



2013

Beauty in a Crooked Line

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Beauty in a Crooked Line

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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December, 2013

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Artist Statement

Experimentation is the beginning and end of all of my art. I examine the interactions of the materials that are involved in the journey of creativity. Typically, I begin a piece with an irregularly drawn line, using a white crayon to resist the media that I will later apply, thereby creating a negative line. This gestural line becomes an element that helps direct my intuitive mark-making.

My process involves masking, using resists, and layering materials. I then remove the layers of media by scraping or sanding them away changing the texture of the paper. I am drawn to media that is unpredictable, difficult to control, and can be unforgiving. These qualities enhance the process of the experimentation because application of a pigmented mark cannot completely be erased. The resulting work reveals its history through the process of making it.

Beauty in a Crooked Line

Introduction

As a child, I was rarely exposed to art nor did I have art supplies to work with. I attended a private elementary school that did not have an art teacher. Growing up on a farm, my days were filled with work. Art was considered a frivolous waste of time and money. It sometimes amazes me that the crooked path I took led me to be an artist.

I remember the first watercolor painting I ever saw. It was a wedding gift presented to friends of my family. The image was a tight rendering of the couple's home. I was astonished at the contrast between the colors of the building and landscape, and the whiteness of the paper. My greatest desire as a twelve-year-old child was to figure out how to capture the sense of sunlight as that artist had.

My high school art teacher was a moving force in my decision to pursue art. It was through her encouragement that I decided to attend college and major in art. Although I had no practical career path in mind, I threw myself into my college art classes wholeheartedly. My undergraduate painting professor, Ray Kass, was an accomplished watercolorist. He taught me that experimentation should be the root of all art. Our daily warm-up in class was to create what he called the *patchwork quilt*. These were small rectangles of watercolor experimentation joined together on a page. I painted constantly, often in plein-air settings that caused me to shiver in the cold. The work that I produced was weak but it was the experiences, such as working with the well-known artist and musician, John Cage (1912-1992), during workshops arranged by Kass, which were building the foundation of the artist I was to become.

After a long absence from art, due to starting a family and trying to develop a career, I returned to my first love, watercolor painting. It was the need to paint and grow as an artist that

led me to take classes with Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) and finally enroll in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program. The beautiful fluidity of the watercolor paint, the vivid colors against the crispness of the white paper, and even the tactile nature of the watercolor paper continued to excite me. My process has changed from my early days with Kass. I now experiment with melting purified bee's wax onto paper as a paint resist technique, layering wax and paint in a process-oriented approach, and using a variety of media to create abstracted works. I focus on an object's or subject's ability to inspire me to experiment.

Through my graduate coursework, I had the opportunity to explore the photo transfer technique. I found that this process gave me the ability to capture an object through photography, and then control the observer's point of view by concealing, revealing, and layering the photograph with text or other images. Because of its versatility, photo transfer became my second area of concentration.

My journey through art continues. Sometimes my path is clear but frequently it is crooked as I meander through newly discovered materials and techniques. A book I love to read to my elementary students about art is called *Babar's Museum of Art* (2003). In the book, Babar tells young visitors to his museum "There are no rules to tell us what art is." (De Brunhoff, 35) Daily, I try to keep in mind Babar's words, allowing my emotions and materials to prompt my experiments.

Aesthetics

As a child, I spent countless hours rambling over the fields of my family's farm, prowling through the woods and observing the wildlife found there. I developed a fondness for an

environment untouched by the human hand. Man's relationship with nature is a subject that I frequently explore. As a society we all find the trappings of modern life, such as electricity and waste removal, necessary but nature is often assaulted to provide for our comfort. As a way to pay homage to the quarrelsome relationship between man and nature, I attempt to echo the rough surfaces of gnarly old trees, rusting metal, and derelict and decaying buildings in my work.

