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# My World of Motherhood

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*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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## **My World of Motherhood**

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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May, 2013

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### Artist Statement

In my artwork, I want to relay the emotional ups and downs of being a single mother. Motherhood, its challenges and rewards, is a recurring theme in my mixed media and photographic work. In family life we all experience the cycles of pain, sorrow, happiness, and tranquility. These are the moments that I want to explore and share.

In my pieces, I incorporate simple, black outlined figures that contain little to no facial features, text that is hidden and broken up, and repeated drawings of entangled spirals. These outlined figures symbolize me as a woman that is facing the world. The obscured and hidden text represents life that is full of mystery and emotional layers. The use of spirals represents the circle of life and the limitlessness of unconditional love.

# **My World of Motherhood**

## **Introduction**

My schooling directed me into the world of art. I always looked forward to the creative process that art projects provided. In high school, I began to take advanced level art courses and then majored in art at James Madison University. I now work as an elementary art teacher and I am delighted that I can share my joy of art in the classroom. However, teaching art to my students left me very little energy to concentrate on my own art. I also wanted to make my art on a more regular basis and explore my own creative energy. Originally, the art I created was often intended as a gift for someone special, home décor, or a sample for my students. I wanted to make art for myself and feel the full meaning of my own creation.

When I heard about the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Program (MIS-IAR) with Virginia Commonwealth University, I thought this degree program could help me develop my own work. I decided to apply and was accepted into the program. I now make artwork for myself. I am able to express what is going on in my life in a creative way. The work I make is a visual journaling through my life stages as a mother, and the challenges I have faced as a single mother. Not only does this new artwork leave me with a feeling of fulfillment but it also allows me to leave a story to my children. I want them to understand the journey we developed together as a family.

## **Aesthetics**

My pieces all relate to what I know best, motherhood. Being a mother for over eight years has been one of the most influential and emotional times of my life. I nurture my children with

each passing day in the best way that I possibly can. I have done this as a single mom for the last several years. It has taken time to get comfortable with this new role, but now it is the only thing I know and I use my artwork as an outlet for this time of my life.

The issues of motherhood are also a universal theme in the arts. There are numerous works throughout history that document and symbolize fertility and creation of life. There are also examples of the maintenance of early childhood life, such as breastfeeding and childcare, dating to the ancient cultures of Egypt, Greece, and Rome. For example, *Young Woman with her son* (410 B.C.), located in the Kerameikos Archaeological Museum in Athens, expresses the great power and complexity of the maternal relationship. Later on in the sixteenth-century, Raphael's (1483-1520) painting, *Virgin Mary with the Christ Child and Young St. John* (1513-1514), demonstrates the legacy of a mother's love through the mother of Christ. These works, among many others, showed me that motherhood is a valid and consistent theme in the arts. I was able to pull from and add to this visual history of mother and child in my own unique way.

I have always wanted to be a mother. I grew up admiring both my maternal and paternal grandmothers and remember watching them very closely when they were working in their kitchen, tending to their children, and keeping the family household running. I admired their strength and resilience. Their roles as mothers were done out of love even though their work may not have always been appreciated. My own mother continued in this capacity of love in bringing up my brother and me. Now that I have become a mother myself, I can use my artwork to relay my feelings and emotional stories.

I have always thought of my life as being composed simultaneously of different layers of experiences and having various roles to play. For this reason, I present my pieces layered with images, text, and figures. This is how I can express the multifaceted aspects of child rearing,

especially balancing it all on my own. I use a variety of media, such as paint, pencils, papers, text, and mixed media. Often, I tear papers and use various media in individual pieces to create texture. This texture helps me to symbolically express the subtle and multiple textures of my life.

In my artwork, I need to express myself as a mother but still relate to a viewer. Therefore, I minimize the rendering of specific figures and heighten the emphasis on layering and texture. In this way, I can use my children and myself as inspiration in my pieces but present the imagery as generalized and universal. I choose colors that reference particular moments or emotions, such as red for anguish and pain, and blue for hopes and dreams. My work is easel-sized because I want people to have an intimate experience with each piece that I have created. I also want the viewer to be close enough to study the drawing, paper textures, and texts that knit together the emotional content of my pieces.

