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Complex Simplicity

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Complex Simplicity

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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Artist Statement

I was born the only American in my West Indian, Guyanese family. My culture played a large part in how I was brought up, and in turn, shaped the person and artist I have become. In my work, I like for my viewers to get a personal feel for what it is like to be West Indian American. My work is a cultural record of people, places, and things. I capture small, special moments because I know that they will never be recreated.

My camera's viewfinder has always been filtered through my eye as a child of immigrant parents. I use photography as my first step in creating and recording ordinary, everyday things. Photographs are captured where I feel most American eyes would by-pass or overlook their importance. However, my work must also involve my hand. Therefore, through my mark making, whether I am drawing, painting, collaging, stitching or using software, I add and subtract from my original photos. By manipulating my images, I change and emphasize a single, fleeting moment into something permanent and significant.

Complex Simplicity

Introduction

Are the things I see in my head all memories? Are they a combination of memories and the remembrance of old photos from my childhood? These are some of the questions that I ask myself as I make my artwork. My earliest memories come to my mind in still photographic form, much like a single film frame. These still frames, encompassing our family vacations, start with shots of me shopping with my mom for clothes and food for our trips. This was normal preparation for our trips to the Caribbean country of Guyana, South America. This West Indian country, where my parents and brother were born and grew up, is considered part of the Caribbean because of its proximity to the other English speaking Caribbean Islands. Prior to our trips, every other year, I remember my mother receiving letters and wish lists in the mail from relatives in Guyana. I remember picking out clothes and toys that satisfied their needs. Mom and I would spend days finding pants, roller blades, dresses, underwear, school supplies, and anything that we could afford to take with us. Then, my brother and I would get a new outfit and sneakers, mom would buy a new dress, and dad would get new undershirts and travel clothes.

The next still frames I see in my mind's eye are my family piling into a taxi with our luggage, heading towards the airport. I have always loved the excitement of the airport, waiting in lines, boarding the plane, drinking endless amounts of soda in economy class, landing in Trinidad and Tobago for layovers, and catching connecting flights that eventually arrived in Guyana.

In Guyana, the memories transform from still frames to moving mental images. I

can feel the hot humid air and the smell of the tropics as we walk from the plane, across the tarmac, and into the terminal. This sequence of events has continued to be the same every other year for my entire life. My Caribbean heritage is part of who I am. The experiences that I have had going to and in Guyana have shaped my life and my art.

In high school, my artwork was very loosely based around cultural aspects of my life. Hair was a major cultural topic and one of the many avenues I explored. My interest in art led me to major in Art Education at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). As an undergraduate student, I was spread thin when it came to studio classes. I had a little bit of painting, some sculpture, a dash of drawing, and a few experiences in other media. I wanted to teach but felt that I also wanted to further my own creative interests.

Now, as a high school art teacher, I know the importance of education and I made it my goal to further mine and partake in higher education by working towards my master's degree. One of the main reasons that I chose the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program, at VCU, was to improve my photography skills as an artist. The MIS-IAR Program seemed right for me. It offered me the chance to explore in depth my interest and love for photography. Additionally, I chose to explore mixed media painting as a second concentration area. It was not until I was well into my MIS-IAR coursework that I began to revisit my culture as an inspiration.

Cultural Drive

My artwork is a personal record of my thoughts and memories. Photographs

jumpstart and reinforce my memories. An old photo that comes to mind is one of my cousin, Adele, and my mom standing in front of my Great Uncle Edmond's wooden house on stilts. That one image reminds me of when Adele introduced me to the genip tree, and how the fruits stained my shirt brown. I can also picture the inside of Uncle Edmond's house. It was old and dark inside. He was blind so every time we would go to visit, everything including all the furniture would be in the same place as when we went two years earlier.

One photograph can create so many memories. I aim to capture and record moments in time but also enhance them with additional emphasis. I refer to my work as *complex simplicity*. This means that my compositions are straightforward and uncomplicated. However, the process of developing the images involves complex and repetitive techniques. In my images, I capture small moments and solitary figures. To embellish these scenes, I use vibrant color and layered mixed media, such as embroidery, paints, and pastels.

To enhance my images, I use bright, saturated colors. The love I have for color stems from aspects of my culture. West Indians are literally colorful people, loud and bright in personality and life. Everything from the houses to the fruits in the Caribbean are brightly colored. I want my work to reflect that same lively color and energy. The same bright orange-pink found on the inside of the papaya fruit, and the electric turquoise found on the feathers of the macaw parrot can be found in my work.