Another subject of my work is often food. Growing up on the farm, my family raised much of the food that we ate. I was involved in the food cycle from planting the vegetables and feeding the animals to harvesting crops and loading the packaged meat from the processor into the freezer. As a child, I heard my mother say *food is love* many times. I have frequently pondered this notion, and wondered that if food is love, why do we love our families with food that is so full of fat and sodium that it eventually kills them? For the past twenty years, healthy cooking and eating has been a major focus in my life. I spend considerable time planning and preparing meals that will appeal to my family but still be healthy for them. I remind myself daily to show appreciation both for the farmers who provide our food and the animals who give their life to nourish us. Although I have struggled with my weight for years, I enjoy cooking, both as a creative outlet and as a way to nourish my family. I am interested in the obsession our society has with fast food and huge servings at restaurants, the battle against obesity, and the close proximity in which obesity and hunger exist in our country. In using food as a subject, I portray the physical beauty of food, including its shape and color. Food also represents nourishing my family and demonstrating my love for them.

An important approach to my work is experimenting which involves layering materials, applying heat and cold, mixing soil into the materials, abrading the paper, allowing found iron objects to rust on it, and allowing people to walk across the surface of the work. I use a wide

variety of media and am always looking for new ones to work with. The purpose of my experimentation is to provide multiple layers of interest to the work. In doing so, I can bring attention to issues that interest me.

I influence the mood of my pieces with intuitive line, color, and layered images. I use irregular and jagged lines to depict decay and to give the work a feeling of unrest, while smooth lines represent happiness and well-being. In addition to drawn linear elements, road and topographical maps often find themselves worked into my pieces. To me, their lines represent nervous energy and movement as well as man's desire to control the environment. I use monochromatic, muted colors to depict a dangerous or solemn mood while bright colors represent a feeling of wholesomeness and health.

I believe a completed work that is the result of experimentation is exciting and allows for multiple readings. Mistakes and imperfections as a result of experimentation create marks and color combinations which can be unique. Rather than trying to hide what some would consider a mistake, I use these happy accidents to add another layer of meaning to my work.

Artistic Influences

When I reflect on the artists who have influenced my work, the one that I think of first is Winslow Homer (1836-1910). While Homer was adept in other media, the range of color in his watercolor paintings sings to me. I am inspired by the beautiful reserved whites in his paintings, and how he used his paints to portray light and shadow. Modern X-ray evidence has revealed that he corrected his watercolor paintings by scraping, scrubbing, and blotting (Tedeschi, 150). During his time, and to some extent during modern times, watercolor painting was looked down on as being less professional than oil paint, as if the painter who chose watercolor was not as

skillful as the one who chose oils. Homer once said “You will see, in the future, I will live by my watercolors.” (Cooper, 239) I have been told by so many artists that they do not like watercolor because of its unforgiving nature. Because of the transparent nature of the paint, mistakes are hard to hide, but artists like Homer prove to me that the material is highly manipulative in the hands of a skilled artist. I frequently remind myself that Homer spent years learning how to manipulate his materials and that the time spent in struggling with the materials paid off in sparkling whites and vivid colors.

As a young artist, I met John Cage (1912-1992) at the New River Workshop in Pembroke, Virginia. I was invited to act as a workshop assistant by my Virginia Tech professor, Ray Kass. The workshop space was filled with stones, feathers to be used as brushes, huge hake paintbrushes, and paint troughs specially built to accommodate these brushes. Large sheets of paper were laid out on the floor; the artist and his assistants moved around the paper, without shoes, to protect the work surface. Cage’s process, which involved choosing numbered stones, brushes, and paints in accordance to directions he received from the classic Chinese book *I Ching* (believed to have been written during the second millennium B.C.) This activity seemed unusual to me as a young artist. Although to my untrained eye it appeared to be unplanned, it was actually very well organized as is evidenced by the notes taken during the workshops (Kass, 84). At the next New River Workshop, I assisted Cage and Kass as they *smoked the paper* over burning straw. The paper was marked by the swirling smoke, thereby adding another layer to the composition. Cage’s marking the paper with non-traditional art materials influences my techniques today.

When I first saw Gerhard Richter’s (1932-) watercolors, I thought *Yes, this is what I have been looking for!* I frequently visit his website to gather inspiration from his use of bright,

pure color; strong graphite and crayon lines; and irregular brush marks. His use of color, in which he frequently places complementary colors adjacent to each other, lends visual excitement to his work. Prior to viewing Richter's paintings, I felt that preliminary drawing and graphite lines were undesirable. I have come to view them as an integral part to my paintings and use them to influence a sense of movement and tension on the picture plane. I also appreciate that Richter incorporates experimentation in his work. "Chance is a given, unpredictable, chaotic, the basis. And we try to control that by intervening, giving form to chance, putting it to use" (Borchardt-Hume, 27).