A recurring motif in my work is the spiral, for me this represents never ending changes in growth and development. This spiral has been used in prehistoric to contemporary art representing the act of creation and the circle of life. In traditional cultures around the world not only is the spiral used as a symbolic motif but it is also a model for constructing useful household items like baskets and pots. Another key motif that I use in my artwork is hands. The hands in my compositions represent human touch and intimacy that can especially be found in the close relationships of family members. I also use the image of trees to represent growth and family. Finally, I often add obscured or readable hand written text in my pieces because I think it adds a personal connection to my thoughts or emotions at the time of the pieces and it comes directly from my heart.

## Artist Influences

From a very young age, I spent my free time coloring for hours and drawing in sketchbooks. I always took along my arts and crafts projects on family trips. As I grew older, I paid more attention to how artists develop their artwork and I grew to have my favorites. In recent years, I have paid attention to the way artists relay emotion through brushwork, composition, or use of symbolic color.

The Impressionist artist, Mary Cassatt (1844-1926), has always been one of my favorite artists. A print that I bought for myself was her *Child in a Straw Hat* (1886), which depicts a little girl in a hat. As a young girl myself, I could relate to this shy, innocent child. My mom also had a Cassatt reproduction in her bathroom. This image of a mother bathing her child was an activity she could relate to as well. It is a simple picture of two unknown people engaged in an ordinary but beautiful moment of the ritual of cleansing. The intimate and special feelings I got from these early images inspired me to also express emotional content in my pieces.

Cassatt's attention to the simple interactions between mothers and their children is unique among the typically male Impressionist artists during that time period. She depicted the small acts of bathing a child, holding a child to be fed, or just spending time with a child. These depictions represent timeless situations that are just as relevant today. Mary Cassatt had a way of bringing everyday life into focus. She represented touching, domestic scenes and images of families with pastel colors and soft contours. This technique allowed her to express quiet moods. In Cassatt's paintings, the figures are placed in configurations that reveal a bond or connection. The heads of the figures are depicted in close proximity and the mother's hands are always shown to be touching the child. The intimacy of the mother's gaze, watching or interacting with her child, is focused. Similar to Cassatt, I created compositions of mothers and children in close contact. I



developed and presented postures and gestures in my artwork that were traditional and familiar. Through this approach my viewers might see themselves in the images, just as I saw myself in the images portrayed by Cassatt. My desire is that my viewers will take a moment to stop and recall a time when they have experienced that universal feeling of love, support, or comfort from a mother. As the poet Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931) stated, “The most beautiful word on the lips of mankind is the word “mother”, and the most beautiful call is the call of “my mother”...She is the source of love, mercy, sympathy and forgiveness...Everything in nature bespeaks the mother.” (Gonzalez, 360)

Like Cassatt, it is my goal to grab the interests of my viewers with a sense of familiarity and connection in the role of caring for children. I have learned from her to notice and illustrate the simple way a person tilts their head, carries themselves, or shows how close they are to another person. I mirrored her approach to painting by using similar brushstrokes and layers of colors to set a mood for a piece. I wanted the approach to my work to draw the viewer into this beautiful and intimate subject matter as Cassatt did in such a rich and inspirational way.

Another painter and collage artist that I have grown to admire is the well known contemporary illustrator, Eric Carle (1929-). Since I teach at the elementary level, I often use his work as examples for my students. Eric Carle uses colored tissue papers as a ground for his drawing surface. To these papers he adds painted patterns, lines, and shapes. He layers these visual elements and uses bold, bright colors to create interest. I am inspired by his technique of building an image with layered color and form. Layering surface with color and textured papers gives me the ability to start with a patterned ground. I am also able to choose papers and color schemes to create a congruency to my artwork. Carle also uses different media in his artwork to make textured patterns and designs. I have adopted his approach of combining collage, drawing,

and paint. Using these mixed media approaches often results in unexpected and welcomed surprises.

Henry Matisse (1869-1954) was an artist who worked in many media but according to his own words, “What interests me most is neither still life nor landscape, but the human figure. It is that which best permits me to express my almost religious awe towards life”. (Selz, 62) In much of Matisse’s artwork he concentrated on the female figure, often using bold lines and curves that emphasized their form. One of his pieces, *Bathers by a River* (1916-1917), shows four women that are heavily outlined in black with no facial features. They are depicted in varying positions and the colors of their bodies are blended with gray, black, and peach. Like Matisse, I simplify my figures with bold, black outlines. The use of blended, non-naturalistic colors that he uses on the figures is also an approach that I take. Matisse used very little detail yet his images tell a lot. It is his straightforward simplicity that I also want in my work.

