



2015

## Social Studies

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## **Social Studies**

A thesis 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, 2015

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## **Artist Statement**

In my mixed media work, I focus on people who are in the process of being uprooted and exiled from their home. My work reflects the limbo refugees experience while they search for balance and a new place to settle. The cultural diaspora affects the transplanted individuals as well as the host communities. Everyone experiences and needs to adapt to change.

My abstracted images are created by manipulating layers of acrylic paint, photo gel transfers, gel medium, and tempera paint. I combine human forms with layers of English and foreign text while exploring concepts of displacement. I use materials that I can rub dry, re-wet, and work into again. This process-oriented approach allows me to create figurative images that are ghost-like and in ambiguous environments which create an ephemeral world.

## **Social Studies**

### **Introduction**

Art has been an active part of my life since elementary school. I remember in third grade the kudos I received for a drawing representing Thanksgiving. Then, in seventh grade, I drew a lobster that everyone thought I traced. (I did not.) The next year, in an autobiography, I stated that I wanted to be an art teacher or a photographer. Now, forty-six years later I am a public school art teacher and have rotated between the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

Teaching art was my main focus, but making art took a back seat for many years. This changed when I was fortunate enough to take an off-campus Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) course through Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), offered in Charlottesville, VA. I signed on to make art with other teachers, and for teaching re-certification points. The structure of learning and producing work was invigorating and changed my thinking about how I would teach art to my students. After a few more classes, I realized I wanted more and enrolled in the MIS-IAR Program at VCU. In this program, my creativity was nurtured and I was guided through many different concepts and endeavors. I have learned that art is more than drawing a face perfectly, or making a logically accurate perspective rendering. I realized that I had to go beyond my early assumptions to make art that was meaningful.

My areas of concentration were painting and drawing. With these media, I

placed attention on people (mostly children) who have left their home, country, and way of life. I presented the figures as ghost-like images that appear to fade into or emerge from layers of media. I included faint drawings of script and fragments of languages. These images referenced cultural diversity and the trials of finding oneself in a different culture.

## **Aesthetics**

I have always been interested in drawing, painting, and constructing the human figure. There is something in the face and the body of humans that call me to visually tell their story. People carry a history of their lives. One can glimpse this history by looking into their faces, their eyes, and the way they carry themselves.

When I started teaching at my present school, I was gifted many outdated social studies books for my classroom. These books created a connection between the past and the present for me. The images were of changes and unrest in various countries during tumultuous times. These images inspired me to bring attention to people leaving their country and their home to find a better life elsewhere. My school has many ESOL (English as a Second or Other Language) students and the specific transition they were experiencing was emigration. They were escaping war, persecution, or poverty. These children were displaced and were required to remake their lives.

When depicting these children and their struggles, I developed transparent forms that appear to ambiguously recede or advance in space. I wanted these elusive figures

to represent people who have to leave a life and part of their identity behind. In addition to figurative elements, I incorporated script and texts from various languages. I asked some of my students to write their native script in pieces of my work. Through their participation, I made a direct connection with them and their experiences.

My process involved layering multiple media and imagery to create a thick, textural surface. I used gel mediums, water-based media, photo transfers, and tissue paper. The materials guided me in their use as I intuitively manipulated and reworked the surfaces and imagery. The script was etched into thick gel medium while the medium was wet. When it dried, I wiped white tempera paint over the script. The pigment caught in the recesses of the writing, thereby bringing attention to the random qualities of the line of scripts. I further manipulated the surfaces to make images appear vague. The white tempera paint also created the look of an erased chalkboard. The residue of chalk and effaced script created a metaphor of a culture left behind. In addition, I found that chalkboards are iconic of teaching and learning, and they created a connection to my students who have emigrated from their homes. The image of a dusty, half-erased chalkboard connects to a past when teaching tools were simple and education was less complicated; a past when children were not refugees and were nurtured and safe in their home countries.

## **Influences**

Different artists and styles have inspired my art. However, a few of these artists captured my attention and their work stuck with me. I have always felt deeply moved

by their images. Two of these artists, Charles Sibley (1921-2005) and A.B. Jackson (1925-1981), were my college professors at Old Dominion University in the late 1970s.

A.B. Jackson was an African-American artist who focused on drawing and painting images of African-American people in the Ghent area of Norfolk, Virginia. He called his figurative drawings and paintings *Porch People*. His images were of people sitting on porches communing with each other, relaxing at the end of the day, and cooling off in the hot Norfolk, VA weather. These people were not bankers or lawyers. They were maids and laborers. You can see their weariness, and their material poverty but you can also feel their quiet dignity. In Jackson's obituary it was written that he was "Praised by art critics for his view of the human as an immensely sensitive and dignified creature, Jackson painted the suffering of Christ" (*The Virginian Pilot and Ledger Star*, obituary). Jackson stated, "I am moved to paint black people. I paint people on the street. I paint the home grown who are alien " (*Virginia Museum of Fine Arts*, 8). I responded to Jackson's ideas but I painted the alien who was setting down new roots in order to feel home grown.