My work has personally amplified the importance of my cultural history. My trips to Guyana are no longer just vacations to see my family members but are also inspiration for my work. While there, I see every day as an opportunity to inspire my

next project. I walk through the capitol city, Georgetown, and Starbroek Market to hear, smell, and see all that the merchants have to offer. It is crowded, loud, and full of excitement. I often come across groups of girls in green uniforms on their way to school and women with bundles of fruit balanced perfectly on their heads.

Day excursions into the interior of the country give me other opportunities to see what life is like for Guyanese that live in rural, hard to reach rainforests. Here, I see children bathing in the rivers or boats full of people on their way to the closest towns. In this Third World country, people do not have a lot of money. Therefore, I try to capture their wealth of spirit, intelligence, and love for life. My intention is to reveal the knowledge that the old farmer has, or show the skill of the young boy who can climb the coconut tree with a machete in one hand, or the independence of the little girl who knows her way around the banana plantation. These are the elements that capture my attention and drive me to create.

Artist Impressions

My love for color stems from cultural influences in my life. However, I am also inspired by the Post-Impressionist work of Paul Gauguin (1848-1903). Gauguin used bright color in his paintings of the people of Tahiti. His deliberate use of color is apparent in his work. He used orange, yellow, and red paint to emphasize specific objects and figures. His symbolic color choice was meant to evoke and emphasize emotions. I also use culturally symbolic colors to draw the attention of the viewer. In other words, I select a specific range of bright colors to bring energy to my work.

Gauguin went to this South Pacific island with the intentions of learning about the native people. As Ingo Walther, the art historian and author writes, "his wish [was] to

find out about the Polynesian peoples and their culture, and to get to know them as wholly and informally as his European background and education permitted.” (Walther, 39) As a Guyanese American I can relate to Gauguin’s objective. I also wanted to learn about a culture that I did not grow up in.

Other artists have inspired me to make certain decisions with my creative process. Marlene Dumas (1953-) and Santu Mofokeng (1956-) are both South African artists who use photography in their work. The South African painter, Marlene Dumas, lives and works in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. She paints portraits that focus on identity through the use of photographic images. I am most impressed by her mixed media and process. She often uses photographs, Polaroids, and magazine and newspaper clippings. The mixed media images she uses and her own photographs are very similar in content, such as solitary figures in various settings. She removes the figure from its original context and edits it and the environment. She can take photographs of war casualties and edit them into beautifully painted dead men and women. Like Dumas, I also collect and photograph images. Like Dumas, I paint and draw directly from the source image to create a translation that has been tweaked and edited.

Santu Mofokeng is a South African photographer who photographs impoverished South Africans in everyday moments and daily life. I appreciate how natural the scenes and people are, nothing is posed. He is able to carry the viewer to South Africa and to particular townships through his lens. I have yet to travel there but, after viewing his work, I have a sense of who the people are, what they do, where they live, and what they believe. With traditional film photography, Mofokeng transports the viewer to South

African life. My intentions are similar. I want to transport the viewer to another place in order to show everyday moments.

Photographic and Mixed Media Processes

In my photography, I aim to capture moments that transport viewers to a particular place and time. With the use of both my film and digital camera, I take photos in real time. Real time means that I don't stage models or objects but capture moments as they occur. My cameras are with me everywhere I go. I cannot predict what and when the opportunity for a perfect shot might occur so I have to be ready for the perfect moment at all times. Within this moment, I want to inform the viewer of these particular surroundings by addressing their senses. I want to suggest the smell that passes in the warm breeze, the level of noise in the parade, and how sweet the sugar cane tastes.

I use digital photography the majority of the time. With a digital format, I take an image in color but also have the flexibility to change the image to black and white if I choose. I use a manual *RAW* setting in digital mode. A *RAW* setting allows me to take high resolution images. Using the manual settings allows me to have control over the shutter speeds and the aperture. Shooting in *RAW* does not change how I take the pictures but allows me to later make adjustments without altering the original file information in the editing process. I also take as many images as possible, which gives me the freedom to make critical selections, narrowing images down to my best photographs. After taking and selecting images, I upload my *RAW* image files into computer software and edit the images. These images can be altered in many ways and I am able to work as if I were in the darkroom. I make adjustments that only enhance or improve the information that already exists in the *RAW* file. Once the

images are enhanced I have them printed and enlarged.