I frequently study the work of these artists, as well as others. It is inspiring to me to find that others have had similar struggles and made similar discoveries. Homer's scrapes and corrections, which demonstrate his creative struggle, encourage me on the days that I find it difficult to create. Cage's work, while well planned, was reliant on an outside structure of chance (the *I Ching*). My experience with Cage inspired me to think of non-traditional materials and to appreciate that abstract art begins in the mind of the artist as a concept and varies in interpretation from viewer to viewer. Finally, Richter's method of controlling chance is the most influential to my own process.

Painting

As I worked with my materials, my confidence grew. I no longer felt a need to realistically portray my subject and my paintings became more abstract. I began to work in a loose, gestural manner and to follow the experimental methods that I had previously been exposed to. I experimented with using drawing materials within my paintings to create strong lines, and found media that would help me create a resist that I used when layering paint.

The painting *Autumn Woods Walk* (Appendix, 1) was the first in a series of paintings where I experimented with adding and removing layers of melted purified bee's wax as a paint resist technique. I was uncertain of the outcome of the process because I had never heard of anyone doing this before. I considered my experience with Cage in which we had smoked paper over a straw fire. Although the results were not always what were expected, they were interesting. So, I embarked on this resist technique to see what would happen. The bee's wax was melted onto the paper and the paper was placed into the freezer. Later, I cracked the frozen bee's wax and applied paint and allowed it to seep in between the cracks. I decided to repeat this process again. After each layer of wax and paint, I removed the wax by ironing using a scrap of cardboard between the work and the iron. The cardboard absorbed the wax as it was melted from the work. The final painting was coated with a sealing layer of wax which was meant to mimic a misty day in the woods, as well as serving as a protective layer. A cold, rainy autumn day influenced my use of muted colors to represent saturated fall foliage, while the vertical orientation of the marks represents the falling rain. The path left behind by the melted wax references a path through the woods.

In *Eye of the Storm* (Appendix, 2) I was influenced by hurricane Sandy, which ravaged the Eastern Seaboard in October 2012. As the storm bore down on Virginia, the drop in the air pressure made me nervous, and I felt the need to burn off some energy. This nervousness accounts for the kinesthetic sense of movement in the painting, which represents the storm's swirling winds. Bee's wax was used as a paint resist in the depicted area of the storm's calm eye. Like Richter's work, I applied irregular marks to focus attention on the white spaces and to lend a nervous energy to the piece.

Fire and Ice (Appendix, 3) was a piece that I created while working with my elementary students. I have found that if I work while they are painting, we both draw energy from each other. The work was influenced by a flyer published by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts to advertise the October 2012 exhibition of glass artist, Dale Chihuly (1941-). The children loved looking at the bright colors of his glasswork. We discussed what it would be like to walk under a ceiling of hanging glass, as in his piece *Persian Ceiling* (2008). I began my piece with drawn lines, using children's crayons to create the strong movement of flame-like structures to mimic his *Mille Flore* (2011). The circular forms in *Fire and Ice* reflect the shapes found in *Persian Ceiling*. The strong coloration was influenced by Richter's frequent use of juxtaposed complementary colors.

Painting, especially with watercolor, remains my media of choice. I am continually excited by the response of the paint to the paper, the crispness of the color on the paper, and the way the media can be resisted by wax and graphite. The various outcomes allow for a broad range of experimentation in which I explore new processes to incorporate in my art.

Transfers

Photo transfer is a process in which photographs may be manipulated digitally before they are printed either on paper or other materials. The receiving materials may include iron-on transfers like the type that is use for t-shirt transfers. Then, the transfer is applied to a surface by applying adhesive or heat and pressure to transfer. After the transfer has been completed, I can further manipulate the image by drawing into the image, painting over the image, and abrading the image.

