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The Wanderers

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The Wanderers

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

by
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Artist Statement

My work focuses on moments that convey a wide range of human emotion. Through examination of these private moments, I investigate contemporary issues of isolation, alienation, and anguish. In my artwork, unrecognizable landscapes and unidentifiable solitary figures grace panoramic canvases with limited color and devoid of fine detail yielding scenes that, while rooted in reality, lend themselves to the surreal. The compositions are designed to evoke feelings of unease, as the viewer is confronted with figures experiencing raw emotion.

The Wanderers

Introduction

Art was my primary mode of expression in childhood. It provided me a language and vocabulary through which I contextualized my interactions with the outside world. Though I barely spoke, I constantly created. Whether it was the simple act of daydreaming about the colors of flowers or creating art with my half-eaten dinner, I was in a constant creative state. It wasn't until much later that I began to express myself using spoken words. Throughout high school and college, I continued to draw and paint and earned a degree in Art Education.

As I began my teaching career, I did not have the time or energy to create art. This was a dark time for me as I struggled to visually express what I was experiencing. Through the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts Program (MIS-IAR), I was finally forced to start producing artwork again, despite a busy schedule. These experiences awakened my artistic soul and pushed me back towards art making.

Aesthetics

In my artwork I place emphasis on figures within landscapes. I focus on the expressive, contemplative moments in life and create landscapes where figure and landscape coexist within the picture plane. I use extreme panoramic formats in my artwork that are too wide to experience in a single view. Therefore, the viewer must start at one side and read through the artwork. Additionally, figures in artwork typically suggest a story, so the figures within my landscapes suggest a narrative. To allow for enhancement of the mood, I select cool, cold colors such as cool blues, grays, and whites. I limit the palette so that the viewer is unaware of the season or the exact time of day.

Almost all of my artworks are filled with some form of water.   Water is an *unknown* as it holds a host of mysteries beneath the surface. I also juxtapose extreme weather conditions, such as storms, with extreme human situations, such as separation. I take pictures during these extreme conditions and look for figures that appear to be illustrating their personal stories through their actions. Using techniques such as uneven horizon lines and extremely stark landscapes, I design the compositions to evoke uneasiness as if there is something just out of reach, just over the horizon. Additionally, I use unidentifiable places and people. The depicted locations or activities could be specific places or events, but I try to leave the details vague enough so that the viewer can create their own stories. As a reflection of my approach, the figurative painter Balthus (Balthasar Klossowski de Rola, 1908-2001) succinctly said, "I always feel the desire to look for the extraordinary in ordinary things; to suggest, not to impose, to leave always a slight touch of mystery in my paintings" (Weber, 2).

Influences

The expressive approach to art particularly inspires me. Though expressionists cannot be solely bound to a particular period, it describes my personal philosophy of art. Expressionists typically adhere to guidelines where they explore and exaggerate the emotional quality of a scene. They often use color in a non-naturalistic manner to exaggerate the feelings of the event. For example, cold colors may be used on a figure to highlight the emotional temperature of the scene. Like many expressionistic artists, I also want to capture emotional experiences and landscapes. Three expressive artists that influenced my work are Francis Bacon (1909-1992), Edvard Munch (1863-1944), and Paula Rego (1932-). It is, in part, their influence that has helped to develop my personal style.

These artists have inspired my process, subject matter, and psycho-emotive content. Like the figurative painter Francis Bacon, I surrounded myself with photographs, torn books, letters, and scraps of clothing that I collected through various life experiences. I used these to capture my memories and thoughts of particular places and events, real or imagined. Even though Bacon would work from photographs, his artwork would not be described as naturalistic. In his artwork, you get a sense of who the figure was in more than a literal interpretation. The viewer is pulled into the experience of the figure. "The experience of existence is lived through all the sense and power of the human being and not through the primacy of the eye" (Ficacci, 7). Like Bacon, I feel as though the figures in my artwork should be more than a realistic interpretation and I present images that have a story beyond the superficial appearance. In my artwork *The Expedition* (Appendix, 1), I cloud the particular details of the figures and the details of where the figures are going, or what they are doing. Many tracks dot the sand as many others have been here and have made various paths. Like Bacon, who wants to " address the viewer's nervous system directly" (Ficacci, 1), I reach in and grasp a moment while exploring the human feeling and emotion within the work. Bacon states, "I would like my pictures to look as if a human being has passed between them, like a snail, leaving a trail of human presence and memory trace of past events, as the snail leaves its slime" (Gale, 26). I hope to intrigue the audience as I leave a trail for them to process.

In my work *Adrift (*Appendix, 2), a man is standing on a pier which has detached itself from the shore and is floating away. You can just make out a city in the distance. You feel a need to trace the past events as you determine how he ended up in this situation and what lies in his future. What is he feeling as he gazes out towards the sea? Even though it may seem a dire situation, he is standing tall, almost proud or perhaps in sureness of rescue.

In addition to Bacon, Edvard Munch, the highly emotional and usually melancholy figure painter, inspired me towards creating emotionally charged artwork. Unlike Bacon, Munch did not work from actual photographs but developed paintings that have evidence of high emotional drama and a personal vision of the experience. Munch states, "I do not paint what I see, I paint what I have seen" (Bischoff, 17). In his artwork *Melancholy* (1896)*,* Munch shows a man sitting on the beach who seems to be emanating a feeling of sadness and jealousy. Munch's use of dreary colors and pose suggest sadness, while his subject matter suggests jealousy. If you look carefully in the picture a man in black and a woman in white are painted in the distance. The slightly messy, expressive brushstrokes add to the feeling of the scene by letting you fill in some of the details yourself. You cannot see the woman's and man's faces or the details of the scene, which allows you to interpret the meaning. However, you are prompted by Munch to read emotion into the scene because, through similar brushwork and colors, the central figure has blended into the landscape. As explained by Dr. Ulrich Bischoff (1941-), well regarded author and curator, "The figure and the landscape become one, the impact of each intensified by the other in a composition of compelling power" (Bischoff, 84). In my artwork, I feel that it is necessary for both the figure and landscape to portray the mood of the artwork and work in harmony to express these ideas. For example, in my artwork *Coliseum* (Appendix, 3) there is a man riding a bike toward a dilapidated fortress. The stormy skies and off-kilter horizon intensify an otherwise serene picture.

Bacon, Munch, and Rego are storytellers in their artwork. They were influenced by the books, movies, and literature around them and incorporated these things into their artwork. In Paula Rego's work the narrative influences are clearly apparent. In *Swallow the Poison Apple* (1995), Rego shows Snow White after she has eaten the poison apple and has fallen into deep

slumber. However, Rego adds her own personal twist to the piece and shows an unusual side of the well-known fairytale. In fairytales, the heroines simply fall into a pleasant sleep. Here, Snow White is writhing in pain as she chokes on her apple and goes into a coma-like state. Her fists are clenched and she tightly grasps her neck. She is not a young beautiful princess but is middle-aged and is interpreted as an everyday person. Like Rego, I am a storyteller in my artwork.   I watch people and create stories of what their life may be like, without knowing them. However, unlike Rego, I create stories based upon my personal experiences.

In much of these artists' artworks a sense of voyeurism is present. In Rego's artwork *The Maids* (1947), the viewer invades a private moment as they watch the maids murdering the mother and daughter of the estate. This sense of voyeurism is also present in Francis Bacon's artwork *The Pope* (1953), which provides an unusual glimpse into the Italian figurehead's mind. In my artwork *Unfinished Business (*Appendix, 4), a man is squatting down on the ground in the snowy forest with a lantern. He is engaging in a private act, yet the viewer is invited to share in his personal moment. I want the viewer to feel a sense of voyeurism as if they are intruding upon solitary private moments.

Like many of these artists, I leave ambiguity in my artwork so that the viewer will be able to insert their own opinions.   As an example, Rego shows remarkable storytelling in her artwork, such as in *The Dance* (1988). In this piece, a group of individuals dance in the moonlight. Everyone is coupled or grouped off, except one woman. Her size is exaggerated to draw your eye to her and she dances alone in the moonlight. Although you may first assume that she is lonely, there is confusion as you attempt to decipher the artist's intent. Is she lucky or lonely? Her pose seems to suggest a sense of pride, however the dark colors of the ground may suggest other interpretations. There are several scenarios that could pertain to the situation but

the ambiguity is thrilling as you decipher clues in the painting and make educated guesses about what could be. Likewise, in my work *Glacier Fish* (Appendix, 5) there is much ambiguous information to ponder. The sparse ocean is surrounded by painted giant glaciers, which upon careful inspection, reveal fabric which ghostlike images of men fishing.