I use my film camera when I know that the color of the subject is not essential to my work. With film, I am more selective with what I shoot. I make sure that my image is *film worthy*. Since there is no delete button and no preview of what was taken, I shoot images when I can take the appropriate time to capture them well. I have an interest in different shooting and developing techniques. One technique that I use in shooting film is creating double or multiple exposures. The shutter is released more than once without advancing the film. Exposing the same section of film to more than one scene creates unpredictable outcomes. The film instantly comes abstract and visually complex.

In contrast to digital photography, more time is spent taking the photograph, developing the film, and processing the photos. Darkroom processing has a human touch that is absent in digital work. I can develop the same image multiple times in the darkroom and have slight variations in each outcome. Other than altering my film by double exposure, I manipulate the image by distressing the physical film through scratching and burning. My time in the wet lab developing the RC (resin coated) photographic paper is another opportunity to manipulate my image. I alter these photographs through the different applications of developer and light. I am a hands-on, process-driven artist.

Mixed Media

I have learned to rely on mixed media, it has become an integral part of my work. I appreciate that with the simple addition of thread, pastel, or other media, conceptual and physical depth in a work can be increased.

I categorize the majority of my work as mixed media painting. I often find that a single media is not sufficient. With both digital and film cameras attached to me, it is easy to create images to start off a work. From these photographs, I use a variety of approaches and media to enhance and re-present these images. The added elements include collage, machine and hand sewing, drawing, painting, and transferred images. For example, to add texture to my work I have included tissue paper, glue, and oil paint. I also create images on silk, canvas, various papers, and RC photographic paper. The inclusions of mixed media elements bring textural features and interest to my pieces. I want my audience to take a closer look and consider how I made the final piece. I want them to take notice of how color was applied or how the texture in a piece was accomplished. All of these steps help me express and emphasize my cultural heritage and introduce it to an audience.

Photos, Threads, Paintings, and Drawings

Photography is my starting place for all my work. I start with a photograph and then enhance it in multiple ways. I have experimented with film and the combination of mixed media elements. Starting with the film, I often begin by creating unique and sometimes unpredictable negatives. For example, *Current* (Appendix, 1) is a photograph created by exposing two separate images on top of the same frame of film. The outcome was a combination of tree bark shot in a portrait orientation, and leaves shot in a horizontal orientation. Next, I repeated the image three times to show my hands-on approach in the darkroom process. With the same negative for each photograph, the resulting images all contained slight variations. The abstracted final image references a landscape suggestive of a land mass and water. To reinforce my

interpretation, I used machine stitching of silky variations of blue and green threads arranged in a freeform and flowing manner.

Technical restrictions often drive decisions I make. In *Flight* (Appendix, 2), I started by using double exposure film but oriented and arranged the overall composition differently from *Current*. The limitations of my darkroom enlarger prevented me from creating large scale developed photographs. So, with three separate photographs, I pieced together a vertically-oriented piece. The decision to machine stitch orange and blue threads was an intuitive decision. I wanted to emphasize the connection between the three separate images. The use of RC paper restricts some media because of the nonporous surface. So, instead of using paint or marker, I used thinly stitched lines as an added element.

Janice (Appendix, 3), is a mixed media piece that combines digital photography, drawing, and painting. This piece captures my Aunty Janice as she took part in an annual West Indies festival. Her costume itself was a work of art and I felt it could not be contained within a standard rectangular format. So, I took her image and enhanced her headdress with the addition of tissue paper and paint on vellum. I allowed these added materials to run off the edge of the support. The irregularly-shaped format allowed me to express the unique nature of this person and costume. The semi-transparent quality of the vellum allowed the drawing and the color to show through the layers.

Many times, I use several different transfer techniques to apply my photographs to my pieces. In *Front Line* (Appendix, 4) I used a gel medium transfer. First, I made a charcoal drawing on a transparent, synthetic paper. The synthetic nature of the paper

allows for the application of wet medium but maintains its transparent quality. Next, I took a laser print-out of a detail of a festival headdress and covered it with matte gel medium. Then, I applied it face down on the back of the drawing. The gel was allowed to dry and the laser print was then wet with water and rubbed off leaving only the colorful inked headdress. I chose this transfer technique because the gel is similar to transparent quality of the synthetic paper.