In *Skeletons of Old Friends* (Appendix, 4), I used a photograph of trees from my father's yard. These ancient white oaks have very twisted branches and rough bark. I enhanced and extended the tangled branches of the trees with added charcoal lines. The trunks of the trees in the image were abraded to make them appear somewhat transparent. I depicted the solidity of the trees that I have known my entire life while still showing the fragility of their age. The image was transferred using acrylic gel medium onto buff-colored receiving paper, rather than white, to imply the advanced age of the trees and the solemnity of the subject. Charcoal was rubbed into the irregularly torn edges of the image to also reference aged or old paper.

In the work *Hiding in Plain Sight* (Appendix, 5), my goal was to capture the trembling fear of a baby rabbit I found hiding in my yard. Although I like to think of my yard as a refuge for animals, in which I provide water, food, and hiding places, the reality is that the animals would rather never be seen. The image was printed first with a small photo of the rabbit. Then, I scanned, printed, and transferred a larger drawing of the rabbit on top. In the center of the image, the eye of the small rabbit is shown as a circular reflection which was captured by the camera and reveals its hiding place. The drawn rabbit has a dark eye, which is more natural, and makes the rabbit appear calm. In layering the two images, I depicted the nervous rabbit that I found and the calm rabbit that I wished to find. The images were first printed on t-shirt iron-on material before being layered. Layering the iron-on material is difficult but the transparency that the material offered allowed me to contrast the two animals by merging the images.

In *Broken Land* (Appendix, 6), I transferred a map of the plan for a sewer line that was constructed through my backyard. The map was transferred in reverse and in pieces to show man's perversion of the landscape. Once the map pieces were transferred, I crumpled the work

to further emphasize the feeling of destruction that the construction caused me. Finally, I emphasized the wrinkles in the paper with graphite lines.

Photo transfers remain an important part of my work. When I use this method, I explore the struggle between man and nature. This media especially lends itself to layering images. It also allows me to show decay and destruction due to my ability to manipulate the image, both digitally beforehand and by drawing and painting into it after the transfer process.

Mixed Media

In my mixed media work, I combined processes to create works with multiple layers. I generally start with an idea that I would like to convey and what format the final piece will have. I then gather materials and begin to experiment.

In *Feast and Famine* (Appendix, 7 and 8) I created a book using a plastic woven rice bag as the receiving material for collaged and transferred images. The theme of the book is contrasting the shortage of food and hunger during the Great Depression of the 1930s and 1940s with the obesity epidemic that is currently underway in the United States. The Great Depression is represented with historic photos from the United States National Archives website; obesity is represented with contemporary diet program materials, recipes, and food packages collaged onto a rice bag. Transferring the images onto the rice bag, which is a material made of woven paper strips, was a new process for me and required much trial and error to get the images to adhere to the receiving material. The images were printed on paper and t-shirt iron-on transfer material. The paper images were adhered with acrylic gel medium and the transfers were applied with heat.

The book, *A Sewer Runs Through It* (Appendix, 9 and 10), is a mixed media piece that also documents the construction of the sewer line and the resulting destruction of the natural landscape in my yard. The construction process was very emotional for me as I watched daily as my trees were being ripped down. The construction equipment was very noisy and disturbed my normally peaceful yard. I again drew on my experience with Cage and made marks on paper with non-traditional materials, while creating the pages for this book. After considering various strategies, I finally settled on having the construction workers walk on the paper to leave footprints behind. The marks made by the tread on the soles of their boots represent man's intrusion on nature.

In the quilted piece *Geese Fly Through Modern Times* (Appendix, 11), solid colored fabric is intermixed with painted fabric, and fabric containing transferred text. The painted fabric began as unbleached muslin. Experimentation came into play with this work as I colored the fabric by painting it with acrylic turquoise and metallic silver paint. Once the fabric was dry, I used various materials to stamp and paint onto the fabric. The overall design originated from a traditional quilt pattern called *Flying Geese*. My intention in choosing this particular pattern, and then modifying it from the traditional one, was to show the changes in the modern landscape that geese must see as they fly over their migratory routes. What once were fields and farms are now cities and houses. To modify the design, I inserted horizontal bands of black which are interrupted by brightly-colored and unbleached pieces of muslin. On these pieces of cloth, I transferred text from a story that I wrote about my earliest memories of birds, in part it reads:

...as a child, working on the farm, the whole family would pause during their labor to watch with shielded eyes the geese as they flew overhead. We were always reminded by a parent that their numbers were not what they used to be, due to man and DDT.

