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Studies of the Middle Class

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Studies of the Middle Class

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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Bachelor of Arts in Corporate Communications, Seton Hill University, Greensburg,
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Artist Statement

I create oil paintings and drypoints that bring attention to scenes of American middle class life. I present crowds of people engaged in community activities and festivals. This enables me to depict a cross section of the residents of a given region. I also create a counterpoint to these peopled gatherings by painting and drawing the exteriors of middle class homes. In my work, I attempt to imbue a sense of intrigue and pathos.

I work from candid photos that I take of people and their living spaces. In these photos, I modify and delete elements to optimize narrative and drama. I use natural light to define hard shadows and bright hues or light values to define forms.

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Introduction

I can't remember a time when I did not want to be an artist. My parents supported my interest by enrolling me in private art lessons at the age of eight, and continued to pay for my lessons throughout high school. At the age of ten, I won *Best in Show* in the Michigan Barrien County Fair Art Competition, which solidified my identity as a creator of art. I originally was interested in comic book superhero art but, in high school, I became interested in underground comic book art because of the mature political and social satirical themes.

After high school, I attended California University of Pennsylvania in California, Pennsylvania and majored in fine art. Soon, I left that school to study graphic design at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh. I felt that I needed to major in a discipline that offered stable employment. I later switched majors to computer animation because it related better to my cartooning interests. When I realized that I did not have the required aptitude for computers, I dropped out the Art Institute and found work at as a hospital supply clerk. After six years in this field, I enrolled at Seton Hill University in Greensburg, Pennsylvania and majored in corporate communications. After earning my bachelor's degree, I continued at Seton Hill and earned my art teaching certification. Then, I moved to Hampton, Virginia to work as an art teacher at Kecoughtan High School.

After a few years of teaching, I enrolled in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program to learn new techniques and meet fellow artists. I wanted painting to be my primary concentration. I had been painting in oils for seven years before I started the program, but I wanted to explore other media. Some media that was new to me failed to inspire my creativity. However, I was surprised to find that creating drypoint

engravings introduced me to an entirely new direction that I could take my art. I had seen exhibitions from renowned artists that included etchings and oil paintings. Like these artists, I wanted to display my paintings along with etchings to create variety and develop content in my pictorial statements.

My favorite past times consist of visiting art museums and galleries, and reading about art history. I consider my greatest teachers to be artists who died many years before I was born. The contemporary artist, Cecily Brown (b. 1969), expressed how I feel about art museums when she stated, “I don’t really think of the art of the past as distant. If you go to a museum, it’s there today. One of the things I love is the freedom of having all these artists in your head side by side; you might find yourself thinking of Jeff Koons one minute and Giotto the next.” (Holzwarth, 46).

Aesthetics

I grew up in a middle class home and have always fallen into that demographic. Since this socioeconomic group is all that I’ve ever known, I feel comfortable making artistic statements about this lifestyle. The scenes and people that I depict are subjects that seem both familiar and interesting to me. For example, the home is a place of shelter, comfort, and pride for people. I paint and create prints of houses and neighborhoods as a symbol of the middle class dream. The patina of the wood, the architecture, and the ornamentation are the cultural reflections of the people that inhabit them. I want to create work that documents the homes and lifestyles of middle class people and make it relevant as a contemporary theme.

I feel the art world often presents the middle class as being insipid and lacking in complexity. In an effort to dispel this stereotype of middle class life, I create pieces that are comprised of multiple details to bring attention to my subject matter. When I see a painting or

etching with detail, I spend extra time studying the various facets that the artist has incorporated into the piece. I also include detail in my work. I work exclusively from photographic references, and I replicate and include much of the detailed areas that I see in my photographs.

I use *chiaroscuro* techniques in both my paintings and prints to create a sense of three-dimensional space. *Chiaroscuro* involves pairing strong contrasts of light and dark areas. Using this technique helps me to amplify the mystery and drama in a scene.

Influences

Most of my influences are rooted in early twentieth-century American art. I relate to the Ashcan School because the scenes and lifestyles that they depicted are still relevant today. I am drawn to their desire to illustrate the lives of the people from their own time. One member of the Ashcan School was John Sloan (1871-1951). At the Westmoreland Museum of American Art in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, I was struck by his painting, *A Woman's Work* (1907). Sloan's ability to capture this woman hanging her laundry outside of her upper floor New York tenement building seemed visually compelling and philosophically meaningful to me. I admired his ability to celebrate the ordinary tasks of everyday people and elevate the activity into the realm of fine art. The three-dimensional effect created by the cast shadow of the hanging laundry inspired me to use similar effects in my own paintings and prints. I was also impressed that Sloan was documenting the city which he called home.

