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# Searching For A Soul

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**Searching For A Soul**


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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**Table of Contents**

**Artist Statement**

The abstract pieces I create now are part of an ongoing evolution in my work to arrive at a visual balance between rigid structure and organic movement. Initially, they were intended as a departure from representational imagery to allow for more focus on color harmonies and structural balance. After more than twenty-five years of rendering objects and things, it became too predictable and "safe" for me to take my work seriously.

As it has been suggested that most abstraction derives from reality in some form, I was intrigued by those rings of light we see when closing our eyes. I liked the idea of appropriating an archetypal image that was neither real nor unreal.

Through the painting process, I have come to appreciate how a dialogue can be generated between the formal, visual elements, and the intuitive, more instinctive realm of aesthetics. Spontaneity and deliberate avoidance of pre-conceived imagery are important to me. I like the idea that ambiguity can create an environment for open interpretation. Most importantly, I am moving closer to work that is true to me.

# Searching For A Soul

## The Journey To The MIS Program

My motivation to create art after long days of teaching was difficult. When Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) offered the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts (MIS-IAR) Off-Campus Art program, I took classes. The classes offered an opportunity, if not an excuse, to force myself to make art. They also provided an opportunity to interact with like-minded educators. Initially, the degree program was of little interest to me. However, after several years of taking the classes I applied to the MIS-IAR program and worked on earning the degree.  My motivation was driven by a desire to grow as an artist and to keep making art, primarily as a painter.

A pleasant side effect of being in this program has been its influence on my classroom teaching. The techniques and art making strategies I've picked up from taking these courses has proven to be an invaluable asset in the classroom. I am more enthusiastic than ever about the importance of art in our culture and the impact that it has on future generations. It has helped me to think about new ways of seeing and interpreting what we value in our world today.

## My Aesthetics

I see painting as a direct way of documenting and communicating the passage of time, the human condition, and the intellect that creates it. I want to create art that will be just as viable in one hundred years as it is now. I am working towards building a

vocabulary of shapes, patterns, and color variations that will help me discover more about my personal habits, preferences, and approaches to art.

My paintings combine geometric structure and organic design. From my years of studying painting, I have found that geometric structure, especially a rectilinear or square picture plane, reinforces and solidifies the fictive compositional space. It helps to give the work a sense of order. Organic shapes and lines create a sense of movement in a fluid and freeform way. My paintings tend to flow in bands of vertical color and pattern.  By juxtaposing the geometric and organic, I create a challenge for myself to arrive at a place of balance and harmony.

The subject of my paintings is painting itself.  Specifically, they refer to themselves through the use of repetitive marks and ranges of colors and shapes. Because I listen to jazz music while I paint, I looked up the names of the top 100 jazz songs and chose names for each painting that seemed to fit the name of a song.  With others, there may have been a feel of a time, place, or thought. Because I spend a lot of time at the ocean, I also made some references to that environment. This method of choosing titles suits the intuitive nature of my overall approach. For instance, I titled this paper *Searching For A Soul* because my method of developing a painting depends on searching for the right marks and colors. By stripping away the external influence of objective representation, the locus of my work is directed inward. In other words, by harmonizing the formal elements in a painting I can enable the viewer to experience these works on a visual and emotional level.

**Processes and Techniques**

  I have developed and intuitively used various stencils, resist techniques, and colors to create these works. Before starting each piece, I build a panel support for the work. Because wood has such inherently interesting designs and patterns, I will look at it for several hours and often days, finding inspiration from the grain. Some sections of the grain appear to flow like water through canals while others seem to bloom like irises. Other sections will simply run straight, vertically, or horizontally, wasting no time in getting from one end of the panel to the other. The first colors that I apply depend on what sort of feel the grain has and whether or not I want emphasis placed on those characteristics. For example, in *Faith Fallacy* (Appendix, 1) the grain of the wood panel (light-colored vertical V-shaped band) seemed to bloom out and upward near the center of the panel. After designating an initial dividing line to begin the composition, I masked off the far left side of the painting as well as the wood grain bloom. Then, I painted all the exposed areas with a thin but opaque layer of red oxide, raw sienna, and burnt umber. In the next step, I removed parts of the paint by dripping water on the red and brown paint and then blotting it off. One of my favorite things about masking off areas involves the anticipation of what a painting will look like after the maskings are removed. With this particular painting, the result was immediately satisfying. Later, I used an oil pastel resist to create the three ovoid shapes on the left. I felt it needed nothing more.

  Sometimes, the direction of a painting can be established early, but usually I need to apply at least three to five colors of thin earth-toned or neutral-colored paint to the surface before any sort of theoretical and formal dialogue begins to emerge. After the initial painting decisions concerning structure and base color are made, I rely on my

3

intuition to complete them. These paintings evolve as I apply or remove layers of paint. Each application or removal of paint helps determine my next decision. Shapes begin harmonizing with each other through their placement, color tone, or size. When one section of a painting begins to relate to another section, I begin looking for common bonds between them and then use those similarities in a third section between them. In other words, if the painting color appears to be dominantly cool in two places, I may be inclined to add more analogous colors to a third place in slightly warmer hues, allowing the painting to shift towards that color range. This method allows me to be flexible with each section of paint application by either moving towards the cool or in the direction of warmer colors.

My paintings range in scale from 24"x24" to 48"x90. The scale of each piece is often dependant on my mood, how much money I have at the time, and how much room I have to do the work. I often use a square picture plane as it fits easily in most interiors and because of the way I compose them primarily in vertical bands. I have found that the square paintings can be viewed vertically or horizontally depending on the viewer's tastes. *Blue Rhondo Ala Turk* (Appendix, 2) is a large scale painting (48"x90"). Using these dimensions, everything was executed larger while still employing the same mark-making techniques. I have found that regardless of a painting's size, I relatively maintain the same proportions in the colored bands. In the larger works, the patterns and marks within those bands become more numerous and create a different optical blending effect. I think that despite the size differentiations between large and small paintings and the varied optical blending that occurs in both, I have found myself using about the same number of color bands and shapes. Perhaps this is part of some underlying desire

to create the same harmonious feel regardless of scale.

What does happen when the size of a painting changes dramatically is a forced interaction between the viewer and the work. Smaller paintings tend to invite the viewer in for closer examination while larger paintings encourage them to step back and see the whole piece. Because the paintings function in similar visual ways, the only real difference is whether or not the viewer steps back first and then moves in for a close examination or vice versa. I leave any narrative interpretations to the viewer.

**Media**

To begin a painting, I might start with dark or warm washes of acrylic color to set up a ground. In others, I may use clear gesso to seal the surface and let the natural color of the wood dictate the colors and shapes that follow. I usually apply acrylic in thin, sometimes multiple, layers. By applying thin layers, I have more control over the color and it facilitates the resist and stencil processes.  I have used an airbrush on some of the pieces when I've wanted a thin, even layer of color or a gradient. In *Three Views of a Secret* (Appendix, 3) I wanted the negative space (the bean shape) to appear to float in and emerge from a haze, similar to seeing light through a fog. I applied a thin layer of airbrushed paint to create some slight spatial tension and to subtly reveal the drawing in some parts.

Because acrylic paints dry quickly, I can make several decisions about the painting in a single sitting. I always mix matte mediums in with the paint because acrylics tend to develop a plastic sheen without it. For me, a shiny painting surface distracts from the work. A case in point could be a situation where there are two very

similar shades of green placed next to each other in a composition. If the painting

surface is shiny, reflected light from it could hide or confuse the subtle color shift

between the shades of green.

Another useful attribute of acrylic paint is its solubility with water and non-petroleum-based liquids. I have used water to make drip, splatter, and run marks on the

work while the paint is still wet. I have also used milk and maple syrup because it

evaporates slower than water and I can manipulate it to pool into wider lines. When

applying any of these liquids, I let the paint semi-dry, then I can wipe it off leaving just

the dried paint. This process makes the act of removing paint just as important as

adding it.

In *Tipitina* (Appendix, 4) I drew the organic, flowing lines in various square and

rectangular areas of the painting. I applied one color over another and then I drew on

top of these layers with maple syrup. The final step was to wipe off the syrup with a wet

rag. The syrup keeps the covered paint wet so that when it is wiped off,  the wet paint is

removed, leaving the first layer of paint exposed.

For more controlled and refined marks, I use masking medium and oil pastel for

blocking out areas that I do not want covered with paint. After paint is applied, the

embossed pastel is carefully scraped off with a razor blade, leaving a thin film, which is

easily wiped off with lighter fluid revealing the color underneath. The masking medium

can be removed with an eraser. All of these techniques are designed to remove areas

of paint and reveal the previous layers of color and surface.

**Compositional Device**

Often times, the most difficult task in getting started on a painting is making the first mark. In creating my compositional arrangements, I incorporate a geometric substructure based on the golden number, or 1.618. For years I have heard about the golden number being used in art and architecture and found in nature. I began using a calculator to divide the length of a side of my picture planes by 1.618 to find a proportional division of the side. From this point, I draw a perpendicular line from one side of the panel to the opposite side therefore breaking the planes down into smaller sections. Using this geometric method to segment my compositions allows me to develop a standard range of proportions throughout my work. It provides me with a simple method of finding a starting point. By putting a dividing line within the picture plane at the prescribed point, I can immediately establish structure within the composition. For me, it provides a means for making a series of paintings that have a unifying thread.

For *Icarus* (Appendix, 5), I started the painting with a light yellow ochre wash. At the dividing line, roughly 14 ¾" (24/1.618) on the top edge of the panel measuring from the right corner, I created a vertical dividing line.  On both sides of that line I added a band of more saturated ochre color and then began adding thin bands of black. Then, working out from the dividing line and in reaction to those dark colors I added neutral grays. This provided a visual relief to the original ochre. Once the entire underpainting was developed, I began applying resist patterns on some vertical sections. By shifting some of the dominant hues from yellows, dark greens, and grays to blue, the tonal quality of the work began changing. Each band of color or section affected the area next

to it and related to colors near it. By adding metallic glazes with resist patterns, some parts of the painting began to advance while allowing the color exposed from beneath to either spatially recede or advance. The painting evolved and each application of paint determined the next decision.

A major advantage of having this structural approach to composition in my work is that it allows me to be more intuitive within the paintings. Once a division in the picture plane is established, I will determine which side of the division, left or right, to begin manipulating the color. That first counter-balancing act will determine where the next shape will be placed, either to the left or right of the divisional line. These steps are repeated until the shapes begin to lose their sense of origin within the work and begin relating to other sections of the painting in harmonious ways.

Quite often I will find myself working on one side of the painting while ignoring the other side completely. Using resist mediums I draw shapes, dashes, scribbles, and patterns repetitively. The results are usually unexpected causing a constant state of flux in the development of the painting. A piece is at its finishing point when its beginning and end merge into a seamless cycle of referencing itself through a range of colors, shapes, and marks.

**Influences On My Work**

My major influences in these paintings were Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) and Sean Scully (b.1945). From the first time I was exposed to the compositional concepts of Cezanne, I was fascinated with how he reinvented the way we see space in a painting.  Using familiar settings, Cézanne showed his viewer objects in space from

multiple points of view and ushered in a completely new way of approaching pictorial space. Ultimately, it paved the way for the Cubist movement and encouraged the subsequent revolutions in painting to the present day. It is because of Cézanne that painters began to see and break down pictorial space into planes of shape and form. It was through his work that I learned the first and foremost rule of any successful painting.  If an underlying structural composition within the picture plane is not present, no matter how brilliant the color, line, or story, the painting will lack coherence.

When first seeing the work of Sean Scully, I was awe stricken. His ability to narrow compositions down to stripes of color in vertical and horizontal bands of varied widths and numbers is deceptively simple. Upon closer examination, the applications of paint and subtle layering of color give his paintings a sense of depth and formal meaning. His paintings draw reference to architectural spaces and places he has been, literature and poetry he has read, and emotional feelings he has had. That he has accomplished these things through a very direct means of visual communication, by removing extraneous information and relying on purely formal painting elements to make his statements, strongly appeals to me. Whereas Scully adds thick, heavy layers of paint to achieve luminosity and surface texture in his work, I am more inclined to substitute surface texture with pattern and reductive painting processes. Like Scully, I am interested in striping away superfluous elements of my work in search of a more direct and personal connection between the viewer and my painting.

**What's Next?**

Since being in the MIS-IAR program, I have found the support of my peers and

teachers to be an invaluable asset to my art making process. It has forced me to work at times I did not feel like it and encouraged me to experiment in ways I probably would not have been comfortable with otherwise. As a teacher with a very demanding work schedule, earning any type of master's degree while working is a daunting task. I have never been comfortable calling myself an artist until now because previously I spent more time wanting to make art than actually doing it. Distractions from being a productive painter are always there and in the past were often welcomed. Motivation is a key factor in making art and the MIS-IAR program certainly helped to unlock those doors. I have worked on art every single day and have developed work habits that will be used for the rest of my life. I have always painted and will continue doing so but as a result of this learning process, I have grown tremendously as an artist and feel more comfortable in my own skin as a painter.

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Carrier, David. *Sean Scully*. New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, 2002.

Loran, Erle. *Cézanne's Composition: Analysis of his Form, with Diagrams and Photographs of his Motifs*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1943.

**Appendix**

**List of Images**

Figure 1.    *Faith Fallacy,* Acrylic on oak panel, 24"x24", 2009.

Figure 2.    *Blue Rhondo Ala Turk*, Acrylic on oak panel, 48"x90", 2010.

Figure 3.    *Three Views of a Secret*, Acrylic on oak panel, 24"x24", 2009.

Figure 4.    *Tipitina*, Acrylic on oak panel, 24"x24", 2009.

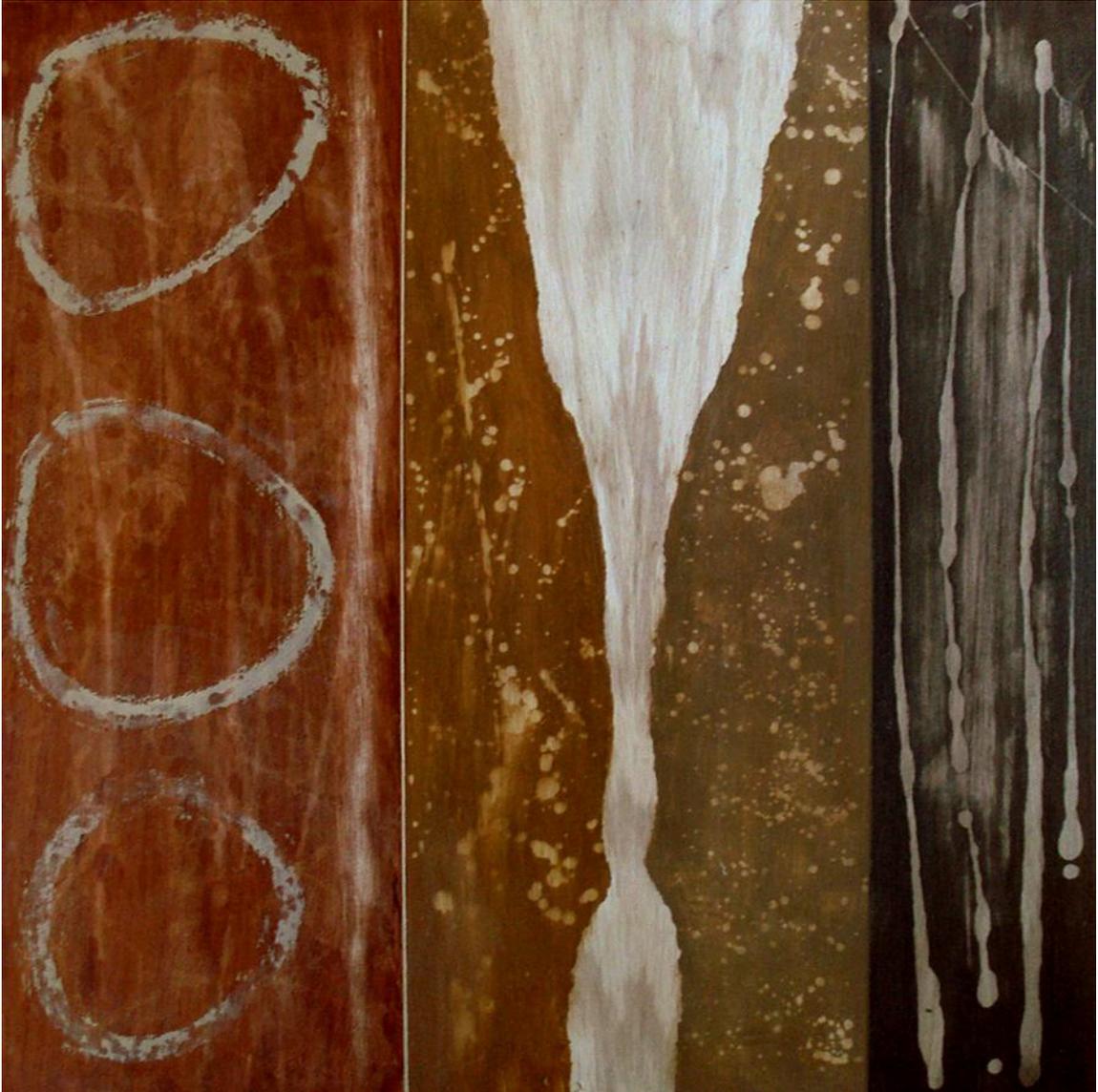Figure 5.    *Icarus,* Acrylic on oak panel, 24"x24", 2010.

Figure 1.  *Faith Fallacy*, Acrylic on oak panel, 24"x24", 2009.

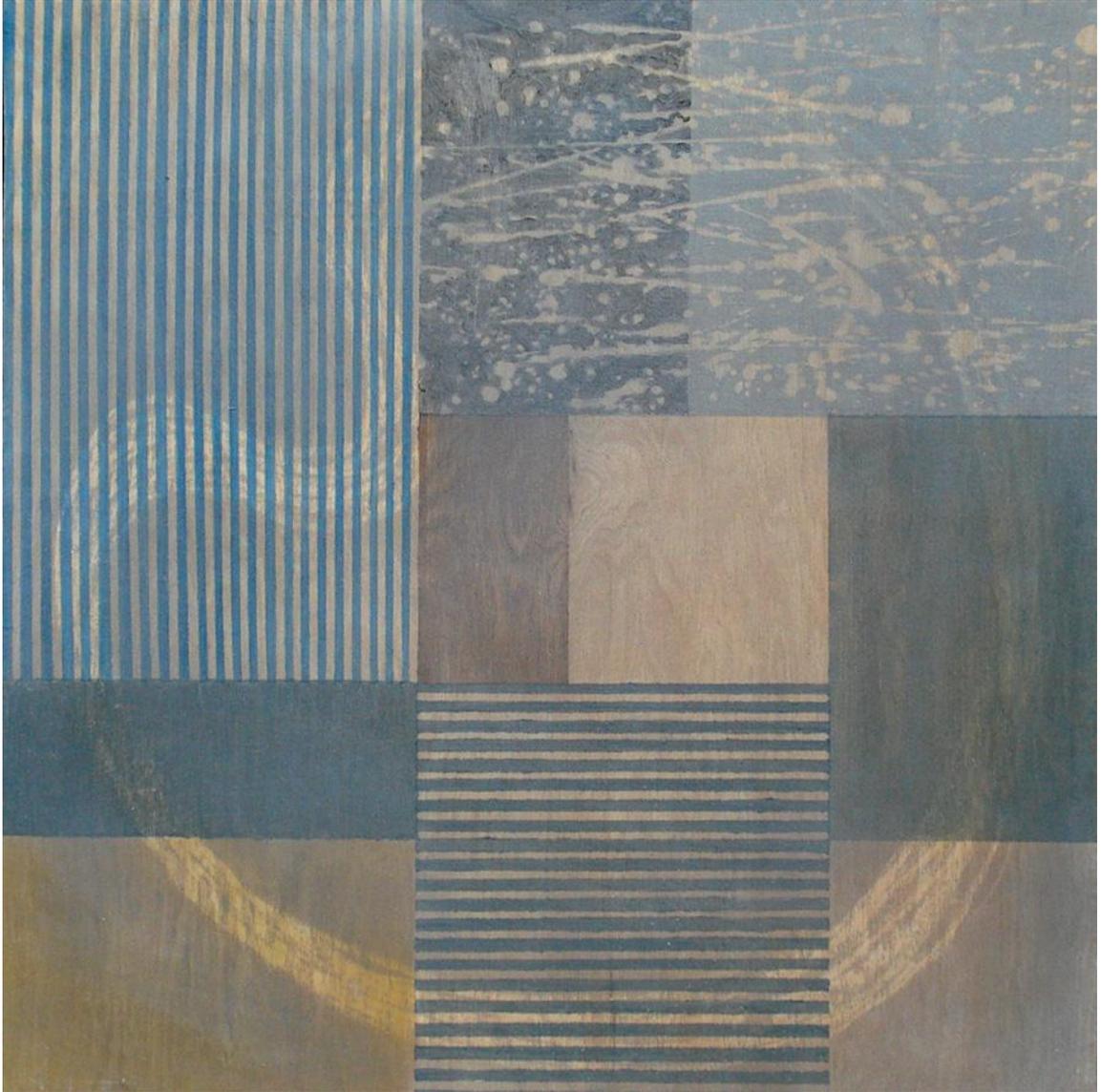Figure 2.  *Blue Rhondo Ala Turk*, Acrylic on oak panel, 48"x90", 2010.

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Figure 5. *Icarus,* Acrylic on oak panel, 24"x24", 2010.

# Michael O'Neal

**EDUCATION:**
2010            Master of Interdisciplinary Studies In Interdisciplinary Arts, Virginia
                Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia. Painting and Mixed
                Media
1993            Bachelor of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond,
                Virginia, Art Education
1991            Bachelor of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond,
                Virginia. Painting and Printmaking

**TEACHING EXPERIENCE:**
2000-Present   Art Teacher, Hermitage High School, Henrico County Public Schools,
                Henrico, Virginia
1994-2000      Art Teacher, Brookland Middle School School, Henrico County Public
                Schools, Henrico, Virginia

**RELATED EXPERIENCE:**
1984-1992      Fine Art Screen Printer, Editions Lassiter, Montpelier, Virginia

**PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS or MEMBERSHIPS:**
2010            Artist Member, Artspace, Richmond, Virginia
2009            National Art Education Association, Reston, Virginia
2009            Virginia Art Education Association, Richmond, Virginia

**SOLO EXHIBITIONS:**
2010            *Connard Arrogant!,* Master Of Interdisciplinary Studies Interdisciplinary
                Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, at
                Artspace, Richmond, Virginia
2008            *Before Sleep*, Red Door Gallery, Richmond, Virginia
2006            *One Person Exhibition*, Westwood Racquet Club, Richmond, Virginia
1999            *One Person Exhibition*, Shockoe Bottom Arts Center, Richmond, Virginia
1993            *One Person Exhibition*, Ginger Levit Atelier, Richmond, Virginia

**GROUP EXHIBITIONS:**
2009            *ThinkSmall*, Art 6, Richmond, Virginia
2009            *Book Arts,* Artspace, Richmond, Virginia
                Curator: Ginna Cullen and Michael Pierce
2009            *MIS 605*, PlantZero, Richmond, Virginia
                Curator: Sally Bowring
2006            *History of Richmond*, Gallery 5, Richmond, Virginia
                Curator: Amanda Robinson
2003            *Seeing Red*, Gallery 5, Richmond, Virginia
                Curator: Amanda Robinson
1986            *Erotic Themes In Art*, Rene Reston Gallery, Richmond, Virginia