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# Breaking Art Apart

Michael Gettings

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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## **Breaking Art Apart**

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**

The human figure, allegory, myth, and the appropriation of other artist's compositions are elements in my work. I aim to update traditional stories to conform to contemporary times and culture. In addition, I am striving to create a new method to visually express figurative storytelling. Breaking from the traditional flat painting surface, I use multiple shaped panels. The surface is broken into different shaped panels at varying distances from each other and from the wall. This allows for more exploration into shape and negative space while depicting the dramatic height of a story. As part of this method, my paintings explore the discrete nature of human vision, or how we focus on individual parts of a scene while the brain filters the gestalt.

## **Breaking Art Apart**

### **The Right Fit**

I enrolled in Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) Off-Campus Graduate Art Program because I wanted to further my studies and receive an advanced degree in painting from VCU. Being a full-time educator and parent, I felt that I could not dedicate myself financially and intellectually to a full-time master's program. I was also looking for a way to increase my professional status and pay. The MIS program offered a chance for professional growth, an increase in salary, and the chance to affiliate myself artistically with VCU. Every person I talked to about the program raved about it and it seemed to be the right fit for me. So, I applied, was accepted, and began to break my art apart.

### **Breaking Apart**

I deconstruct the traditionally shaped picture plane by using multiple shaped surfaces to present figurative elements. These surfaces are made of primed masonite panels. The panels are attached to a support structure that is in turn hung on the wall. On each shaped surface is painted part of a figure. Combined, the panels depict one figure that is shown from different angles, in different scales, or in varying positions.

The fracturing of images as presented by the Internet and television are part of the inspiration behind my work. This fracturing is evidenced by the use of pop-up images, multiple image windows, and the use of scrolling text on television and the web. It is unlike any information presentation medium in the past. It uses dynamic images, text, and hyperlinks. It is not a linear medium. At any time users can control the amount of information they receive by

scrolling down through text or linking away to another source. Images move and, with the advent of larger bandwidth, the images have become more sophisticated. It is common to see movie trailers, video stories, and complex animations.

Web pages are unique because presentation is electronic and not on a piece of paper. On paper, there is an edge. In a book, there are also edges and a fold in the center. These are physical anchors that we use when tracking across documents. These anchors help us track text without getting lost or losing our place. On a web page we do not have the normal visual anchors. With an electronic presentation the text must be formatted in such a way that we can visually track it without getting lost. This is done by limiting the width of a text block and by the use of “chunking” of the text into small sections. Without these and other graphical visual anchors we are forced to move our head while tracking text and therefore lose our place much easier. These notions of anchors, chunking, and tracking interested me. I started to pay more attention to these design concepts, and how our eyes move across images.

Television news programs have always been a medium of images and words. Images, spoken words, and text are shown in a wide variety of formats. While watching a news station a viewer may be hearing and seeing information about a murder but at the same time latest NFL scores are being scrolled along the bottom of the screen. This presentation of multiple images, text in a variety of areas, and image windows helped lead me into the exploration of the fracturing of the image. I was searching for a new way to look at an image from multiple viewpoints and to tell a dynamic story with the medium of painting.

The nature of vision is also something I am exploring in the paintings. The human eye does not filter what it captures. Our perception of the world comes about by a filtering process that occurs in the brain. Research continues on how this works but it is clear that we can and will

focus on specific parts of a scene that interests us. When we focus on a part, the rest of the scene becomes secondary in importance. This phenomenon is called salience. Salience, or attentional specificity, allows us to focus on one object out of a field many objects. In my paintings I am alluding to this phenomenon by showing parts of the figure that I think are interesting and important.

## **Influences**

My current interests are rooted in an event years ago when I happened upon a discarded issue of ARTnews. The cover had a picture of Frank Stella (b. 1936) surrounded by a work in progress. The associated article, *Stella's Flying Ships* by Lawrence Weschler, traced Stella's move from flat, minimalist paintings to his sculptural works. The pictures of Stella's new sculptural work showed swirling shapes, bright neon colors, and straight geometric lines working together in one piece. This captured my imagination. Weschler described these elements as, "...virtually vaulting out towards the viewer, almost levitating off their armatures and into free space." (Weschler 1987, 93) I loved the images but I didn't fully understand Stella's stated reasons or Weschler's explanations. However, this article stuck in my mind.