Transfers also allow me to apply images to surfaces such as fabrics, papers, tiles, wood, plaster, and canvas. In *Carnival Nation* (Appendix, 5), I used the Citrasolv photographic transfer technique on silk. I wanted to keep the soft and smooth quality of the silk while still applying a photograph to the fabric. To do this I used Citrasolv, in which I burnished a photograph to the silk and transferred only the ink without additional interference from a medium. Because the integrity of the silk was maintained, I was able to easily apply hand and machine stitching and beading along with some color enhancements with chalk pastels.

Carnival (Appendix, 6) is also an image transferred onto silk. I wanted to add emphasis to the ornate headdresses worn during Caribbean carnival parades. The majority of the finished piece is hand embroidery. My choice in using mostly hand stitching comes from the many feathers, beads, and jewels used in the headdresses. With the use of embroidery, I was able to mimic the soft look and texture of the plume of feathers on top of participant's head. The overlapping of thread creates thick layering, causing the head piece to visually and physically stand out from the background.

In my paintings, I use photographs in a different way. For *Aunt Marina* (Appendix, 7), I scanned an image of my great-aunt Marina from my grandfather's photo

album. I used computer software to explore my color and design options and decided to add color to the black and white image. I selected a brightly-colored palette of colors and simplified the lines and shapes. The resulting painting was colorful and graphically design-oriented. I was able to translate this old photo into a representation of what I see in my heritage.

Aunt Vera (Appendix, 8) is also a painting created from an image I found in a family album. Again, I painted with mostly flat, bright colors and simplified lines and shapes. I wanted to add significance to her outfit and jewelry. I chose to use the complementary color of yellow against the blue ground. Then, I applied tissue paper and glue to add texture and prominence.

Traditional film photography, digital photography, and prints are tied together in my work. With all that I do, photography is an integral part of my creative process, yet not the end. As I created these works, I realized that my images are not self-portraits, yet these pieces illustrate a part of me. My work asks the viewer to take a closer look and to pay attention to details. Reflecting on this, I recognize the similarities in what I ask people to see in me and what I put into my work.

Intertwined

I cannot separate my culture from who I am. It does not matter where I live, I cannot change who my parents are, where my family is from, or how they raised me. My art and my life are intertwined, and my work has brought me closer to my culture. My initial goal was to inform others on what I already knew and saw around me. Instead, I learned a lot about myself and saw my culture through a different lens.

With my time in the MIS-IAR Program, I have been able to apply what I have

learned into my class lessons. My students know that I am a student as well and are inspired by that. They see me working on my personal art and it pushes them to do better. When I have learned new skills, I come to my class excited to share new techniques and methods with them.

I have also been able to explore new avenues. I have separated myself from the comfortable and allowed myself to be creatively pushed. Professors and classmates introduced me to new techniques and directions. Now, my creative process involves looking closer at my history and myself. This allowed me to become a part of what I was observing. I used to go to the carnival parades and look at all the costumes and admire those who took part in the festivities. I now buy my own costume and am a participant myself. I have a greater appreciation for who I am and what it means to be a Guyanese American. My artwork helped me explore what that means from the inside out and embrace who I am in my complex simplicity.

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Appendix

List of Figures

- Figure 1. *Current*, mixed media on RC paper, 10" x 22.5", 2012.
- Figure 2. *Flight*, mixed media on RC paper, 22" x 11", 2012.
- Figure 3. *Janice*, mixed media, 11" x 19", 2010.
- Figure 4. *Front Line*, mixed media, 18" x 12.5", 2010.
- Figure 5. *Carnival Nation*, mixed media on silk, 8" x 10", 2011.
- Figure 6. *Carnival*, mixed media on silk, 7.5" x 9.5", 2011.
- Figure 7. *Aunt Marina*, oil on canvas, 11" x 14", 2012.
- Figure 8. *Aunt Vera*, oil on canvas, 20" x 16", 2012.



Figure 1. *Current*, mixed media on RC paper, 10" x 22.5", 2012.