In choosing the text, I considered the impact that man has on the habitat and health of birds, as well as my life-long relationship with birds.

Mixed media work allows me to use multiple processes and experimentation while creating a piece. I am constantly hoarding found materials in my studio, and mixed media work gives me possibilities for use of that material. Bookmaking allows me to make multiple pieces of related images because each page is a work unto itself. I am then able to join these individual pages together to tell a bigger story. Working with fabric allows for experimentation with both factory printed and hand-painted fabric.

Conclusion

My work has changed greatly over the course of the MIS-IAR Program. Prior to my coursework, I never used mixed media to create a work. Now, as a result of experimentation and mixed media processes, my work is more gestural and abstracted. Previously, I took great pains to hide preliminary drawing in a painting. I now find that showing the various steps that go into creating a work adds another layer of interest to a piece. I have also found that my efforts have produced pieces that are not only bolder but more meaningful.

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Figure 1. *Autumn Woods Walk*, watercolor and wax on paper, 11" x 14", 2012.



Figure 2. *Eye of the Storm*, Diptych, watercolor and graphite on paper, each panel 23" x 15", 2012.



Figure 3. *Fire and Ice*, mixed media on paper, 30" x 22", 2012.



Figure 4. *Skeletons of Old Friends*, image transfer and charcoal on paper, 9 ¼” x 11 ½”, 2011.



Figure 5. *Hiding in Plain Sight*, image transfer and graphite on paper, 9 ½" x 11 ¼", 2011.