In his later years of his life, and during his time of illness when he was put on bed rest, Matisse became a collage artist. His piece called *Blue Nude IV* (1952), which was created two years before his death, is a simple paper cut-out of a blue female figure. From a distance, the figure appears to be solid, blue color. However, up close the image is made from multiple pieces of paper that are similar shades of blue. The range of closely related colors in the paper bring unity to the piece. I adopted this same approach when creating my work. I did not try to keep to a single hue or even solid color when I was tearing or cutting for my pieces. Instead, I tore or cut paper that I had painted, found, or created that had a similar value or range of color.

Motivation for my artwork came from personal events in my own life, and by studying these artists. Through this graduate program, I was able to concentrate on many styles and movements in art. I enjoyed finding artists that related not only to my theme of motherhood but

also how they used media to portray emotion. Artists through the years have used their own lives and events to capture a little piece of who they are, and through my art I wanted to express aspects of my life.

## **My Artwork**

Painting and mixed media came as a natural way to express myself. The flow of paint, drawing, and cutting papers were creative activities that had become ingrained in me. I was able to instinctively express myself through images and color with these media and approaches. In my piece *The Tender Embrace* (Appendix, 1), I drew and painted a mother and child in a very close moment. When I created this piece I had the word “comfort” in mind. I thought about how much I needed to be there for my children in time of pain and sorrow. I needed to help them grow and stay strong enough to face the negative things that life might throw their way. I presented the child in the mother’s arms but the activity is somewhat ambiguous. I want my viewer to question if the child is just being held or is nursing. Both of these actions between a mother and child are full of comfort and are universal to our human nature.

In making this piece, I constructed the ground with torn, painted papers and photographic images of babies. I wanted the background to create a story about my feelings. My children are very young and every day that goes by I think about how quickly they are growing older. My children will not always be able to be held and comforted in my arms and the pictures of the babies brought to light the fact that they do not stay forever young.

*Hold my Hand* (Appendix, 2) depicts two faceless figures of a mother and child that are holding hands. The colors I chose for this piece were a neutral theme of browns, whites, and gray hues. I presented the two figures and their two hands with minimal detail to impress on the

universal nature of the scene. In addition to the two figures, I placed a large hand in the upper left-hand portion of the piece. This hand is a photograph of my own son's hand that I glued onto the canvas. Then, I drew a clock around the hand. This hand represents connection. In this piece, I also incorporated spirals that unify the composition and symbolize that love and connection to family is never ending.

In the piece titled *Biological Clock* (Appendix, 3), I created a background of torn paper and paints which depicts clocks, babies, and toddlers that point to the theme of time and fertility. I chose papers and images with the same blue color scheme for consistency. For me, the blue in this piece symbolizes the hopes and dreams of giving birth. The figure's form is perfect and clothed in bright orange. Hers is a belly that is flat and without child. Her attention is directed to the clock referencing how time is an essential element in life. The original stage of being a mom surfaces when you start having the hopes and dreams of raising a child.

*Two Sides to My Story* (Appendix, 4) depicts my personal journey as a single mom. Stages of my divorce came to mind as I was making this piece. To create tension, I used two varying palettes of colors to represent strife. The mother and the children, clearly depicted in the upper left-hand corner, are separated from the figure in the lower right, which is hidden behind a tangle of lines, text, and color. I enjoyed the hands-on process of manipulating the colors, images, and words to capture my emotion. It was therapeutic for me to tear the paper, use a paintbrush, or draw what I was feeling during these moments of my life.

After creating a set of mixed media pieces, I became interested in using digital photography to create multilayered images. I have always been a photographer and have documented the special moments and events in my children's lives. Because of this natural journaling interest, I became interested in what digital manipulation would allow me to do when

creating compositions that included text, photography, drawing, and color.

*Brothers* (Appendix, 5) is an image of my two boys in an embrace. In making this piece, I tore up neutrally-colored paper and applied it to a ground of paper. Then, I scanned it and added a digital layer of a journal entry that I wrote when they were younger. This entry is a very personal piece of my life but I thought it was important to include. It shared my deepest desires for them to always have each other and support one another throughout their lives. Finally, I layered a faint image of a sunlit tree in the top left-hand corner to signify the tree of life.