Many years later, while attending the Partners in the Arts Summer Institute held at the University of Richmond, I registered for a graduate credit, which involved writing a paper. I chose to write about Frank Stella. As part of my research I read *Working Space* (1986). This book is based on *The Charles Norton Lectures* given by Stella during 1983 and 1984. These lectures cover the reasoning behind his sculptural paintings. Stella made the argument that abstract art was dying and needed a new challenge. He said:

Sadly, however, the current prospects for abstraction seem terribly narrowed; its sense of space appears shallow and constricted...Who would be the heirs of Roman Classicism?

...What painting would stand up to Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael? (Stella, 4)

Stella then pointed to Caravaggio (1573-1610) as the answer. According to Stella, Caravaggio's use of space was expansive, and "...capable of dissolving its own perimeter and surface plane." (Stella, 10). Stella saw in this the answer to the challenge of abstract art, particularly in his own paintings. So, his solution was to create a new working space or format to make sculptural paintings.

As I worked on the paper and reflected on my own artistic explorations with painting, I began to ask myself, *Why am I still working on a flat space? Why was I creating images in the traditional "window" that representational artists have been using for centuries?* Inspired by Stella, I decided to create paintings that were comprised of separate shaped canvases that extend out into the viewer's physical space.

One of my first efforts was *David* (Appendix, 1), a work inspired by an Old Testament biblical story. The image captures the point when David is reaching for the perfect rock to take into battle against the Philistine foe, Goliath. My interpretation of the concept of salience, or attentional specificity, uses fragmenting and detailing aspects of this story from multiple perspectives and in varying scale. This painting consists of four panels. The largest panel shows David's face staring up towards an unseen Goliath. The panel to the right of this shows us the view of David as he might have been seen by Goliath. The lower left panel shows David's body and the bag he will put the river stone into. Finally, the lower right panel shows David reaching down into the stream for the round rock. In the background lies his sword; it has been discarded because David knows that it will be little use in combat against the giant. David is dressed in contemporary clothing. I call this type of presentation Dimensional Figurative Painting.



While Frank Stella was inspired by Caravaggio's use of space, I was inspired by his mastery of depicting the dramatic height of a story. He used allegory and myth for subject matter and I felt that the timelessness of the Greek and Roman myths and biblical stories could be retold in contemporary terms. In *Saul (On the Road to Damascus)* (Appendix, 2) I appropriated the pose of Saul from Caravaggio's *Conversion on the Way to Damascus* (1601). In this painting Caravaggio shows Saul, the persecutor of Christians, on the ground after being blinded by a flash of divine light. In Caravaggio's painting Saul is dressed in a Roman Centurion's garb. In my version he is wearing a contemporary business suit. People (even people with a religious background) have told me that the image is too violent and makes them uncomfortable. By using contemporary dress, the image has moved away from the traditional representation of the story. By bringing this story into contemporary times, viewers have the opportunity to recognize the timelessness of the message.

### **Allegory and Myth**

Since I am interested in the religious and mythological stories of Western Culture, I decided to use them as my subject matter. These ageless stories of the gods teach us that life can be capricious and unfair. The gods and goddesses in mythology can make bad judgments and work for their own self-interest. Sometimes the hero wins and sometimes he is beaten. The hero's lot in the end is almost always tragic. Some of these stories teach us about faith and courage. Most of the stories are forgotten or relegated to a dim background memory. I want to resurrect these stories and contemporize them. I want to present the heroes as modern people, wearing modern clothing, and sometimes doing modern things.

My core idea is to spark curiosity about the image and the story that is being told. The

title of the work offers the first clue to the meaning. For instance, *Bacchus* (Appendix, 3) shows a contemporarily dressed young man holding a glass of wine. He is overweight and a bit tired looking. His face is shown on two of the five panels, with eyes downcast and half-lidded. The far left panel shows his torso in a reclining position. He is holding a glass of wine in his left hand. This glass is repeated in the two panels to the right. The common assumption is that Bacchus was the hedonistic god of wine. In viewing my version of him I hope that the viewers will see him as a tired looking god. A god who after 2,000 years of parties is burned out. I want the viewers to be curious and delve deeper into the Bacchus myth. If they learn his stories they will discover that he is also a wise god who even counseled King Midas not to take the gift of the golden touch, advice which Midas ignored to his regret.

*Mary* (Appendix, 4) is a five-panel painting showing three views of Mary. This is the Mary represented by the scripture of John in the New Testament:

It was that Mary which anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. (The New King James Version, John 11:2)

I found the idea of a woman washing a man's feet and then drying them with her hair oddly erotic. The painting shows Mary on her knees looking up. Her gaze is direct and her lips are parted. She is dressed in contemporary clothing. I wanted to capture both innocence and an erotic nature in the image. The meaning of the painting is ambiguous because there is confusion as to the identity of Mary, whether she was Mary of Bethany, the "sinner", or Mary Magdalene. Some viewers may see her as the sinner Mary while others as Mary the saint. I want the viewers to look deeper into this compelling story and come to their own conclusion.

## **Composition**

Composition can be defined as the arrangement of elements in a work of art. The artist

arranges these elements to draw in the viewers and capture their attention. Within the field of painting, composition typically takes place on one surface. The composition of my paintings involve assessing the factors of multiple surfaces and varying scales.

Once I determine the subject matter I research paintings of the same subject matter. With *The Pope* (Appendix, 5), I was inspired by the modernity of Francis Bacon's (1909-1992) *Study from Portrait of Pope Innocent X by Velazquez* (1953). Using that as a starting point, I then appropriated the triangular composition and color from Diego Velázquez's (1599-1660) *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1650). After studying the composition and making sketches of Velázquez's painting, I began to brainstorm compositional ideas by drawing different arrangements of the shapes for the panels. Once I reached a set of shapes and arrangement that I found effective, I began to sketch in figurative elements. I focused on the face and the hands. I feel that these are the most expressive parts of the anatomy.

For *The Pope*, I posed and photographed a model in seventeenth-century religious attire. The attire and pose helped to visually connect the Bacon and Velázquez painting with my version. I also felt that dressing the young model in religious attire made an interesting contrast. In the past, the Pope was depicted as an older man. I hoped that this contrast in age would make the image more compelling.

To create the source images, I positioned a 100-watt natural light bulb on the upper right of the set-up. This created a dramatic cast shadow across the model's face and body. I took several pictures from different positions using a digital camera. Later, I selected and digitally edited the reference pictures used for the painting.

*The Pope* is made of three panels. The top center panel shows a young man wearing a red mitre with gold trim. His head is tilted to the side with a stern expression on his face. Draping

down off both shoulders is a red stole. The lower right panel shows a closer look at the stole near his waist. The left panel shows his right hand angled down as if it were resting on the arm of a chair. Like Velázquez, I used a triangular arrangement of the panels with the top panel as the apex of the triangle. The two lower panels were cut and arranged to mimic the position of the hands of the pope as well.

When I am sketching the figures I try to keep a flow of the elements from one panel to the next. In *The Pope* I aligned the stole and shadows in the robe across the panels. At this point I consider how the panels will be displayed and stacked. I manipulate them and determine if the panels will overlap. If they overlap, I decide which will be furthest from the wall and which will be under the others. During the entire process I also considered the lighting of the work and where the actual cast shadows from the panels would hit the wall.

I generally use a limited palette of high contrast colors in my paintings. A limited palette helps to unify the images across the panels. The red in the mitre at the top is visually related to the stole on the right and the sleeve on the left. I chose this color because it was used in the Velázquez painting. The robe is a light blue. I used blue as a complement to the warm flesh tones, the red mitre, and stole. This contrast between the blues and the reds add a visual excitement.

The contrast of the light and dark areas on the figure is a form of *chiaroscuro* which is defined as a bold contrast between light and dark. This creates a dramatic illumination that helps to create a focus on each panel for the viewer. Using these elements helps to mimic the sense of salience or attentional specificity by bringing attention to selected areas.

Scale of imagery and size of panels are an important feature as well. I typically create a painting in one of three size ranges, *Bacchus*, 49”x59”, is an example of the largest size, *The*

*Pope* is a medium-sized painting at 24"x38", and *Medusa* (Appendix, 6) is a small painting at 21"x20". The factors that I use in deciding the size are a bit improvisational. I usually create my paintings in a series of ten to twelve works at a time. I try to have a variety of sizes of works over the range of the series. If an entire series is displayed at one time (Appendix, 7) then I can create a visually interesting relationship between the multi-paneled works.