Perhaps the most influential artist for my paintings is Edward Hopper (1882-1967). A retrospective exhibit of his work at the National Gallery of Art, in Washington DC, left a tremendous impression on me. I marveled at his use of color and composition, and his unique paintings of houses and buildings changed the way that I wanted to capture the American experience. "Hopper's paintings have ways of capturing a distinctively American feeling, spatial

psychology, and pictorial mood.” (Thompson, 191) One painting that especially caught my attention was *Drug Store* (1927). A brightly illuminated drug store window is depicted against a blackened, nighttime background. His use of *chiaroscuro* creates a feeling of intrigue. It was this sense of intrigue that I wanted to incorporate into my own work. I began to use some of Hopper’s strategies in my own pieces.

Another painting by Hopper that resonated with me was *Early Sunday Morning* (1930). I was struck by the feeling of emptiness of this piece. The painting depicts a well-worn cityscape that would normally be brimming with activity during normal business hours. However, no signs of life are visible, no people inhabit this view. This painting, along with *Drug Store*, is reminiscent of dramatic background scenes found in *film noir cinema* from the same time period. I incorporate this vacant, un-peopled look in my own paintings. Both of these paintings captured a somber mood in a setting that seemed familiar and relatable to me.

Another artist that influences my work is Martin Johnson Heade (1819-1904). His small painting, *Thunderstorm at the Shore* (c.1880-1881), is a dramatic and foreboding painting. The power in this painting comes from its dark grey storm clouds which appear to be brimming with humidity and encroaching on two small sail boats. These heavy, dark clouds compress the lower half of the picture plane and create a visual and psychological tension. This is another coloristic and compositional approach that I have adopted in my own work.

An American artist who influenced my prints is the printmaker Martin Lewis (1881–1962). Lewis is best known for his highly-detailed etchings of nocturnal city life. His drypoint, entitled *Chance Meeting* (1941), depicts a young man meeting a young woman on the streets of New York City. I admired and related to his simple, ordinary narrative of a rendezvous between people on the street. Although it depicts everyday people, it has a sense of mystery and intrigue

largely due to the strong contrasts of light and shadow. I try to use similar lighting in my own work to achieve a similar effect. What struck me the most was Lewis' ability to create multiple directional lines that form a nearly solid value. I use this technique in my drypoints to also create solid values.

Lastly, a film that influenced my paintings and prints is Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949). This *film noir* movie, which takes place in post-war Vienna, incorporates *chiaroscuro* lighting. Film noir refers to stylized crime films from the 1940s and 1950s that displayed cynical attitudes and incorporated strong contrast, hard shadows, and low key visual styles influenced by German Expressionist cinema. The creators of these early films used dramatic light and shadow as a method to create drama and mystery in a scene. *The Third Man* is considered one of the quintessential examples of the film noir genre. The shadowy night scenes and use of partial silhouettes in the film, which imply mystery, influenced the presentation and compositional arrangements of my work. I first became interested in film noir cinema when I read that Edward Hopper had used these movies as an influence for his own work. "[Hopper] once told a friend: 'When I don't feel in the mood for painting I go to the movies for a week or more. I go on a regular movie binge!'" (Levin, 58). Like Hopper, I recognized similarities between films, paintings, and socioeconomic times.

I look to these early twentieth-century artists to compose and present my work. I incorporate scenes of everyday life in a manner similar to John Sloan and I document these unassuming situations and psychologically elevate the scenes. I create paintings of houses that do not contain figures, similar to many of Edward Hopper's works. I want to capture a Hopper-like sense of melancholia combined with the feeling of eminent doom found in the work of Martin Johnson Heade. I also incorporate a strong use of contrast; similar to the lighting found

in the film *The Third Man* and the prints of Martin Lewis, to create psychological tension in my paintings and prints.

Photography

My process for creating my paintings and prints starts with a photograph. I search out houses, art festivals, community gatherings, or parades to photograph. When photographing a scene, I distance myself from the subjects by hiding behind my camera lens so I do not interfere or become a part of the activity. I prefer a *gonzo style* of photo shoot. This style is indicative of getting the shot and leaving before someone notices me. I later search through the images and create files of the digital photos that can be used as potential imagery for my work.

Finding the optimal light for a scene is always a challenge, so I tend to photograph in either the early morning or at dusk. During these times of the day, the contrast of light to shadow areas is higher and forms are more clearly defined. I also find that the elongated shadows that are formed when the sun is low create a sense of intrigue that I want to imbed in my work.

When I choose a photograph to work from, I take liberties in translating elements in the photograph. Incorporating inconsistencies and abstractions, such as rearranged shadows or omitted figures, are where the humanity is found. I want these minor flaws and changes to create an unsettling appearance that violate the natural laws of light and shadow. I want the intentional flaws in my photo editing to make my houses and subjects more thought provoking.

When I select digital images to work from, I spend time organizing and then modifying the imagery on the computer. If I am looking for a photo to reference for a painting, I tend to decrease the color saturation level. I then adjust the contrast and brightness to accentuate the

shadows and create a tonal range of values. I sometimes add shadows and shading to the photos, using *dodge* and *burn* filtering tools in my digital manipulation software. These tools help me define and emphasize the hard shadows against the brighter hues. If I am looking for a photo to inspire a print, I convert the photos from color to black and white. I adjust the contrast and brightness and see how the photos look on a small, or thumbnail-sized scale. By looking at a smaller version of the photo, I get a better sense for the composition and range of tones that I want to use.

My goal is to create photos that have high contrast values commonly found in film noir cinema. I use the film noir method of incorporating strong light and shadow in the development of my narratives. For example, I sometimes adjust certain areas of the photo that I want to hide or suppress by turning the brightness down. I turn the brightness up in the areas that I want the viewer to be drawn to. It is crucial that I create a *chiaroscuro* effect, of high-contrast lights and darks, to present mysterious and intriguing images to bring attention to the range and drama of middle class life.

The photographs are my starting points for my paintings and prints. The extensive selection process and editing of my photos determine whether a given scene will be worthy of the long hours that it will take to render them faithfully in oils or in a drypoint.

On Canvas

I had been painting for several years before starting the MIS-IAR Program, but it had been almost twenty years since I had studied painting in a formal classroom environment. Since enrolling in this program, I have expanded my knowledge of oil painting and experimented with the conceptual content of my work.

Papa Bear (Appendix, 1) is an oil painting created from a photograph of an art fair called *Stockley Gardens* in Norfolk, Virginia. The painting depicts a crowded scene with sixteen figures walking through the art fair on a sunny Saturday. For this piece, I was thinking of how John Sloan depicted ordinary people engaged in everyday activities, and how he elevated an ordinary scene to the realm of fine art. I wanted to document how middle class people live in a variety of settings and how they engage in a wide range of activities. Similar to a Sloan painting, I wanted the subjects to look natural and not posed so, I used a candid (gonzo style) photo of the group of people.

The title *Papa Bear* refers to the bald male figure, in the center of the composition that is the focus of the piece. He is depicted as vigilantly scouting for signs of danger as he walks with his daughter who seems naïve to the hazards of the world. The apprehensive father in this piece creates a sense of psychological tension.

In my painting *Hilton Village* (Appendix, 2), I depict a two-story white house in a neighborhood. There is a strong light source coming from the front and left, which dramatically shades the right sides of the house. The sky is black and imposing, with a gradient of grey occurring closer to the horizon. I wanted the painting have a sense of drama to create interest in what would be considered an otherwise mundane scene.

Another painting, entitled *Buckroe Houses* (Appendix, 3), depicts a row of six houses. I positioned a red car in the center of the composition. The sky is also painted black but greyed out towards the horizon, as in *Hilton Village*. The red car in the center of the canvas creates a focal point for the viewer and black sky flattens the background allowing the brighter colors in the foreground to visually advance.

Both *Hilton Village House* and *Buckroe Houses* are part of a series that I call *A Fond Farewell to the American Middle Class*. The paintings in this series were inspired by the architectural paintings of Edward Hopper and the background scenes from *The Third Man*. Hopper's influence comes from his psychological depictions and focus on architecture with few or no people. The influence of the film comes from the use of shadow to create a sense of intrigue and mystery.