Process

As I developed my portfolio of work, I learned many photographic processes, such as liquid light, emulsion transfers, cyanotypes, Lazertran, and photo transfers. I reproduced photographs onto unusual surfaces, such as stone, wood, canvas, and fabric. This added to my base of knowledge and offered a range of possibilities for expression.

The first method used basic gel medium to transfer photos. I printed out my photographs from a laser printer and then painted a layer of gel medium over them. Then, I placed gel-covered images face down onto a canvas and thoroughly rubbed the surface. After the gel dried, I peeled off the paper, which revealed residual ink that had adhered to the canvas. This technique is used in *Seeing Double* (Appendix, 6) to provide the piece with an additional layer of abstraction. The figure in the foreground is transferred onto the canvas precisely, preserving the clarity of the scene. Meanwhile, the background and surrounding scenery are reproduced in a less exacting manner.

I also used this method to coat my photographs with multiple layers of gel medium, letting each layer completely dry. Then, I soaked the photo in a basin of water. After several minutes, I peeled off the paper backing leaving a partially transparent, bendable photo. At this point, I applied these to many surfaces such as ceramic, stone, wood, and canvas. These transfer methods were a good start to printing onto surfaces. I started to print onto glass and plastic using gel methods, transparencies, and tape. However, they produced unsuccessful results because I

yearned to print directly onto transparent surfaces to achieve an ethereal look.

Soon there after, I began experimenting with Polaroid cameras and day labs, which brought me one step closer to printing on transparent surfaces. A day lab is a machine used to produce Polaroid pictures using film negatives, or images printed onto transparencies. This process entailed taking a picture with the day lab and then pulling the Polaroid apart before it fully dried. Next, I soaked the half-developed image in boiling water to remove it from its paper backing. At this point, I was left with an image that I could twist, distort, and stick to various surfaces. When using the day lab, I could produce transparent images but I was left to create art that was no larger than a four-inch square. It was when I went grocery shopping that I came across the perfect material, contact paper!

I named this method that I developed *Contact Paper Transfer*. First, I took my photographs and printed them out on a traditional laser printer onto 8" by 10" paper. Because I was working with panoramic images, I printed out the artwork onto several consecutive sheets of paper. Then, I carefully taped the images together and applied contact paper over the entire surface. I burnished the ink to the contact paper carefully. Afterwards, I soaked the contact paper with the laser printouts attached in the sink and slowly rubbed the paper off the image. This left only the inked image on the contact paper. I was able to leave some of the paper scraps on the surface of the contact paper as a result of the rubbing process. The final step involved transferring the image on the contact paper to a plexiglas surface. Remnants of the printed photograph were intentionally left on the contact paper during the transfer. This added extra atmosphere to the landscapes, mimicking the look of clouds or fog. It was visually unclear whether or not these artifacts were in the original image or were a result of the process. An example of this technique can be seen in my artwork *The Wanderers* (Appendix, 7). At this

point, I had successfully transferred panoramic images onto a transparent surface.

Next, I took this process further and photographed these panoramic panels. From these photographs I repeated the contact paper process, which further deteriorated the resolution of the prints. I also used Photoshop to deteriorate the digital pictures of the images. It was an additive and subtractive process because I kept breaking down, rubbing, ripping, and bending the image frames until the scenes became abstracted. This can be seen in my artwork *Wandering* (Appendix, 8). I was moving toward abstraction in my images, so that the viewer could focus on the emotional quality of the work and not be concerned with time and specific location.

These process-oriented methods helped me create more abstracted work. They started a chain reaction of one process leading to another. These techniques inspired me to think outside the box and to try new things and unlikely materials in order to advance expression over verisimilitude.

Conclusion

The MIS-IAR program has had a profound influence on my personal, artistic, and professional development. It equipped me with a new range of artistic principles and techniques, as well as the confidence to conduct my own experimentation as I further develop my body of work. The broad range of experiences in the program inspired new ideas and opened my mind to new possibilities. The development of my portfolio also provided an outlet for expression. At the conclusion of a piece, I often found that I was able to better organize my thoughts and express myself more clearly in a visual manner than through verbal communication.

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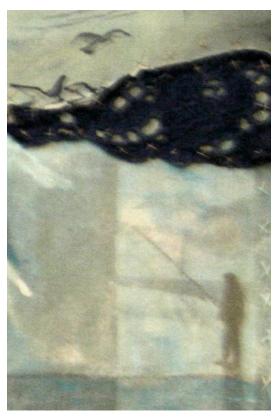

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