Composition #14 (large square)

Composition #14 (Figure 13) measures 4ft x 4ft and the support is constructed with pinewood and luan paneling. A large square of tar is placed on a background of differing values of white latex paint. The composition is completed by three smaller squares placed below the dominant square to create an

approximate symmetrical balance. The materials used to create the varying textural surface are joint compound, sand, concrete patch, oil paint, polyurethane, and roofing tar. The painting was begun with special attention being placed on the construction of the backing and being very conscious of its structural components. Joint compound was applied as a base coat to provide sufficient beginning textures and to allow for sanding, scraping with a chisel, cutting with various tools, or breaking back into the backing with a hammer. Once joint compound was applied and dried I began to cover sections with successive layers of reds and blue oil paints to give me something to cover up and later excavate the previous layers when refining. I then applied numerous layers of white house paint and some new areas of joint compound to build up the surface textures to my desired thickness. While applying these layers I also applied washes of roofing tar mixed with paint thinner, which gave the surface an aged effect much like staining paper with coffee. This aged look referenced the old walls or doors that have inspired my work. As the painting progressed through further stages of refinement, a large square kept appearing within the composition. I decided to accentuate the square and to provide contrast with the background through use of a different texture and color. This choice underscores the balance of control and abandon within my working process and my interest in creating discovered compositions. I chose to further accentuate the large square by trowling on roofing tar. I also used the tar wash as a way to provide a smooth transition into the subtle areas of white. Once this was done it became very evident to me that the piece needed to be rebalanced and due to my controlling nature, I applied three smaller painterly squares to the

bottom of the composition to produce an approximate symmetrical composition. From there I added polyurethane to the edges of each square to unify them, create a smoother transition, and also to contrast the two predominant textures with a much smoother and shinier one. This result was close to, but not quite what I desired. The composition had become too ordered. To keep the balance of control and abandon I applied a thick tar wash to the lower right corner to keep the composition from being too structured. Overall *Composition # 14* is a very large piece with an aggressive application of materials used to emphasize the very simple geometric composition. Through the layering process I was able to build up the materials to create a contrasting surface that contains both subtle transitions and very active lines that bring the viewers eye from one corner of the work to the other. By using the contrasting textures along with the aggressive gouging brush strokes I sought to create enough interest in the piece as a whole to draw the viewer in to examine the piece more closely.

Three Bars

More recently I have become more concerned with creating intimacy by exploring the physicality of my materials on a smaller scale; as seen in the piece, *Three Bars* (Figure 14), which measures 18" x 18". The artwork incorporates concrete patch, sponges, sand, and textured house paint to create a subtle surface of country blue and parchment paints, which highlights the three pieces of metal that comprise the focal point. Also, this painting is still very much concerned with emphasizing its object-ness due to the inclusion of actual, three-dimensional metal bars and physical building of the paint within the piece. Through successive



Figure 13. Merritt Giles, *Composition # 14*, 2006, Mixed media painting
4' x 4' x 5", Artist's Collection.



Figure 14. Merritt Giles, *Three Bars*, 2006, Mixed media painting,
2' 6" x 2' 6", Private Collection.

layers of joint compound, attached sponges, concrete patch, and various acrylic paints I was able to achieve a very physical painting that begins to challenge the traditional boundaries between painting and low relief sculpture while highlighting the subtle surfaces within the work created by the juxtaposition of the rusty metal surface against the smoother background. The call for intimacy within the more recent works is intended to capture the experience I feel when discovering the compositions in my surroundings. There is a certain artistic comfort or pride I feel when a new composition is discovered, as if I am the only person who can see it and consider it art. By choosing to create works on this smaller scale I am exploring how the viewer will react when observing the piece. My wish is that the physicality of the work will bring the viewer in from across a room and upon doing so they will notice and explore the subtle nature within the work while having an aesthetic discovery.

My works on panel emphasize the very raw nature of objects or potential compositions that I see in my everyday environment. These also relate more to the architectural aspects of objects that can move me. This accounts for the use of metal bars, wallpaper, joint compound, and other materials that relate to walls and doors.

Composition # 23

Most recently my works have moved from panel to canvas. I began using canvas and found that I enjoyed the process of building an object that appears to be very solid in nature, but in reality is not. By using various textured paints on the canvas I am able to create a stone like appearance, which mimics the textures

in my surroundings and the surfaces created on my works on panel. The works on canvas are similar in appearance, but vary in process and materials. My very physical additive and subtractive processes must change due to the more delicate nature of canvas. The sensitive nature of canvas adds certain effects to each painting that are desirable, but also causes new challenges in achieving a resolved composition. The viewer will notice an obvious difference in size but not much difference in overall appearance with these works. In these most recent pieces the ordered composition has become even more evident. I approach these works like the works on panel, as if they are gestural drawings, beginning with intuitive, visceral marks and slowly refining each work into its final composition.

Composition #23 was one of my first efforts in moving back to a canvas support, as the last time I used canvas was in my undergraduate work. This piece began as an experiment with new textural materials; my first intention was use this canvas only as a surface on which to conduct experiments. However, as the experimentation progressed I began to notice chance effects that resembled the visual qualities I was drawn to in my surroundings. Even with this being my first venture back to canvas I was familiar enough with its properties that I could still impose control over the canvas and materials used. The series of circles began to develop through pooling tar washes at the base of the canvas. I began to notice these chance effects and I began to refine the working composition of the piece. The process for creating the works on canvas begins just like the panels with building a structurally sound stretcher then attaching canvas. To make the canvas more durable than normal I began using rabbit skin glue to size the canvas, which

made the canvas drum tight on the stretcher. I applied 3 layers of rabbit skin glue to this work to achieve the desired tightness and durability. After this, the process could proceed as normal with successive additive and subtractive layers to build up the desired surface textures. *Composition # 23* (Figure 15) is an example of the final phase in this thesis series. It incorporates selected qualities from previous paintings, combines and refines them to create a successful composition. This artwork measures 30 inches by 30 inches with 5-inch depth. The composition is comprised of subtle surface textures created with textured paints and painter's putty. These areas are accentuated with washes of roofing tar. The composition uses aggressive slashing and peeling away of paint to add variety to the surface. The composition contains a row of 5 small circles at the bottom that act as the focal point. The strong lower focal point is balanced out in this work by placing 5 tack nails through the top of the canvas to mimic the lower focal point and draw the viewer's eye up through the surface. In this piece I combined aspects from Antoni Tapies by using various mundane materials like tar and sand along with a very simple geometric pattern similar to Robert Ryman's aesthetic.

All paintings discussed are examples of the progression of my thesis works. These paintings represent crucial points during my graduate studies and show the influence of the artists discussed in Chapter II. The thesis works also provide examples of the processes I use to create my thesis works and the formal qualities that comprise my compositions.

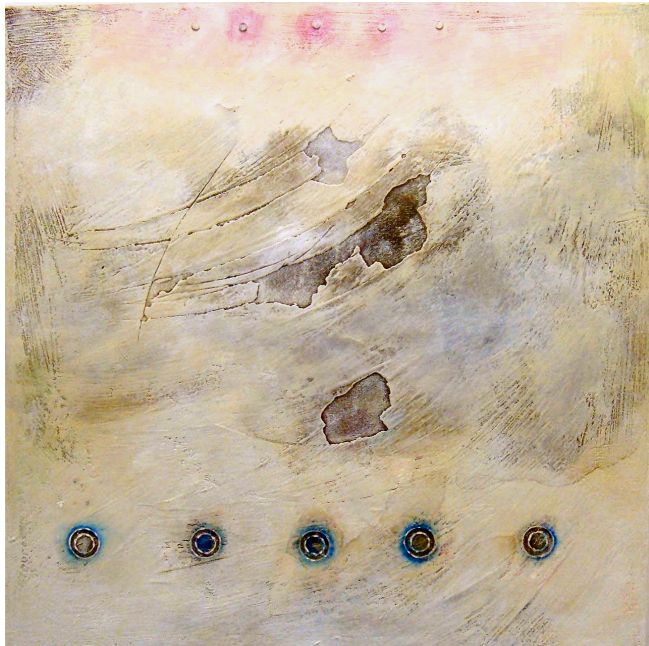


Figure 15. Merritt Giles, *Composition #23*, 2006, Mixed media painting on canvas, 30" x 30", Artist's Collection.

Chapter IV

Conclusions and Implications

Restatement of Artistic Problem

The thesis works are mixed media paintings that document the creative process through which I search for the right balance of imposed order and chance effects that recreate, for me and my audience, the aesthetic response I experience when discovering chance compositions found in the materials from man-made environments around me. These works explore how the tension between control and abandon can be directed toward image making. They attempt to translate, into my artistic processes, my innate need for control while embracing the accidental and unexpected to such a degree that the structure does not become predictable and uninteresting. The inspiration for the works stems from my aesthetic experience when witnessing these “discovered compositions” in my surroundings.

Candidate’s Evaluation of the Solution

Upon entering graduate school I had a clear goal in mind, which was to further my artistic pursuits by honing both my use of artistic materials and aesthetic sensibilities. I wanted to create large textural works that were very physical in nature and concerned themselves with formalist issues. The works would simply be about the surface, composition and the visual experience of interacting with a physical object. I focused on finding a visual language that would not only provide an aesthetic experience for myself during the creation process, but also give the viewer surfaces rife with opportunities for their own aesthetic discoveries.

There were many paintings made that were failures on my way to more successful artworks during my time as a graduate student. *Composition #17* (Figure 11), I would consider an unsuccessful painting based on what I am striving to achieve. Being my first painting in graduate school I was attempting too many things at once. This was the first artwork in which I gave myself the constraint of the square composition, while using new materials and tackling the much larger panel. Combined with using new materials I became overwhelmed with how they reacted with one another. I had no previous knowledge about how materials like concrete patch would interact with tar washes or acrylic paints. All of these factors caused me to not be able to impose the necessary control over the materials, which is critical to making a successful composition, therefore making this work un-unified and unsuccessful. But even though this work was not as successful as a finished piece, it was an important experiment and step toward my current work. *Composition #17* was the first of many paintings during my time at Georgia Southern that led to the final thesis works.

Once I was able to successfully control the amount of accidental effects with those that were intentional, I was able to recreate the experience of discovery for myself during the process of creation. Through my additive and subtractive processes of recreating patterns, textures and surfaces that inspire me I was also able to recreate moments of discovery for my audience. By creating a process of producing art that is always challenging and unpredictable I was able to keep my artworks fresh for the viewer and myself.

As for my future artworks, not yet realized, I plan to continue my exploration of surfaces and materials. By recreating compositions that inspire me I am constantly fueling my desire to create more art. The paintings in my thesis exhibition have opened the door for a lifetime of artistic creation. After completing the thesis artwork and writing the thesis paper I believe I have only just begun.

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