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# Unravelings

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## **Unravelings**

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

by

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Virginia Commonwealth University  
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May, 2012

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### **Artist's Statement**

My work is a collection of narratives. Each one is the unfolding of the story of a person or thing. Several pieces are made up of objects that tell the story of their owners, giving clues to their lifestyles and experiences. I am interested in the story behind the things and people that I come across on a daily basis. For instance, what was housed in the drawers of the dresser I found in a thrift shop? Who drank from the milk bottle I now use as a vase? If I see a discarded toy on the street, I wonder what events led up to its abandonment. The way in which all of the represented objects and people are linked is left ambiguous, so that the viewer can create their own narrative.

The more abstracted pieces are close-ups of objects. These pieces document the wearing away or fraying of something, telling many stories over several years, possibly portraying a wall that has been painted over many times, causing it to flake, or a shirt that has been worn to the point of disrepair.

# **Unravelings**

## **Introduction**

After teaching art for two years, I knew that my career was the perfect fit for me but I wanted to learn more. At that time, I was teaching in a rural school system where I was the only high school art teacher in the county. I was responsible for teaching a variety of classes ranging from graphic design to three-dimensional design. In some of these areas, I felt I needed to strengthen my own skills in order to be a more successful teacher. I was fortunate to have access to a darkroom, a kiln, and had acquired grant funding which enabled me to order supplies for media not usually available to high school students, such as enameling and glass materials.

With only one ceramics class and one photo class in college, I was constantly doing all that I could to learn more about the tools available to me. I researched independently, joined professional organizations, and attended conferences and workshops. Then, at a workshop I met a teacher who told me about Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program. In this program, I could continue teaching while learning new techniques, working with new media, and earning a master's degree.

I focused on drawing and crafts as my concentrations in the program. In addition to strengthening my understanding of art, the experience encouraged me to exhibit my work. I have also been pushed out of my comfort zone into trying new materials.

## **Cycles and Circles**

Subtleties and ambiguities in art have always been of interest to me. I like to search for

the meaning of a piece or to look for visual information rather than having everything spelled out. I also have an interest in seeing stories unfold and how a story can be interpreted in an individualized way. These are elements that I want in my own work. Therefore, I develop open-ended visual stories that can be read in a variety of ways. That way, the viewer becomes a participant in the creative process.

In my work, I either include people or objects at different points of their lives. For example, the pose a person holds gives some insight into what they are feeling and thinking. A figure with their head facing downward could indicate several possible emotions. Also, the possessions of a person can give clues to the time in which they lived and what was of importance or necessity to them. I sometimes present unraveling pieces of fabric and representations of objects made of fabric in my work. I want the viewer to think of things in his or her own life that have deteriorated. I also include images of circles and ovals which reference the notion of cycles. I depict the circular forms, that resemble eggs or cells, as whole and new in contrast to surfaces that appear aged and cracked. By using these types of representations, I can tell a range of stories from seemingly insignificant to major events, or general transitions in time.

My media of choice is fiber which allows me to freely improvise when making my work. As I plan the elements for a particular piece, I create dyed or stitched portions that I may use in the piece. Then, as I compose the piece, I have the freedom of picking and choosing from these pre-worked portions. I often work with cheesecloth and mesh because they easily unravel. I symbolically relate this unraveling to changes in relationships, changes in a person over time, and changes in objects over time.

In addition to fibers I use gouache, oil paint, and mixed media. I prefer to use linear elements and imagery in my fiber pieces. I feel that thread lends itself to contour lines. In other

works, where I prefer a more naturalistic rendering of an object or person, I turn to paint. Most of the paint I use is on paper but I have applied paint to fiber surfaces and I have sewn painted imagery into fiber pieces.

Much of my imagery includes circles and ovals, these are especially noticeable in my more abstracted pieces. In these pieces, I have developed the circles and ovals to appear to be cracking and decaying. Yet, the circular forms refer to a story of possibility or something new.

### **Influences**

I've always liked to read, which is one reason I include stories in my work. In the contemporary short story *White* (2001), by novelist Terese Svoboda, she writes about the way things age and change, and cannot be made completely new again but are often marked with attempts to do so. She references a building that has been painted over in areas, without the original layers of paint first being removed. This shows the evidence of the past through the thick and inconsistent paint layers. Some of my abstract pieces reference this sort of history by showing crackling, unraveling, or breaking down.