Jackson employed the technique of *chiaroscuro*, which is used to create dramatic contrasts of lights and darks, in his faces full of subtle expression. Much of the time, his faces were naturalistic yet depicted as melting into muted and overlapping contrasting shapes, creating transparent layers of images. His palette contained just a few muted colors and his brushstrokes were gestural and expressive. I took Jackson's expressive mark making and layering of imagery to my pieces.

Charles Sibley was a figurative painter who portrayed people in private moments



of their life when seemingly there were no spectators. They seemed to be alone and lost in their solitude. His paintings have strong compositional design but his brushwork was painterly and intuitive. In presenting these figures, he used vibrant, contrasting colors. One of Sibley's typical works is *Speedwalker*, 1981. Regarding his process in making this work, Sibley stated:

I smeared those colors over everything, and not really knowing what I was going to paint, I took some white on a brush and began outlining very quickly. I had previously had the figure's hand extended holding a cane and I suddenly thought I would eliminate the cane and put in a horizontal mark so that it would appear he was leaning on something. As I drew the horizontal, it seemed to suggest one of those walkers. I didn't know exactly what a walker looked like - whether it had wheels or not-but I wasn't about to take the time to find out either, so I painted a support that I hope is at least reminiscent of one. I put the other arm in and extended both arms to have him push the walker in front of him. But it happened - the solution to the painting - in about 20 minutes after having messed around with the painting for over two weeks (Daley, 4).

Like Sibley's spontaneous and intuitive approach to resolving his painting, I also work in this manner in finding resolutions for my work. His process demonstrated to me that it was okay to let ideas germinate and evolve over time.

Sibley chose his subject matter partly because he described himself as a loner and he related to his figures, which he depicted as isolated. He viewed the idea of pleasant things in life producing boring and simplistic art for the most part. In his comment regarding Pierre-Auguste Renoir's (1841-1919) depictions of crowds of cheerful people, he said, "But you don't feel any of the blood-warm existence of actual people who face things by themselves and whatever we do, we do it by ourselves" (Daley, 7). He also said, "I paint difficult times and endings" (Daley, 7). Over the years, I have felt a connection to his paintings. It is partly his philosophy of

independence and struggle in life that I focus on in my work. However, instead of endings, I place attention on the struggle for new beginnings.

## **Drawing**

Charcoal has allowed me to explore the contrasts of *chiaroscuro*. The high contrast of dark and light values in my drawings reflects the simple but bold essence of my subject matter. They are diverse students and to portray them in black and white, with an occasional area of color, also seems to provide commonality of the students' situations. *Yusof* (Appendix, 1) is a drawing of a young man from Iran. I wanted to show him participating and being an active part of class. I used charcoal with a bit of yellow pastel on the left side of the image. I used a touch of color to add a bit of warmth to the harshness of the black charcoal and my use of heavy line. To obscure the image, I took white charcoal and scratched marks over the image of Yusof. I wanted to make him appear to be behind a screen. I wanted to symbolically present him as being in America, but not yet fully assimilated into our culture.

In *Chrissy and Sarah* (Appendix, 2), I used charcoal to continue my series of close ups of students working in class. I used a variety of lines from dark and hard, to soft and barely perceptible. The ground has rectilinear shapes and large dark areas, which contrast with the expressive line used to draw the two girls. I added light touches of yellow pastel in various areas to lighten and give warmth to the picture. The dark quality of the drawing seemed stark without the touches of warmth. These ESOL students provide a contrast to my students who are home grown and from Albemarle

County, Virginia.

*Jabawk* (Appendix, 3) shows an intense and highly-focused student from Burma. There is an internal energy manifested in her production of art and her freedom in the art room. Her hair is moving, flying back and forth as she works. She is losing herself in her work. I used boxes and blocks of diverse value in the background to contrast with the movement of her hair. Again, I added touches of yellow pastel, which gives the drawing a sense of warmth and visually ties it to the other drawings of my students.

### **Mixed Media Painting**

After working with charcoal, I decided to explore painting techniques in an effort to address the subject of emigration. I began the process by using images from newspapers depicting struggles beyond the United States. I used these images as a reference for a series of oil paintings. Next, I began to cut out and collage similar images from old social studies books into my paintings. To apply the cut out images to the paintings, I used a gel transfer process. By using this process, I was able to incorporate a photographic image into a composition. The process also caused the fragile cut-outs to tear. I used this outcome as part of the presentation of people torn from their native countries.

I also used newspapers that were printed in different languages. I was intrigued and fascinated with the various scripts. I was then exposed to some of the languages of my students during a school mural project. This project inspired me to use script of different languages in my work. Similar to my charcoal drawings, I decided to limit my

palette primarily to black and white. I wanted my paintings to look like chalkboards. Chalkboards seemed to reflect my life as a teacher. They also were a point of contact with my students.

*Dancing Child* (Appendix, 4) is an image of a boy from an eastern European country. The child is playful and is happily dancing. I depicted him to appear as if he is moving through a swirl of words. In creating this piece, I painted black acrylic on a wooden panel, then, applied a gel transfer image of the child on top. I applied a coat of gel medium over the surface to seal and protect the newspaper image. While this gel was wet, I had various students write in their native script. When the gel dried, I painted white tempera over it and then wiped it to create an erased effect commonly seen in schoolroom chalkboards.