### **Processes: Construction**

Prior to painting my process involves the construction of the panels and the hanging support. First, I cut the shape of the panels and place them in the proper arrangement as viewed from the back of the supports (Appendix, 8). Then, I construct a separate hanging support using 1"x2" pine strips with masonite corner supports (Appendix, 9). I place the hanging support on the panels and trace where any additional 1" x 2" pine strips will be placed. These strips are glued to the back of the panel and then nailed to the masonite from the front. The strips add structural strength to the masonite. Next, holes are drilled through the hanging system and into the 1"x2" strips so that dowels can be inserted. These dowels connect the panels to the hanging support (Appendix, 10). The balance point of the entire construction is located, and eye hooks and hanging wire are added. The entire construction is hung on the wall when the painting is complete (Appendix, 11).

There are three considerations when designing this support system. First is strength. The system that holds the panels together must be strong enough to actually hold the weight of the panels and wood. Second, balance is considered to make sure the painting does not tilt when hung on the wall. The third consideration is the ability to hide the hanging system from a frontal view of the work.

Finally, the panels are prepared with several coats of gesso. After each of the panels are sanded, the assembled painting support is hung on my easel. The reference photos are projected onto the panels. During this phase I manipulate the scale and position of the images. I also make final adjustments for the placement of the figurative elements. I quickly sketch the outlines and details onto the panels.

When I paint I generally separate the panels from the support system. When practical, I re-mount them after each session to assess the overall composition and progress. Finally, I hang the completed painting on the wall to evaluate it. This allows me the opportunity to see the painting from a distance with the cast shadows of the panels on the wall. If I feel the need to make further adjustments, I take it back to the studio and work on it.

By developing my own structural support I have allowed myself to avoid the traditional format and bring the painting into the viewer's space while exploring the concepts of attentional specificity. The unique structural supports also allow me to break away from the traditional flat surfaces painters have used for centuries.

## **Conclusion**

Working in the MIS program has helped me clarify and focus on the intent behind my work. When I created the term Dimensional Figurative Painting for my painting, it was a tag without substantial depth or meaning. During the MIS program I have had the opportunity to add definition to the term.

The years spent in the program also helped to distill my ideas and keep my focus sharp. I have been able to work with people outside of my normal artistic community who have brought differing visions and understanding to my works. They have, in a sense, held my feet to the fire.

The professors and student held me to a higher standard.

I have a lifetime of work and exploration ahead of me. Exploring the deconstruction of the planar surface, the aspects of story telling, the science of vision, and the medium of oil painting are endless. This gives me incentive to continue to create and to show. At the age of fifty-two I have just begun to scratch the surface of Dimensional Figurative Painting and look forward to years of breaking art apart.

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**Appendix**  
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- Figure 2. *Saul (On the Road to Damascus)*, Oil on four panels, 39" x 54" x 5", 2007.
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Figure 1. *David*, Oil on four panels, 41" x 51" x 6", 2005.



Figure 2. *Saul (On the Road to Damascus)*, Oil on four panels, 39" x 54" x 5", 2007.



Figure 3. *Bacchus*, Oil on six panels, 49" x 59" x 4 ½", 2007.





Figure 4. *Mary*, Oil on five panels, 36" x 40" x 3 3/4", 2008.



Figure 5. *The Pope*, Oil on three panels, 24" x 38" x 3 1/2", 2009.



Figure 6. *Medusa*, Oil on nine panels, 20" x 21" x 3 1/2", 2006.





Figure 7. *Softly September*, Installation View, Visual Art Studio, Richmond, VA, 2007.



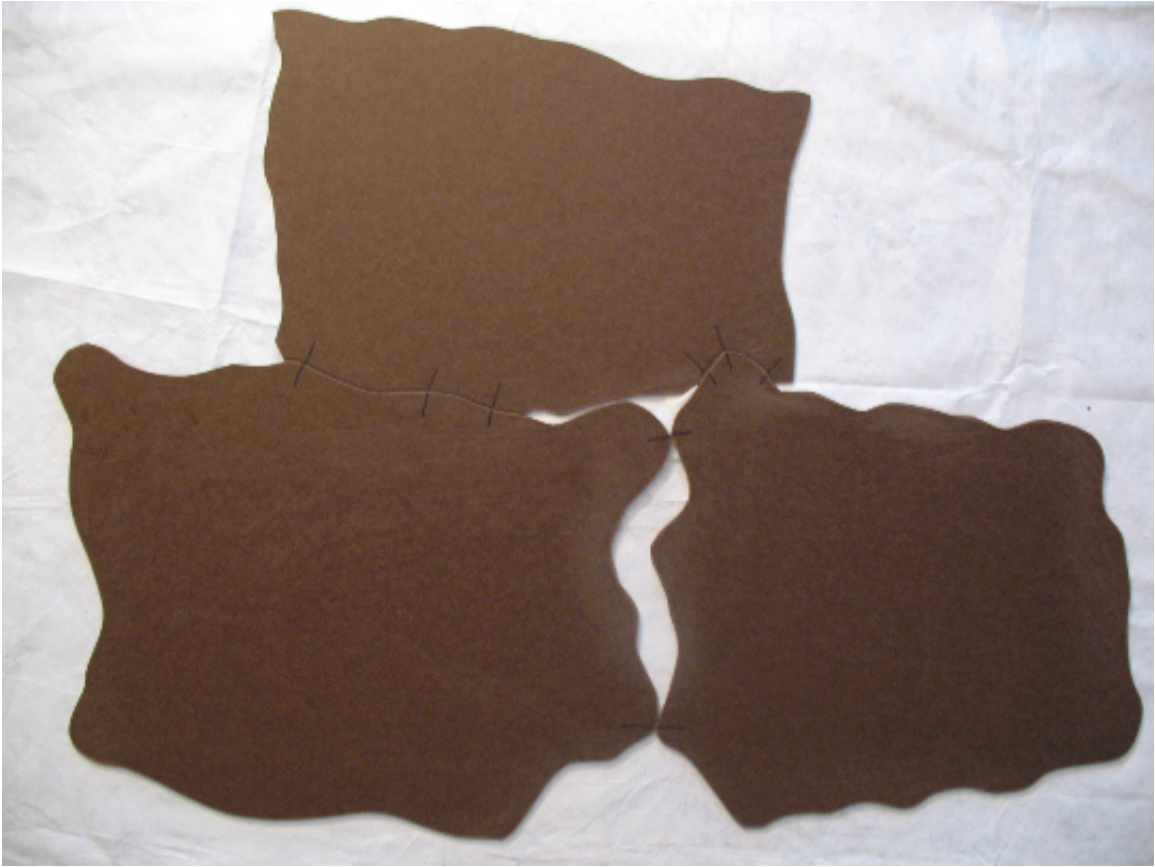


Figure 8. *Hephaestus*, Panels (back view), 22" x 28", 2009.