These paintings are a statement about economic uncertainty among the middle class. In my own lifetime, since the global economic collapse of 2008, the American middle class has begun to shrink in size. Many of those who have retained their jobs have wondered how much longer their luck will hold. In these paintings, by using *chiaroscuro* and heavy, black cloud systems, I am relaying a sense of impending doom that looms over the average homeowner. The home represents the American dream because it is a habitat, source of pride, and financial investment for middle class people. The home is also considered the most devastating material object to lose if you no longer have employment. For this reason, I want to create psychological portraits of people and houses that have conceptual depth and will cause viewers to contemplate their own lives and of those depicted in my paintings.

On Paper

One new media that I explored during my MIS-IAR coursework was printmaking. By using an X-acto knife to scratch into Plexiglas, I created print blocks for making highly-detailed drypoint engravings. I wanted to be able to create black and white line work as a counterpoint to my paintings. Working in two media would create variety when displayed side by side with my color works.

The Ladies at the Mummer's Museum (Appendix, 4) is a drypoint engraving. In this piece, I depicted a row of older women sitting in the lobby of the Mummer's Museum in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The Mummies are flamboyantly clad participants in a New Year's Parade in Philadelphia that has taken place there for over 100 years. This tradition, which includes costumes, song, and dance, dates back hundreds of years in Northern Europe and Colonial America. The Mummer's Museum displays the elaborate costumes that have been used in this event. The women in this print were members of the Hanna's Town Historical Society from Greensburg, Pennsylvania. I chose to make this print because the figures depicted a cross section of elderly women from middle class backgrounds. I wanted to make a statement about how many middle class senior citizens spend the latter days of their lives. Here they are presented as studying bygone eras through their local historical societies.

My drypoint, *Pow Wow Festival* (Appendix, 5), depicts a crowd that has gathered to attend a Native American gathering, or Pow Wow, that took place on Buckroe Beach in Hampton, Virginia. I was drawn to this scene because it references Native Americans and their current place in American culture. Ironically, this Pow Wow image has no depictions of actual Native Americans; this is a reflection of their dwindled population within America. I depicted children, men, and women of different races and sizes. I exaggerated many of the cast shadows from the figures in my photo manipulation software for added drama. Finally, I placed a drawing of a tiny American flag in the upper right-hand background as a poignant reminder of where this scene takes place.

Another drypoint, *Hilton Village Street Neighborhood* (Appendix, 6), depicts a series of six homes in an area of Newport News, Virginia. I was drawn to the early twentieth-century architecture found in these homes. The high contrast light and dark combined with leafless trees

give a sense of melancholy to the scene. To firmly place this image in the present, I depicted contemporary cars on the street of this old neighborhood. I wanted this piece to make a statement about the bleak economic period that existed in 2010 for the American middle class. At the same time, I wanted it to reference a traditional American etching by Edward Hopper or Martin Lewis.

My prints are a black and white counterpoint to my paintings. Although I use similar themes in my drypoints and paintings, the prints allow me to explore the use of lines to create tones instead of strokes of paint. When my drypoints are displayed next to my paintings, the variation in color, size, and technique make the overall display more visually diverse while maintaining a sense of thematic unity.

Conclusion

I have learned a great deal about the formal aspects of painting while enrolled in the MIS-IAR Program at VCU. However, the most important lessons have involved the creation and presentation of meaning in my art. I learned to use color and composition to accentuate my statements about middle class life. I also learned to visually edit my imagery so that my statements are apparent to the viewer.

The MIS-IAR Program has helped me expand my art making repertoire tremendously by offering courses in printmaking. Drypoint allowed me to work in a traditional manner but still make statements about the current times in which I live. It has also allowed me to make multiple copies of images that I can sell to help supplement my teaching income.

The skills and creation strategies that I have learned in the MIS-IAR Program will be utilized to elevate my students' art making techniques and promote higher thinking skills. I now

help my students craft visual statements in their work. I also demonstrated the printmaking process and hope to obtain an etching press for my school so that my students can make their own drypoints. The MIS-IAR Program has forever changed how I will teach art and my students will benefit from my personal growth for many years to come.