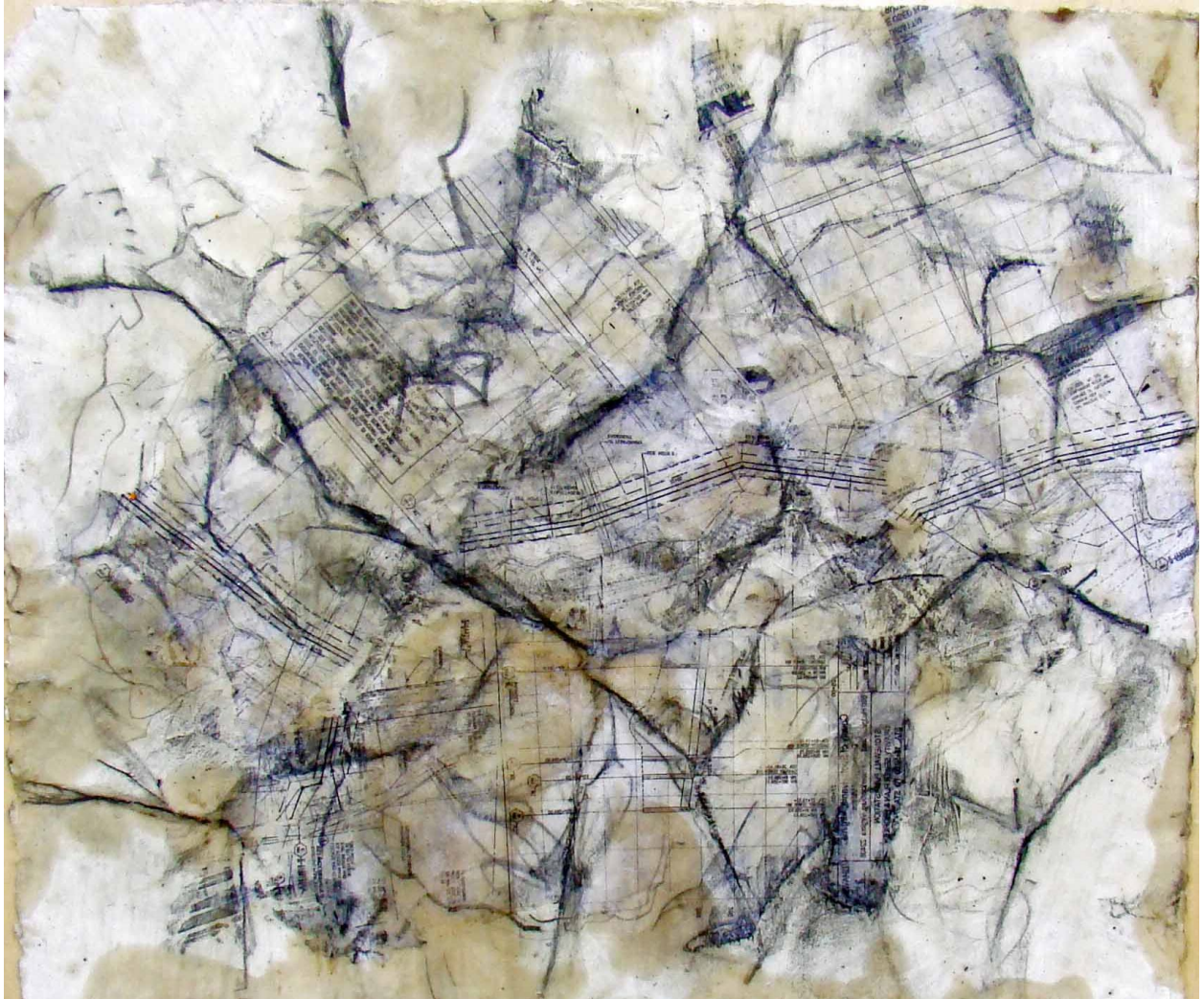


Figure 6. *Broken Land*, image transfer and graphite on paper, 9" x 11", 2011.



Figure 7. *Feast and Famine* (Open view), mixed media book, 8 ½” x 7 ½” x 1” (closed dimension), 2010.



Figure 8. *Feast and Famine* (Detail), mixed media book, 8 1/2" x 15" x 1", 2010.

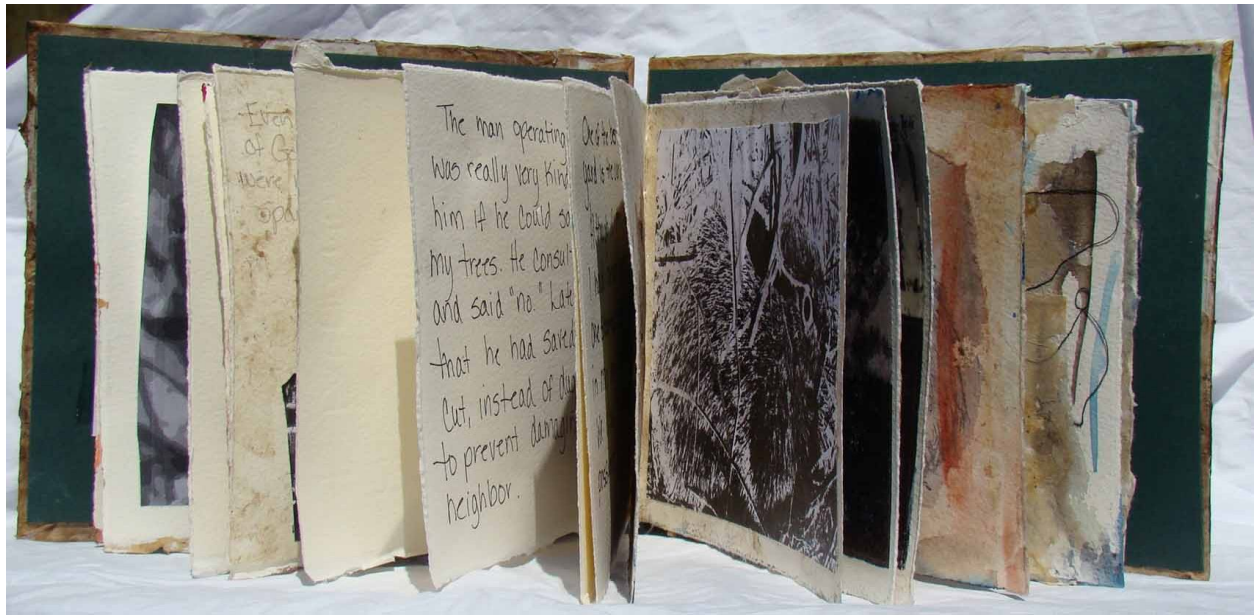


Figure 9. *A Sewer Runs Through It* (Open view), mixed media book, 6 ½" x 8" x 1" (closed dimension), 2012.