When I created the digital piece *Time to Come* (Appendix, 6), I began with a large photographic image of my friend during her pregnancy. On top of this image, and in her hands, I scanned a stylized pencil drawing of a mother holding a small infant. I wanted to emphasize what was to come in my friend's life. Next, I layered a large butterfly wing over her belly as a symbol of growth and change. Finally, the white writing on the right-hand side are words that represent the hopes a mother has for her child. The use of drawing, photography, and text was a way that I could achieve a mixed media approach in my digital work.

*In the Womb* (Appendix, 7) has a similar theme as *Time to Come*. Again, I wanted to emphasize the child inside the womb. I placed a photograph of a pregnant mother on the right side and a drawn image of a mother and child on the opposite side of the composition. In the center, I positioned a low-opacity photograph of my son's hand. On the final layer, I placed my written thoughts of a prayer.

The colors I used in my artwork *Time Fragments* (Appendix, 8) are the cool colors of blues, greens, and purples. To me, these colors represent cold and hurtful feelings. On the lower right-hand side of the picture, I placed my two boys walking down an empty road. I also layered the word "love" over them to show how much they are loved and cared for. I layered an image of

a woman on the left-hand side. She is depicted in a position of prayer with her hands folded in front of her face. Next, I obscured her image with entangled tree branches and sticks to show that she is trapped or restricted by the short time she has with her children.

Through the use of mixed media on canvas and digital photography, I was able to explore drawing, painting, and photography. I was able to pull from my own life and relay my authentic feelings. I was able to approach these two concentration areas in a similar way by layering elements to tell a story. However, the process of layering images in each direction of media was often very different. For my painting, I had to plan how each material would physically work together on a drawing or painting surface. For my digital photography, I had to plan and choreograph photographs with drawn images through computer techniques. Overall, whether I was working on a canvas surface or through the computer, layering is how I articulated my ideas and feelings.

## **Conclusion**

Through my time in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Program, I have developed my own method of journaling my life as a mother. Whether on my computer or using my hands to create a painting, I know I can use the layers of media to create beautiful pieces for my children and me to treasure for years to come. I have learned that a special moment with my children doesn't only have to be captured in a single snapshot but can be transformed into art.

I want to share my knowledge of this personal process with my art students. I think they can learn to develop a deeper and more personal meaning in their work through the journaling and layering of media. What I have learned in this master's program is now a part of my new creative

outlet, not only as a practicing artist but as an art teacher as well.

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## Appendix

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Figure 1. *Tender Embrace*, painting, collage, and drawing on canvas, 22" x 28", 2011.



Figure 2. *Hold My Hand*, painting, collage, and drawing on canvas, 20" x 16", 2011.



Figure 3. *Biological Clock*, painting, collage, and drawing on canvas, 28" x 22", 2011.



Figure 4. *Two Sides to my Story*, painting, collage, and drawing on canvas, 20" x 16", 2012.



Figure 5. *Brothers*, digital photography, 22" x 28" (variable digital size range), 2012.



Figure 6. *Time to Come*, digital photography, 22" x 28" (variable digital size range), 2012.



Figure 7. *In the Womb*, digital photography, 22" x 28" (variable digital size range), 2012.



Figure 8. *Time Fragments*, digital photography, 22" x 28" (variable digital size range), 2012.



## Aimee F. Rop

### **EDUCATION:**

- 2013 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia. Emphasis in Mixed Media and Photography.
- 1997 Bachelor of Science, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia. Major in Art and Minor in Psychology.

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### **TEACHING EXPERIENCE:**

- 2009-present Art Teacher, McNair Elementary School, Fairfax County, Herndon, Virginia.
- 2005-2007 Art Teacher, Dogwood Elementary School, Fairfax County, Reston, Virginia.
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### **PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:**

- 2009-present National Art Education Association
- 2010-present Virginia Art Education Association
- 1996-1997 Kappa Pi Art Honors Fraternity

### **EXHIBITIONS:**

- 2013 *My World of Motherhood*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA at Richard J. Ernst Community Cultural Center, Annandale, Virginia.

### **VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE:**

- 2011 Student Teacher for Intern with George Washington University, Washington, D.C.
- 2007 Mentor Teacher for Co-teacher, Dogwood Elementary School, Fairfax County, Reston, Virginia.
- 1997 Co-Chairman of Very Special Arts Festival, Harrisonburg Community Center, Harrisonburg, Virginia.
- 1997 Project Head for "Children's Art Network" Community Art Day, Harrisonburg Community Center, Harrisonburg, Virginia.