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Appendix

List of Images

- Figure 1. *Papa Bear*, oil on canvas, 24"x36", 2010.
- Figure 2. *Hilton Village*, oil on canvas, 24"x18", 2013.
- Figure 3. *Buckroe Houses*, oil on canvas, 12"x24", 2013.
- Figure 4. *The Ladies at the Mummer's Museum*, drypoint, 4"x6" (image size), 6" x10" (print size), 2010.
- Figure 5. *Pow Wow Festival*, drypoint, 4"x6 ½" (image size), 5 ½"x9" (print size), 2010.
- Figure 6. *Hilton Village Street Neighborhood*, drypoint, 6"x9" (image size), 8"x10 ¼"(print size), 2010.



Figure 1. *Papa Bear*, oil on canvas, 24"x36", 2010.



Figure 2. *Hilton Village*, oil on canvas, 24"x18", 2013.



Figure 3. *Buckroe Houses*, oil on canvas, 12"x24", 2013.



Figure 4. *The Ladies at the Mummer's Museum*, drypoint , 4"x6" (image size), 6" x10" (print size), 2010.



Figure 5. *Pow Wow Festival*, drypoint, 4"x6 ½" (image size), 5 ½"x9" (print size), 2010.



Figure 6. *Hilton Village Street Neighborhood*, drypoint, 6"x9" (image size) 10 ¼"x8" (print size), 2010.

SCOTT STANARD

EDUCATION

- 2014 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
(Painting and Printmaking)
- 2003 Bachelor of Arts (Magna cum laude)
Seton Hill University, Greensburg, PA
(Corporate Communications)

OTHER EDUCATION

- 2004-2005 Apprenticeship with oil painter Phillip Salvato, Pittsburgh, PA
- 1998-2000 Studied Computer Animation at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh,
PA
- 1992-1994 Studied Visual Communications at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh,
Pittsburgh, PA
- 1988-1991 Studied Fine Art at California University of Pennsylvania, California, PA

CERTIFICATION

- 2006-present Art, K-12

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- 2005-Present Art Teacher, Kecoughtan High School, Hampton, VA
- 2007 Drawing Instructor, Charles H. Taylor Arts Center, Hampton, VA
- 2005 Art Workshop Instructor, K-12 Gallery for Children, Dayton, OH

RELATED EXPERIENCE

- 2004-2005 Assistant Gallery Manager, 3rd Street Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA

AWARDS AND GRANTS

- 2006 **Sister Clementine Oler Memorial Award for Excellence in Art
Education**, Seton Hill University, Greensburg, PA

AWARDS AND GRANTS (continued)

- 2006 **Visual Arts Program Award for Artistic Achievement**, Seton Hill University, Greensburg, PA
- 2005 **Excellence in Painting Juror's Award**, Community College of Allegheny County, Pittsburgh, PA
Pittsburgh Society of Illustrators Scholarship Award, Community College of Allegheny County, Pittsburgh, PA

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2013 *Studies of the Middle Class*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA at A Pop-Up Shop from Jo-Louise, Newport News, VA
- 2008 *The Art of Scott Stanard*, Phoebus Art Gallery, Hampton, VA
- 2007 *Scenes of Urban Pennsylvania*, Riverview Gallery, Portsmouth, VA
- 2006 *The Art of Scott Stanard*, 3rd Street Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2013 *Artists Who Teach Show*, **Award of Merit**, Charles H. Taylor Arts Center, Hampton, VA
- 2012 *Artists Who Teach Show*, **2nd Place**, Charles H. Taylor Arts Center, Hampton, VA
- 2011 *Port Warwick Arts Festival*, **3rd Place**, Newport News, VA
- 2010 *Virginia Landscape Artists*, Peninsula Fine Arts Center, Newport News, VA
Artists Who Teach Show, **Honorable Mention**, Charles H. Taylor Arts Center, Hampton, VA
- 2009 *Artists Who Teach Show*, **Award of Merit**, Charles H. Taylor Arts Center, Hampton, VA
- 2008 *Artists Who Teach Show*, **Honorable Mention**, Charles H. Taylor Arts Center, Hampton, VA
Artists Who Teach Show, Charles H. Taylor Arts Center, Hampton, VA
- 2006 *Art All Night Group Exhibition*, Lawrenceville, Pittsburgh, PA
Scenes of Carnegie Group Exhibition, 3rd Street Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA
- 2005 *Art All Night Group Exhibition*, Lawrenceville, Pittsburgh, PA
Community College of Alleghany Student Show, Community College of Alleghany County, Pittsburgh, PA
- 2004 *Art All Night Group Exhibition*, Lawrenceville, Pittsburgh, PA