In *Princess Sisters* (Appendix, 5), I transferred one image of a little girl twice. I used one image for both girls to create a sense of kinship. These Burmese girls are dressed in native costume behind a veil of lacy script. I wanted their native wear to give them a sense being exotic or royal in nature. The script is Nepali and is written by Narbada, my former student from Nepal. I chose an intimate format for this piece to emphasize the small stature of the young girls. I used the images of these children in their formal dress because it created a contrast to their innocence and the naiveté of their youth.

Math is a common language among countries and provides the background and title to my last piece, *Common Language* (Appendix, 6). Instead of the languages of different and diverse people you see the universal language of math. Math symbols are

used here to represent people coming together with this unifying language.

Remembering math symbols on chalkboards in colored chalk from my childhood led me to add touches of subtle color to this piece with pastel. The ghost-like images of figures are actual transferred photographs of my students.

I have worked with the theme of emigration using many different media. However, the final mixed media pieces connected me closer to my students because it involved their mark making in the work. I am not sure what they thought when I asked them for their help, but there was hesitation and some uncomfortable looks leading to laughter on their part. For me, their hand in my work is a cherished gift. Those are the pieces that are NFS (Not For Sale).

## **Conclusion**

The MIS-IAR Program opened my eyes to a wide variety of experiences. I saw more diverse art through this program than I had ever seen before. I was exposed to different ways to express meaning through art making. I found that working with other students and professors was enriching. My colleagues and I took the same classes but we came up with unique ways to express ourselves with diverse materials. This experience has broadened my thinking about how different outcomes can be reached from an idea. The many critiques, delivering and receiving, have sharpened my eye to the power of line, color, and shape and how subtle changes in these can totally change a piece of art. I feel more confident to express my ideas in a unique way and follow my intuition.

The MIS-IAR Program also placed me in situations similar to the situations I have placed my students in when I teach. It has created in me an empathy and connection to the feelings of discomfort students may have when they are faced with a new art challenge. Before this program, it was difficult for me to take risks in my art and I know that it is difficult for my students to do the same. I have learned it is good to be out of your comfort zone and encourages unique thinking. I have shared this with my students and let them know great ideas come from this place. I feel like I have been on this journey with them. What I feel and learn I take to class to share with them. The pep talks and critiques I give to them I give to myself.

This program has given me the tools and confidence to make art, call myself an artist, and exhibit my work. I have come to acknowledge that some pieces will work and some will not and that is okay. My professors exposed me to diverse creative expressions and this led me to realize that what I create also has worth.

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## Appendix

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- Figure 1. *Yousof*, charcoal, 12" x 11", 2014.
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- Figure 3. *Jabawk*, charcoal, 11" x 12", 2014.
- Figure 4. *Dancing Child*, mixed media painting on wood, 8" x 9", 2013.
- Figure 5. *Princess Sisters*, mixed media painting on wood, 8.25" x 8.8", 2013.
- Figure 6. *Common Language*, mixed media painting on wood, 18" x 24", 2014.





Figure 1. *Yusuf*, charcoal, 12" x 11", 2014.



Figure 2. *Chrissy and Sarah*, charcoal, 11" x 12", 2014.



Figure 3. *JaBawk*, charcoal, 11" x 12", 2014.



Figure 4. *Dancing Child*, mixed media painting on wood, 8" x 9", 2013.



Figure 5. *Princess Sisters*, mixed media painting on wood, 8.25" x 8.8", 2013.



Figure 6. *Common Language*, mixed media painting on wood, 18" x 24", 2014.

## **DONNA BARNES EVANS**

### **EDUCATION:**

- 2015            Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts  
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA.  
Concentrations: Painting, Drawing
- 1978            Bachelor of Arts  
Old Dominion University  
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### **CERTIFICATION**

- 1980-2015     Art, K-12

### **TEACHING EXPERIENCE:**

- 2007-Present   Middle School Art Teacher  
Jack Jouett Middle School, Albemarle County, Charlottesville, VA.
- 2001-2007     Elementary Art Teacher  
Broadus Wood Elementary, Albemarle County, Earlysville, VA.
- 2001-2007     Art Teacher  
Tandem School's Summer Spectrum Program, Charlottesville, VA.
- 2003-2005     Ceramics Teacher  
Open Doors Community Education  
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- 1982-1990     Middle School Art Teacher  
Staunton River Middle School, Bedford County Public Schools, Moneta,  
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### **PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:**

National Art Education Association  
Virginia Art Education Association  
National Education Association

## **RELATED EXPERIENCE**

1990-2000 Private Art Lessons, Bedford, VA.

1990-2000 Volunteer in Bedford County Schools, Bedford, VA.

## **EXHIBITIONS:**

2015 *Social Studies*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA., The Boneyard, Charlottesville, VA.

2014 *Bridges*, C2D-Art in Place, McGuffey Art Center, Charlottesville, VA.