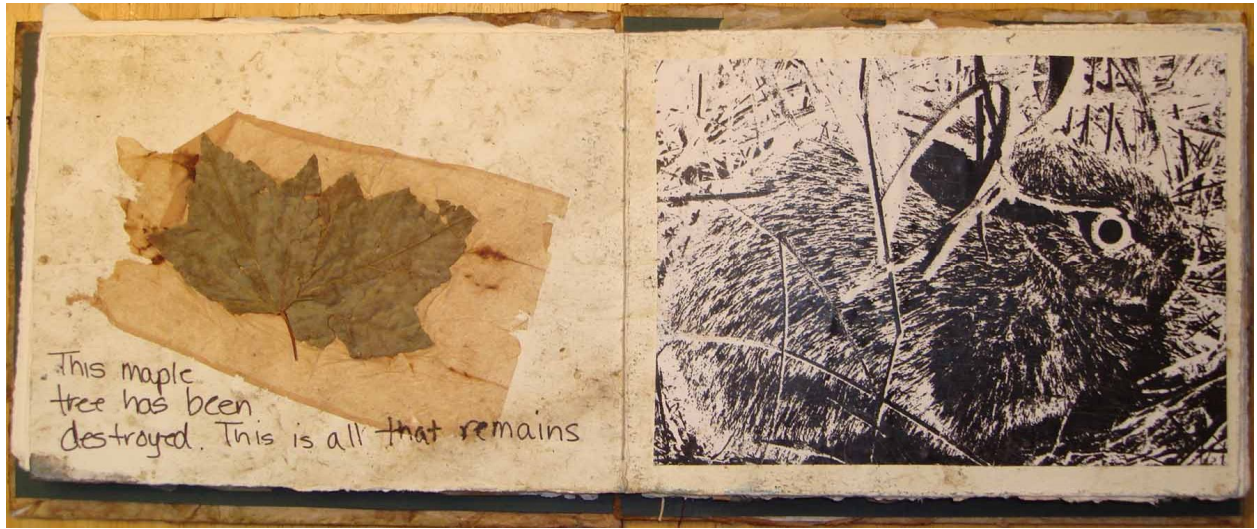


Figure 10. *A Sewer Runs Through It*, (Detail), mixed media book, 6 ½" x 16" x 1", 2012.