I am also inspired by visual artists. For example, Edward Hopper's (1882-1967) ability to leave his subjects' facial expressions and background ambiguous is appealing. In *New York Movie* (1939) he included a crowd of people but clearly isolated the main figure with lighting, facing her in a different direction from the other figures. He then gave her an ambiguous facial expression that allows the viewer to develop their own story. He did supply the viewer with some information about her story, such as the uniform she is wearing which implies that she works at the theater. Hopper has geared the piece in a certain direction but has not filled in all of the narrative blanks for his viewers. I have this same goal in mind, part of my preference for

storytelling is that some creative thought is left to the viewer.

Edgar Degas (1834-1917) is another artist who inspires my work. His technique of minimally modeling forms and simplifying figures influences my approach to line work in fibers. His work makes me think of some of the unique possibilities for fiber art. Using the linear quality of thread, I am able to represent forms with contour lines and express my ideas in fibers without the need for modeling.

Finally, I draw inspiration from both traditional and fine artist quilters. I have studied traditional quilting techniques and modified these techniques to fit my needs. For example, traditional quiltmaking involves very even stitching and consistent patterning because a blanket is more appealing when it is the same weight and texture throughout. In my pieces, I stitch in whatever way works best for the imagery. I may leave a 4” section unstitched, then stitch heavy line work in another area.

I feel that quilts tell a story and have been an historic device for storytelling, even if a quilt was simply meant for warmth. Dating back to the fourteenth-century, women have created bridal quilts to commemorate their own wedding or the wedding of a friend. Their quilts could reveal something about the makers of the quilt, and friends who made these quilts would sign the block they created. If made by the bride, she would sometimes include the family crest in the design. In addition, up until recent years when a variety of fabrics could be easily obtained from all over the world, the type of fabric used also told a story of where the piece was made. Another milestone that was commemorated by quilts was the birth of the first child. These quilts are of interest to me because they are objects that are telling a person’s story.

Now a significant number of fine artists are creating quilts as art. Maggy Rozycki Hiltner is a contemporary quilt artist whose subject matter is usually based on humor that she encounters



in her life. The characters she creates are simplified into contoured lines and they tell a story. Her characters are all stitched in the same way, except for her own face, which is portrayed in a childlike way similar to the way her children might draw her. I admire Hiltner's ability to develop her sequential narratives. In my work, the pieces are about people and objects. The stories portrayed in each are individual instances. Her skill in character and story development are what I appreciate and strive to achieve in my own work.

I am also interested in the work of contemporary Japanese printmaker, Tetsuya Noda (b. 1940), because his imagery is simplified yet it boldly captures the attention of the viewer. He uses a photo transfer process to capture a moment from his day. Part of his unique process is using very minimal color and adding a daily diary entry. Some of the days he depicts are eventful, some are just average days. The snapshot images sometimes include himself, other people, or objects. Noda's use of figures, as a support to his story rather than the focus, helped me reach a decision to occasionally use figures. In his piece, *Diary:Sept.21st '06* (2006), he posed in the photograph but his face and much of his body were blocked by a letter he is reading. This presentation of story elements leads the viewer to multiple conclusions as to the actual event depicted.

All of these artists have contributed in some way to my work. Seeing the way another artist handles different aspects of storytelling is helpful in my decision making as an artist.

### **Crackling and Fading**

When I began to work with fiber I latched onto it because I enjoy the process of dyeing fabric and making decisions with new media. Rather than starting and finishing with the same media, like I would do in an oil painting, I could have hand-dyed fabric, embroidered fabric, and

quilting in the same piece. I am not limited to the size of a canvas but can instead add and crop out pieces as I create.

The use of textiles has given me a whole new process in which to create. When dyeing fabric, I sometimes apply the dye with brayers and brushes as if it is paint. I sometimes add a resist of potato dextrin. This resist is a thick paste that produces a crackle effect after the paste dries, and dye is applied to the exposed fabric. I also use thickened dye and handmade stencils to create prints and use textured objects for rubbings. By dyeing fabric, I create grounds on which I can later add thread work and appliquéd imagery. For example, in *White* (Appendix, 1) I used a piece of fabric that I dyed using potato dextrin. Then, I quilted vertical lines over top which attached the batting and canvas to the cotton backing. These quilted lines also add a layer of subtle line work to the piece. The circular form is made up of small, crackling pieces that appear to have broken away or are ready to form into something new. Therefore, the piece can be viewed as either unraveling or as the formation of something. The solid black areas, on the right and left margins, provide a strength and stability that contrast the fragile line work. This story represents the cyclical nature of things.

In my oil on canvas piece, *Calm and Chaos* (Appendix, 2), I took a similarly abstract approach as in *White*. It was created using brown house paint as a ground. After applying the ground, I painted white, flowing lines that varied in transparency. Later, I glazed over these lines with a transparent blue. These flowing, wavy lines are more concentrated and orderly on the left side of the canvas, contrasting with the right side where the lines are more tangled, complex, and appear to fade away. Here, I present the viewer with contrasting elements. The piece is telling a story but that story is open-ended.