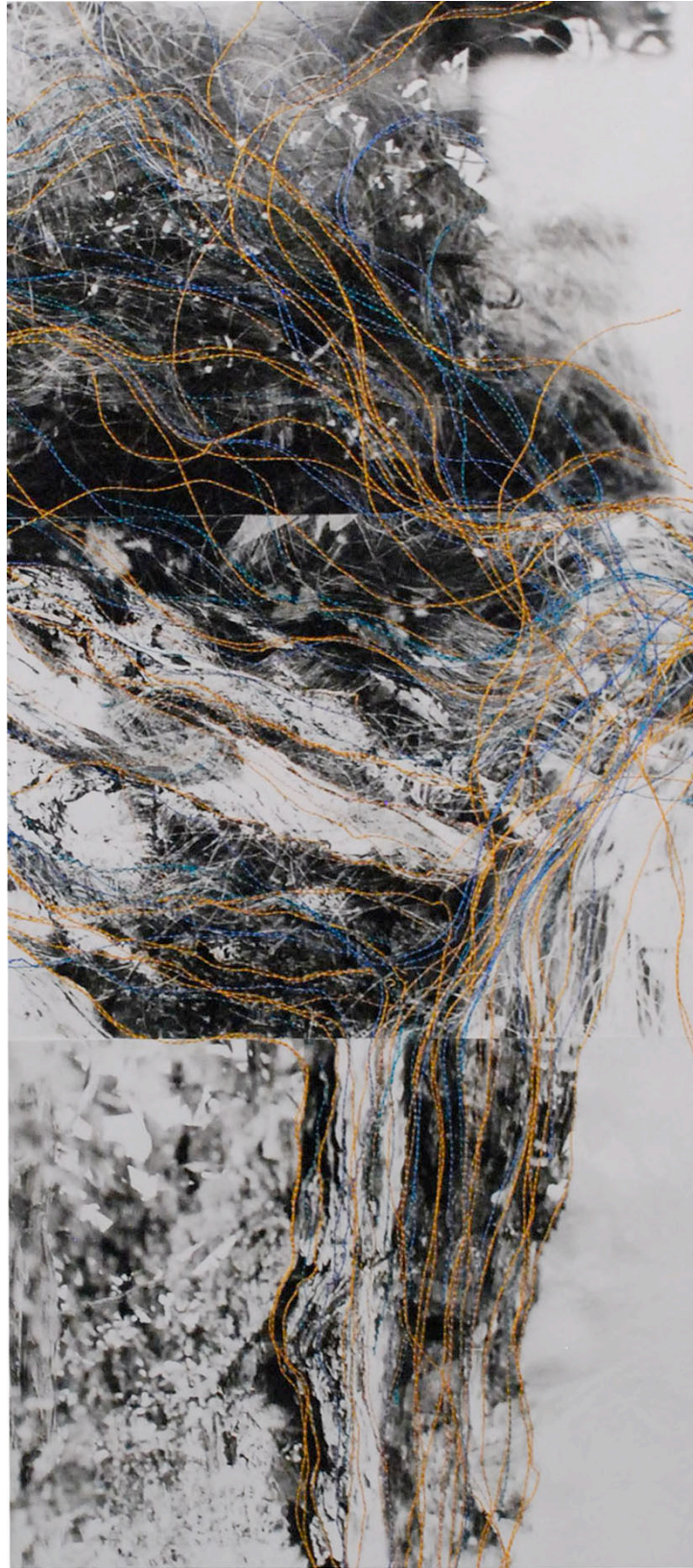


Figure 2. *Flight*, mixed media on RC paper, 22" x 11". 2012.



Figure 3. *Janice*, mixed media, 11" x 19", 2010.



Figure 4. *Front Line*, mixed media, 18" x 12.5", 2010.