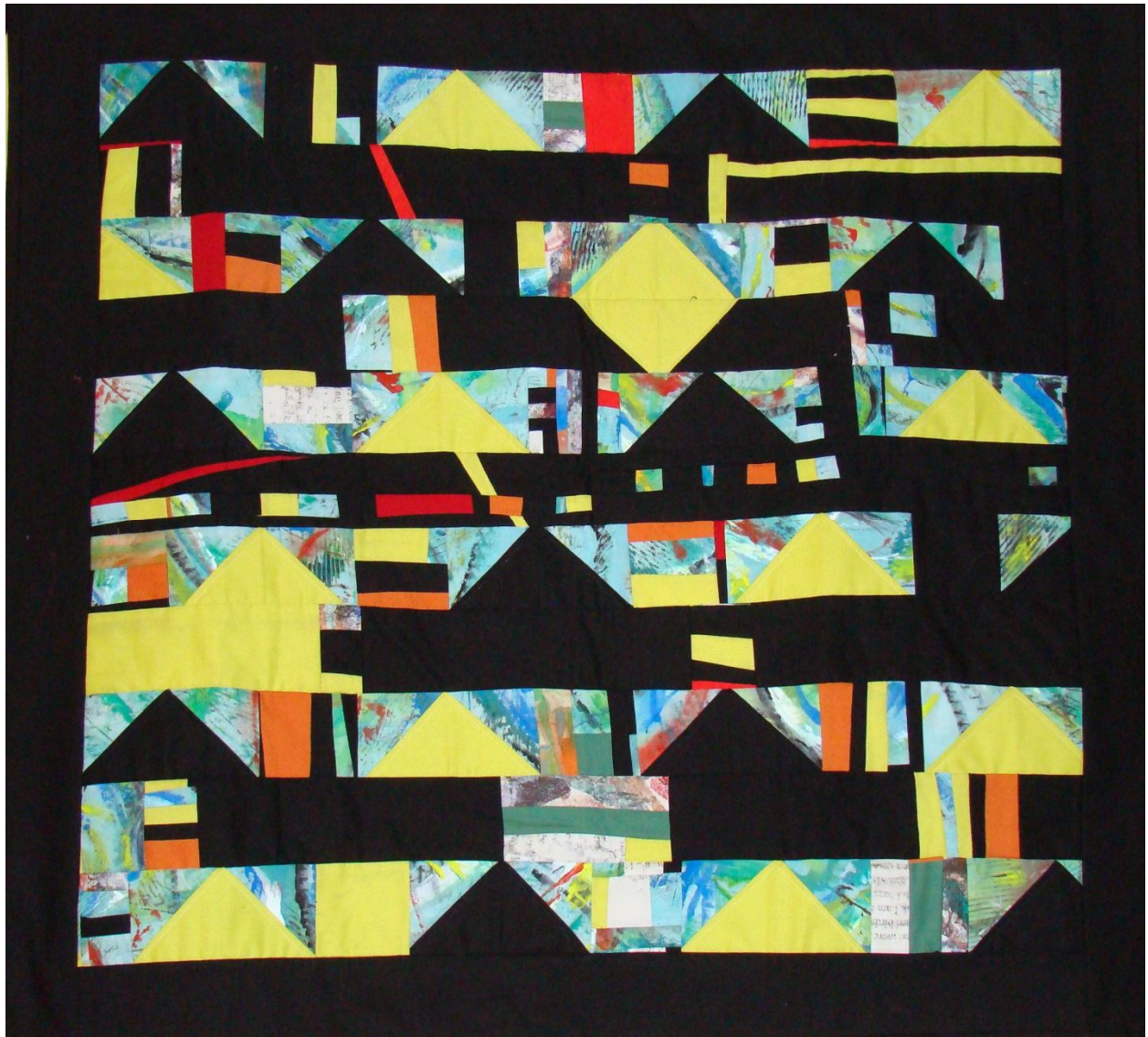


Figure 11. *Geese Fly Through Modern Times*, mixed media on fabric, 30" x 32 ¾" x ¼", 2012.

Sarah Ramey

Education

- 2013 **Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art**,
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Concentration: Painting and Mixed Media Technology
- 1990 **Bachelor of Arts**, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA
Focus Area: Watercolor

Certification

- 2006 **Art Teacher**, K-12, Spotsylvania County, VA

Teaching Experience

- 2008-Present **Art Teacher**, Cedar Forest Elementary School, Fredericksburg, VA
- 2006-2008 **Art Teacher**, Chancellor Middle School, Fredericksburg, VA

Related Experience

- 1990 **Workshop Assistant**, Mountain Lake Workshop, Pembroke, VA
- 1989 **Workshop Assistant**, Mountain Lake Workshop, Pembroke, VA

Art Exhibits

- 2013 ***Beauty In A Crooked Line***, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in
Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University,
Richmond, VA at Louisa Arts Center, Louisa, VA
- 2012 ***Say Cheese***, Louisa Arts Center, Louisa, VA
- 2011 ***What's For Supper***, Louisa Arts Center, Louisa, VA
Community Art Show, Pamplin Depot, Pamplin, VA
Down On The Farm, Louisa Arts Center, Louisa, VA
Farmer's Market, Louisa Arts Center, Louisa, VA
- 2010 ***Solo Exhibit***, Pamplin Depot, Pamplin, VA
August Regional Exhibit, Fredericksburg Center for Creative Arts,
Fredericksburg, VA Juror: Jennifer Glave
Birds In Word and Image, Liberty Town, Fredericksburg, VA
June Regional Exhibit, Fredericksburg Center for Creative Arts, Fredericksburg,
VA Juror: Matt Lively
- 2008 ***Feast for the Eyes***, Liberty Town, Fredericksburg, VA