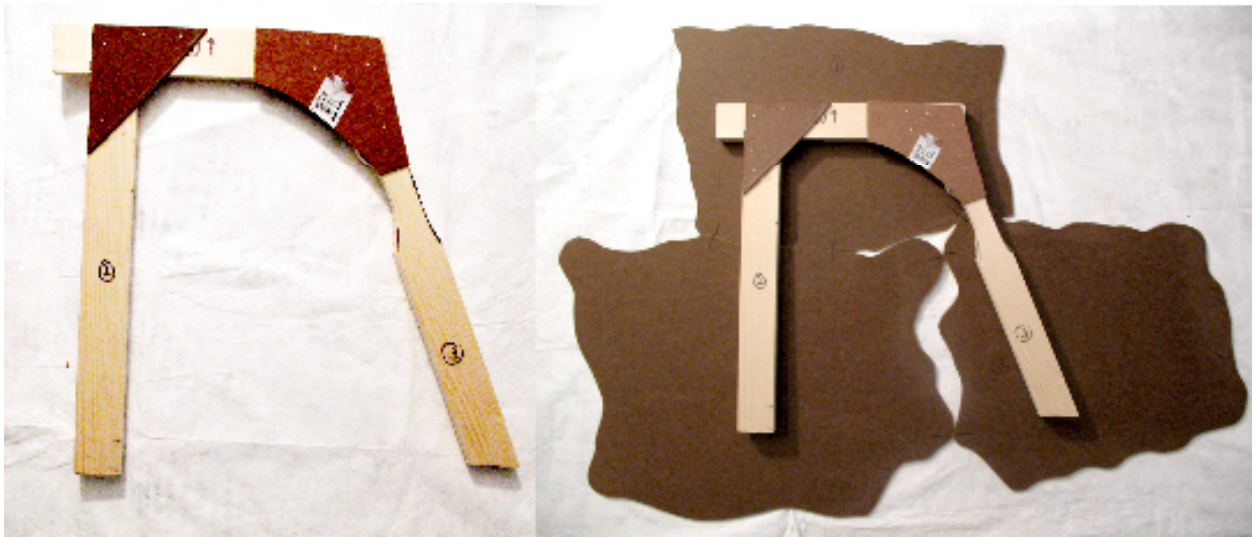


Figure 9. *Hephaestus*, Hanging System (back view), 2009. Hanging system (on left), hanging system as attached to masonite (on right), 22" x 28".

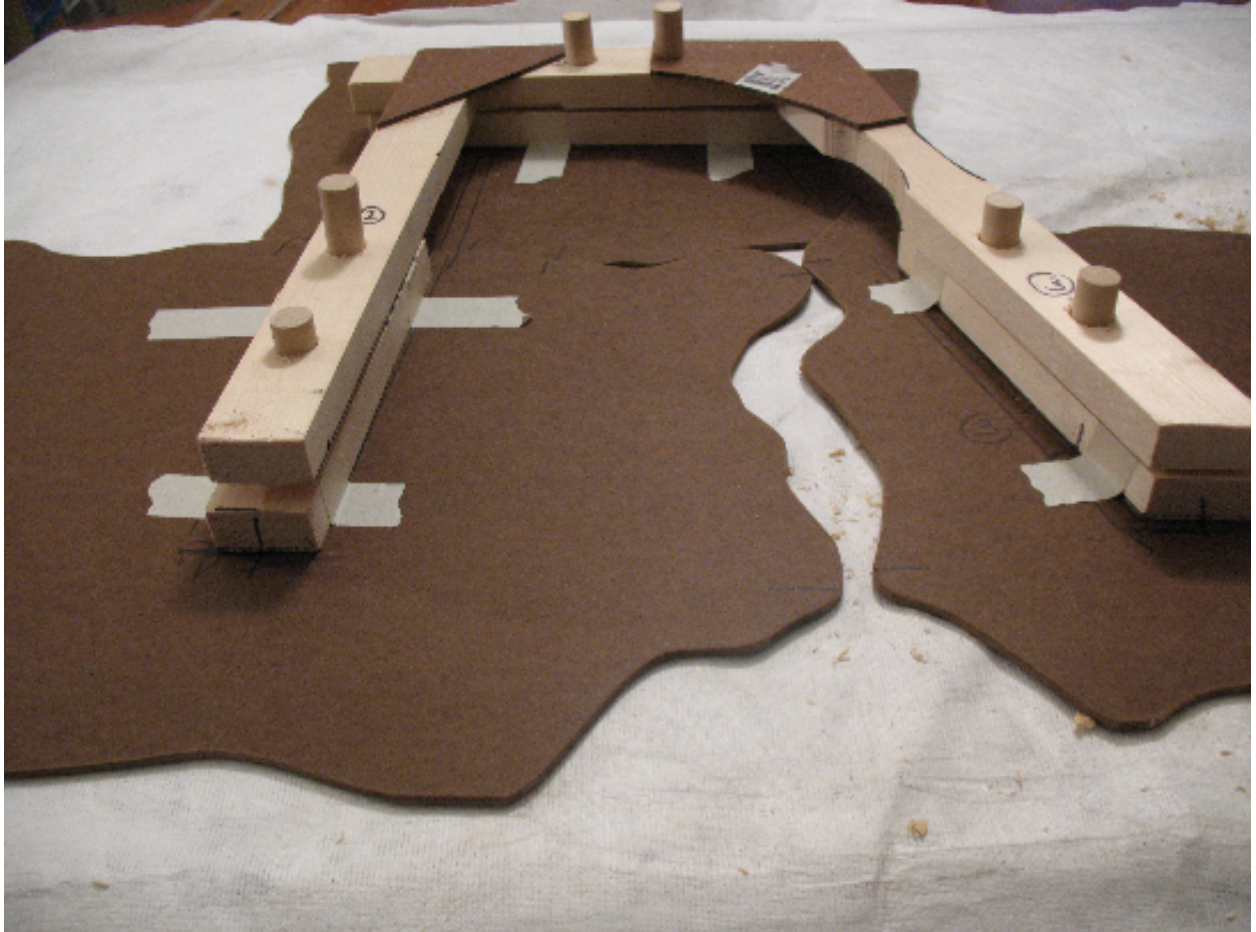


Figure 10. *Hephaestus*, Hanging System with Dowels, 2009.





Figure 11. *Hephaestus*, Oil on three panels, 22" x 28" x 4 ½", 2009.

## Michael Gettings

### EDUCATION:

- 2010 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia Specialization in Painting and Mixed Media
- 1996 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Art Education, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia
- 1983 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Painting and Printmaking, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia

### TEACHING EXPERIENCE:

- 2008-present **Art Specialist**, Henrico County Public Schools, Henrico, Virginia
- 2007-2008 **Art Technology Integrator**, Chesterfield County Public Schools, Chesterfield, Virginia
- 2000-2007 **Art Teacher**, Clover Hill High School, Chesterfield County Public Schools, Chesterfield, Virginia
- 1996-2000 **Art Teacher**, Swift Creek Elementary, Chesterfield County Public Schools, Chesterfield, Virginia

### LICENSES AND CERTIFICATION:

- 2006-2011 Art Education Certification K - 12

### PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS or MEMBERSHIPS:

- 2008-present **Association for Curriculum Development**, Alexandria, Virginia
- 2003-present **ArtWorks Gallery**, Richmond, Virginia
- 1995-present **National Art Education Association**, Reston, Virginia
- 1995-present **Virginia Art Education Association**, Midlothian, Virginia

### RELATED EXPERIENCE:

- 2007-2010 **Web Policy Committee**, National Art Education Association, Reston, Virginia
- 2006-2010 **Technology Chair**, Virginia Art Education Association, Midlothian, Virginia
- 2006-2009 **Printmaking in Every Classroom**, Partners in the Arts Summer Institute, University of Richmond, Richmond, Virginia
- 1997-2009 **Workshop Presentations**, National Art Education Association, Virginia Art Education Association, National Association for Gifted Children
- 2006 **Southeastern Region Art Educator of the Year**, National Art Education Association
- 2005, 2006 **Youth Art Month Award of Excellence National Award**, Council for Art Education
- 2004-2006 **Youth Art Month Co-Chair**, Virginia Art Education Association

## **RELATED EXPERIENCE (continued):**

- 2005        **Virginia Art Educator of the Year**, Secondary Division, Virginia Art Education Association
- 1999        **Teacher of the Year**, Swift Creek Elementary, Chesterfield County Public Schools, Chesterfield, Virginia
- 1997        **Outstanding Folk Art/Folklife Curriculum Plan**, Folk Art / Folklife in Education Institute, New York University, New York City, New York

## **EXHIBITIONS:**

- 2010        **Breaking Art Apart**, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia. Visual Art Studio, Richmond, Virginia
- 2009        **Expressive Hands**, ArtWorks, Richmond, Virginia
- 2009        **THINKsmall 5**, art6, Richmond, Virginia
- 2007        **Softly September**, Visual Art Studio, Richmond, Virginia
- 2007        **Artist/Teacher....Past, Present, Future**, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia. Jurors: Nancy Sausser, Annette Polan
- 2007        **New Orleans Revisited**, Petersburg Regional Art Center, Petersburg, Virginia
- 2006        **All Media Show**, Petersburg Regional Art Center, Petersburg, Virginia Juror: Roy Proctor.
- 2006        **Gang of 4**, Petersburg Regional Art Center, Petersburg, Virginia
- 2006        **Educators as Artists**, Richmond Public Library, Richmond, Virginia
- 2005        **Recent Works**, Richmond Public Library, Richmond, Virginia

## **WEBSITES, LOCATIONS OF WORKS ON-LINE:**

<http://www.michaelgetttings.com>  
<http://www.awebdesigner.com>