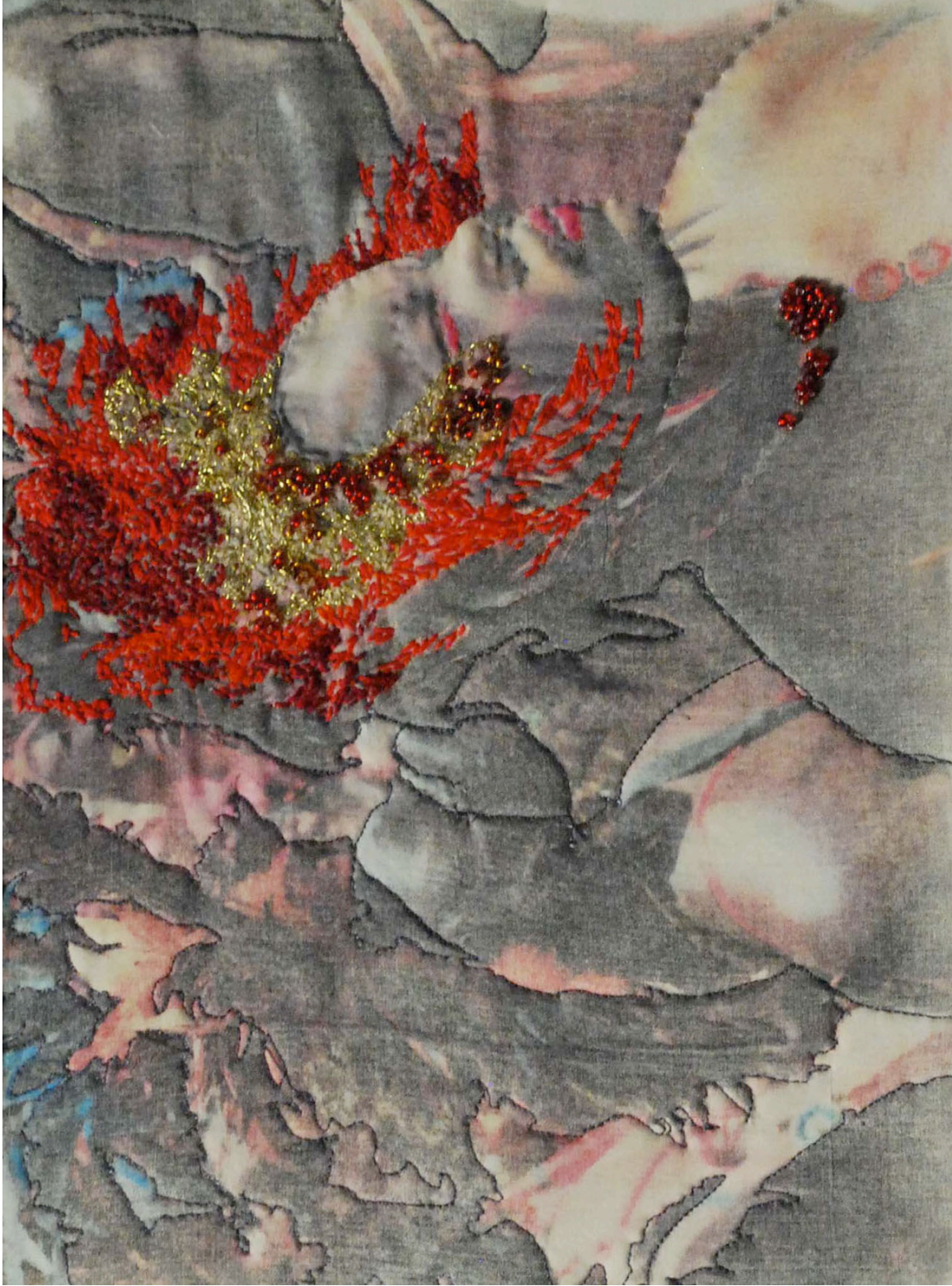


Figure 5. *Carnival Nation*, mixed media on silk, 8" x 10", 2011.



Figure 6. *Carnival*, mixed media on silk, 7.5" x 9.5", 2011.



Figure 7. *Aunt Marina*, oil on canvas, 11" x 14", 2011.



Figure 8. *Aunt Vera*, oil on canvas, 20"x 16", 2012.

Marina Lois Dublin

EDUCATION

- 2013 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia. Emphasis in Mixed Media Painting and Photography.
- 2007 Bachelor of Fine Arts in Art Education, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

CERTIFICATION

- 2012-2017 Collegiate Professional License, Visual Arts PreK-12, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- 2007-Present Art, Photography, and Graphics Teacher, Manchester High School, Chesterfield County Public Schools, Chesterfield, Virginia.
- 2005- 2009 Art Counselor, VCUArts Summer Intensive, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia
- 2007 Student Teacher, Manchester High School, Chesterfield County Public Schools, Chesterfield, Virginia.
- 2007 Student Teacher, Swift Creek Elementary School, Chesterfield County Public Schools, Chesterfield, Virginia.
- 2006 Instructional Assistant, Parklawn Elementary School, Fairfax County Public Schools, Alexandria, Virginia.

AFFILIATIONS

- 2006-2007 Assistant Historian, Caribbean Student Organization, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.
- 2001-2003 Member, National Art Honor Society

EXHIBITIONS

- 2013 *Complex Simplicity*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia at C'est le Vin, Richmond, Virginia.