In *In My Dresser Drawer* (Appendix, 3), another fiber piece, I used a solid green piece of

fabric as a starting point because the planned imagery would be complex. The plain background allowed me to place attention on the depicted imagery. On top of the green fabric, I added a stenciled wallpaper design, an image transfer of a calendar, and embroidered drawing to represent a dresser. Then, I appliquéd squares of dates, altered in Photoshop, from the calendar that seem to be either falling from or rising up to the calendar. I present the passage of time to the viewer who must choose to interpret this as time lost, memories kept, or experiences gained.

In this fabric work, *Worn* (Appendix, 4), I embroidered an image of a person onto a print of an unraveling surface. The clusters of vertical lines, directly above the figure in the lower right-hand quadrant, appear to suppress or weigh down the figure. The light, irregularly shaped patch of color, which is the result of the removal of dye and partially obscures the figure, symbolizes erosion. This patch is repeated in other areas of the piece.

In *Lotus Blossoms* (Appendix, 5) and *Lotus Pods* (Appendix, 6), both gouache on paper, different stages of a lotus flower are depicted. In *Lotus Blossoms*, the lily pads and the blossom are both depicted in colors that are vibrant and representative of life. The format is squared off similar to a quilt. An entire lily pad is depicted on the left, a close up of the tops of lily pads are depicted on the top right, and a view of the blossom is depicted on the bottom right. Two different angles of the pod are depicted in *Lotus Pods*. The pods still hold onto a slight purple and blue coloring but have mostly faded to brown in their dried state. On the left-hand side is the top view of the pods and on the right is the side view. The peak of this flower's existence is beautiful because of its vibrant colors but its withered end stages have a different beauty, filled with its history, and hold the seeds for new life.

My pieces are images that tell a story of the cycle of life, which contains a beginning, middle, and end. It envelops time with growth and struggle. My pieces include glimpses into

these aspects of life.

### **Resulting Approach**

I have worked with different media and I have gained experience with several new processes through the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Program. I have spent time applying what I have learned about fiber but look forward to expanding my media. I also plan to expand my storytelling to include more aspects of the cycles of life.

As a result of the Program, I also am much more a part of the art community. I have been challenged to create and show work, and will continue to do both.

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## Appendix

### List of Figures

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- Figure 2. *Calm and Chaos*, oil on canvas, 22"x28", 2009.
- Figure 3. *In My Dresser Drawer*, fiber, embroidered and image transfer appliquéd on fabric with machine quilting, 22"x22", 2011.
- Figure 4. *Worn*, fiber, embroidered and printed fabric with machine quilting, 22.5"x18.5", 2010.
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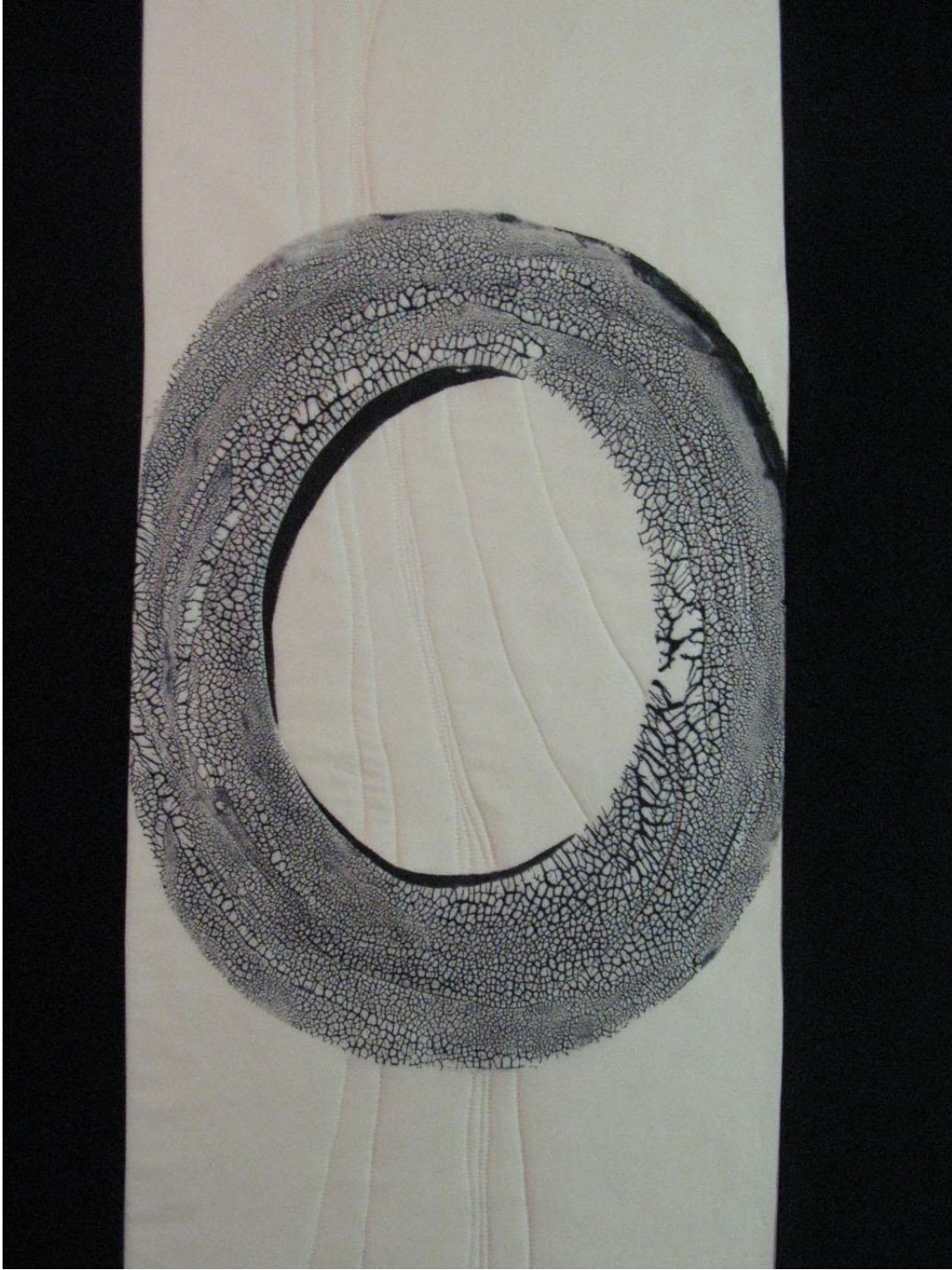


Figure 1. *White, fiber, hand-dyed fabric with machine quilting, 33"x25", 2011.*



Figure 2. *Calm and Chaos*, oil on canvas, 22"x28", 2009.





Figure 3. *In My Dresser Drawer*, fiber, embroidered and image transfer appliquéd on fabric with machine quilting, 22"x22", 2011.



Figure 4. *Worn*, fiber, embroidered and printed fabric with machine quilting, 22.5"x18.5", 2010.



Figure 5. *Lotus Blossoms*, gouache on paper, 15"x11", 2012.



Figure 6. *Lotus Pods*, gouache on paper, 9.5"x12", 2011.

## Megan McConnell

### Education:

- 2012 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, Focus in Drawing and Crafts.
- 2006 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Longwood University, Farmville, VA  
Concentration in Art Education, Drawing, and Printmaking.

### Teaching Experience:

- 2009-present Art Teacher, Meadowbrook High School, Richmond, VA
- 2006-2009 Art Teacher, Nottoway High School, Crewe, VA

### Professional Organizations or Memberships:

- 2011-present Member, ArtWorks Gallery, Richmond, VA
- 2005-present Virginia Art Education Association
- 2002-2006 Member, Kappa Pi Honors Art Fraternity  
Served as New Member Educator and Vice President.

### Awards and Honors:

- 2011 **Third Place**, July All Media Show, Artworks, Richmond, VA. Jurors: Jennifer Glave Kocen and Joanna Gagnani
- 2005 **Senior Scholarship**, Longwood University, Farmville, VA

### Exhibitions:

- 2012 *Unravelings*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA at ArtWorks, Richmond, VA
- 2011 *July All Media Show*, ArtWorks, Richmond, VA, Jurors: Jennifer Glave Kocen and Joanna Gagnani
- 2011 *April All Media Show*, ArtWorks, Richmond, VA, Juror: Durwood Dommissie
- 2011 *February All Media Show*, ArtWorks, Richmond, VA, Juror: Amie Oliver
- 2010 *Virginia Orchid Society Show*, Strange's Florist, Richmond, VA
- 2009 *V.C.U. Mixed Media Show*, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Richmond, VA
- 2005, 2008 *Virginia Art Education Association Annual Show*, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Richmond, VA

**Exhibitions (continued):**

- 2005            *The Big Block*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA
- 2004            *Blur Between the Arts*, Longwood Center for the Visual Arts, Farmville, VA
- 2003            *Potluck*, Longwood Center for the Visual Arts, Farmville, VA
- 2002-2005    *Kappa Pi Member Shows*, Longwood University, Farmville, VA

**Public Collections:**

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The Print and Picture Collection of The Free Library of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA