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# Trees

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*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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## **Trees**

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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## **Trees**

The intention behind my work is to draw the viewer's attention to the intimate, beautiful details found in nature. For example, I am awed and inspired by the unique qualities found in every tree whose varieties are seemingly infinite. The basic concept of my work is to portray the images of trees close to the viewer's eye to instill a sense of nature's grandness.

## **Trees**

### **Background**

When I entered the VCU/MIS program during my first year of teaching I was excited to get back to my own personal artwork. Previously, in my undergraduate work, I painted studies of cloth and folds. My working method began with stapling material to a wall and filling the folds with paper. Directing a light source on one side of the mass of fabric enhanced the lights and darks. The forms on my canvas took on an extremely bulbous quality in which viewers at times imagined figures or objects. An inspiration for my work was studying old masters such as Caravaggio. To achieve his powerful use of chiaroscuro was a goal I set for myself.

In addition to my cloth studies, I painted portraits of people that I knew. Working in a small format, the image of each face was severely cropped on the canvas so that the individual's expression was further emphasized. My intention for this dramatic presentation was to be provocative, giving the viewer the opportunity to examine human emotion in tight proximity. Nonetheless it seemed all through my undergraduate work I was actually just painting images that my professors suggested I try. I never felt completely happy with the work I was doing. The subject matter didn't truly reflect a personal artistic style or what is really representative of me as an individual. I was envious of artists who had a specific theme for their work.

I decided to begin my graduate program in the spring of 2002. While teaching I found limited time for creating my art. I decided the VCU/MIS program would be very beneficial for myself and my students. Hopefully by becoming a practicing artist I could be inspirational to students while helping them understand the importance of creating art.

Looking back on my undergraduate experience forced me to set goals for myself that I wanted to accomplish during my graduate work. I wanted to paint what truly inspires me. What kind of things in my life am I drawn to? What feelings do I have that can be portrayed through my art? As a source of information to work from I have photographs from past trips I've taken: camping, hiking and other experiences spent outdoors. Additionally there are images taken in an undergraduate black and white photography class, mostly of nature. Looking back at the images from that class and pictures I took outside of the course helped me to remember my adolescent years. I decided the content I chose then is still important to me. Finally I had something to express that I truly connect with.

### **Inspired by Constable**

While working in the Spring of 2003 in my first graduate painting and drawing class I was inspired by an artist's painting reproduced in *Essential Constable* by Mandi Gomez. John Constable (1776-1837) is known for capturing the effects of changing light and cloud patterns moving across the sky. He loved the

countryside, and his best work was of outdoor scenes in his native Suffolk and his London home in Hampstead.

I was instantly drawn to the image Constable created in a painting called *Study of the Trunk of an Elm Tree* (c.1821). It was the same general idea for a painting that I was currently working on. Constable's painting is of an extreme close up of a tree: a section of bark that takes up the whole canvas except for narrow views on either side. The way that Constable handled the light reflections on the bark and the warm glow on the ground behind the tree encouraged me to use different colors for rendering bark. I felt he had some sort of personal history with this tree. Besides being such strong, distinct imagery, it seemed mysterious to me as well. Essentially these were the features that I wanted in my own work.

I had taken a photo of a tree while camping in the Adirondack mountains and decided to use this as the image in my painting: a close up of a single tree. Every deep crevice of the bark was in deep shadow in sharp contrast with the beautifully illuminated surface of the wood. This tree had a large portion of bark eroded through decay. All of the branches along the mid-section of the tree were broken off and beginning to rot. I decided the background should be blurry to give absolute prominence to the tree and its textures. I adjusted the focus on my camera to capture all of the details of the tree.

After encountering Constable's work, right at the end of the semester I decided to replicate the photographed tree for my last painting (Appendix 1, Number 1). I began by selecting a

large canvas, 40"x30", to enhance its grandeur in scale. Instead of painting the tree in a gray scale as caught in the black and white photo I selected a warm palette of ochres and browns for my mid-tones. I highlighted the bark with yellows and pale ochres. To deepen the appearance of the crevices of the bark I used ultramarine blue to complement the warm yellows. At first the process of creating the textured bark was a complicated one for me as I struggled with making the surface appear rough. I used a palette knife to build up a bark-like surface, treating each piece of bark individually. Similar to the contrasting effects I produced with my cloth studies, one side has the light reflection balanced by the dark blue crevices. This high contrast technique helped the bark appear to emerge from the tree's surface. Once I completed the tree itself, I created the background to simulate the black and white photographic source. I painted the twilight effect with different blues. The distinct difference between the tree's sharp focus and the background vagueness reinforces its prominence.

### **Summer Landscape Painting Course**

During my second summer semester in 2003, I enrolled in a landscape painting course. I thought it was the perfect opportunity to continue painting images that were significant to me. Initially I painted a complete landscape painting on a 16" X 20" canvas. The image was of the Potomac river and the Maryland coast line. I painted the scene realistically using various

greens and browns for the trees and grass and gray for the reflections in the water. The sky was a light blue and there were clouds that changed from large to small as they receded into the background. Unfortunately the painting merely recalled a generic, run of the mill, landscape painting.

I painted another landscape painting using an unconventional palette in a diptych format on two 16" X 20" canvases. Although the choice of unnatural colors was a step forward, once again I wasn't satisfied with the final results. I wondered what style of painting really inspires me? How could I use the environment around me to create work that would relate to my previous semesters of paintings? I decided to produce another tree trunk in detail, this time from life rather than a photograph. Setting up my canvas stand and chair right in front of a tree's trunk, I painted only the bark including a section of the tree that splits into a fork towards the top of the canvas. I was fascinated with the trees on the river bank, each variety has such grandeur and detail. There were so many trees to choose from. Since it was a two week course I wanted to create a number of pieces, rather than spend a week on a single large painting (See Appendix I, Number 2 through 11). I chose 6" X 7" masonite board to paint on, similar to a series of small portraits produced in college. The smooth surface of the board, once primed, is highly adaptable for painting quickly with oil paints. As before I focused on one section of a tree, contrasting lights and darks. With each painting I made subtle differences in the composition. Some of the small paintings had leaves near the top of the board. Some

had depth to the background, while other paintings had a simple horizon line that separated the ground and sky. As a challenge I selected different colors that I wasn't used to painting with.

After painting two of the small trees on the masonite board I realized they were kind of plain looking. I decided this was because I had used browns and ochres for the trees body, so I tried to avoid them in the rest of my small tree series. I used vibrant colors, crimson red hues, intense yellows, and even ultramarine blue for the trees bark. Employing color theory I chose colors triads for the leaves and the backgrounds. For instance, an ultramarine blue tree visually intensifies next to an Indian Yellow sky. Another benefit of working with a small format was that it greatly increased the speed of my painting process.

At the end of the semester I had 12 small masonite boards with intensely colored trees. While each piece holds up individually, putting them all together with complimentary colors paired for optimum intensity creates a visual tour de force. Arranging small nails in two rows allowed me to place the masonite paintings on weathered barn wood for display. This was a prominent piece for my graduate show. The summer landscape painting class was a wonderful addition to my tree series. I was beginning to feel truly connected with my art.

## **Computers in Art**

During my first semester in the VCU/MIS program I enrolled in Computers in Art I. This was a completely different way to create art for me. I learned to use programs such as Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator that enabled me to transform an original photograph into an image that I could not have achieved otherwise. Now I could take an image and manipulate it in a variety of ways for my Trees series and other eventual artwork. I was also using the techniques that I learned with my students in my classroom. The courses called *Transferring Images parts 1 and 2* were the third and fourth courses that would complete my second focus area. These were the classes that really pushed me creatively with a variety of techniques that I had never tried before. Some of these were successful while others were absorbed as a learning process.

I developed other images of trees that I had taken with a camera using black and white film at the Manassas battlefield in Virginia. In the Spring the trees were huge with their leaves so full. After developing them in the darkroom I used color tinting markers to change the shade of everything except the tree. This proved to be an unsatisfactory experiment because I felt the tinting process cheapened the true richness of tone in the photos.

One experiment that was successful involved using Photoshop to change a picture of a tree that I would then print on a laser printer. The next step called for up to ten layers of a clear

glue. Once the glue was completely dried, I rubbed the paper off of the back leaving the tree image intact on the adhesive. I tacked the images to wood and used them in my graduate exhibition. The wood tacks added to the rustic look.

I also found images of trees on the Internet that appealed to me. After transferring the images using Photoshop I burned them onto a silk screen. This allowed me to create a series of screen prints sometimes using layers of different colors, some printed on black paper instead of white. A tree that I printed with rich brown ink was my next experiment. When it was completed I found a perfectly symmetrically shaped green leaf and glued it to the bottom of the print. I began to use real leaves in my printmaking even printing on top of them. Discovering a new medium again was an interesting experience for me as a painter (Appendix 1, Numbers 12 and 13).

One of the last pieces I created in this course was based on a photograph that I took during my undergraduate work. It was a picture of our neighbor's yard showing extremely tall pine trees with the sun beginning to set behind them. The ground in front of the trees had crisp concise shadows that each pine tree cast. After scanning the picture into Photoshop I printed it out onto white paper in four sections to increase the size of the image. It was now approximately 22" X 16". Painting each sheet with linseed oil made the image slightly transparent, with a warm beige tone as if it were aged. I mounted the image onto a large piece of white poster board that I had previously covered with drawn lines that resemble the texture of bark. Although subtle,

this presentation idea added another layer to the piece. Finally, happy with the outcome, I mounted this print to another piece of barn wood. This was not only a new process for me, the image itself has a great amount of personal significance as well (See Appendix 1, Number 14).

### **Obtaining my Next Image**

In the Fall of 2004 and the Spring of 2005 I was enrolled in two more painting courses. I decided to continue my series of large tree paintings. I wanted to build upon the same concept of painting the body of the tree as an extreme close up using a large canvas format. The first challenge was to decide how I was going to obtain my next image. I knew that I wanted to paint a tree to render realistic bark while also emphasizing grandness with scale. My problem was not being sure of what type of image to use as a reference. Although I had experience painting a tree in plein air during the summer landscape painting courses, I was working in a classroom now without accessibility to those kinds of trees as models.

Since using a photograph as a source was the next best thing to being outside, I decided to use images found through research on the Internet. The photographs I found were actual pictures of trees that I cropped and manipulated. This series of paintings were the main component of my painting focus in my exhibition. *Birch Tree, Three Trees, Tree with Rope, Two Trees, and Red Tree*

were all paintings I created based upon images from various photographers (See Appendix 1, Numbers 15 through 19).

### **Conclusion**

As an artist I feel I've come a long way from where I was when I started in the MIS program. In painting, I have learned technical ways of imitating the texture of bark, color theory, and how to push myself into staying connected thus making art that is a true reflection of me. Currently I am doing mural work for clients homes. Many of the techniques I learned I use in this line of work.

I remind myself of the goals I had set when I entered into the program and how I felt throughout my undergraduate work. I enjoy painting and creating art that truly represents me as an artist. Due to my experiences in the VCU/MIS program I am sure that each future piece of art I create will represent all that I have learned about creating art so far and myself as well.

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**Appendix I**

## Slide List

1. *Untitled* , Oil on Canvas, 40x30, 2003
2. *Orange and Teal*, Oil on Masonite, 7x6, 2003
3. *Teal and Red*, Oil on Masonite, 7x6, 2003
4. *Blue and Yellow*, Oil on Masonite, 7x6, 2003
5. *Magenta and Teal*, Oil on Masonite, 7x6, 2003
6. *Red and Blue*, Oil on Masonite, 7x6, 2003
7. *Violet and Orange*, Oil on Masonite, 7x6, 2003
8. *Teal Trees*, Oil on Masonite, 7x6, 2003
9. *Ochre and Blue*, Oil on Masonite, 7x6, 2003
10. *Brown Tree*, Oil on Masonite, 7x6, 2003
11. *Orange and Blue*, Oil on Masonite, 7x6, 2003
12. *Tree Intertwined with Leaf*, Ink on Paper, 22x12, 2002
13. *Tree Intertwined No. 3*, Ink on Paper, 19x12, 2002
14. *The Pines*, Linseed on Paper, 19½x14, 2003
15. *Birch Tree*, Oil on Canvas, 30x24, 2004
16. *Three Trees*, Oil on Canvas, 36x24, 2004
17. *Tree with Rope*, Oil on Canvas, 36x24, 2005
18. *Two Trees*, Oil on Canvas, 72x21, 2005
19. *Red Tree*, Oil on Canvas, 36x24, 2005

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Virginia Commonwealth University  
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Specialization: Computers in Art,  
Painting
- 2001 Bachelor of Science  
College of Saint Rose  
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Specialization: Art Education

**Teaching Experience:**

- 2003-2005 Colin Powell Elementary School  
Centreville, VA
- 2002-2004 Sylvan Learning Center  
Alexandria, VA
- 2002-2003 Little Run Elementary School  
Fairfax, VA
- 2001-2003 Columbia Elementary School  
Annandale, VA
- 2001-2002 White Oaks Elementary School  
Burke, VA

**Related Experiences:**

- 2001-2004 Fairfax County Public Schools, Fine Arts  
Office  
Teaching strategies document preparation  
Organized Program of Studies document to  
be published  
Falls Church, VA

**Related Experiences Cont'd**

2002 Organizer, Student Art Show- Green  
Springs Garden Park  
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**Exhibitions:**

2005 **Trees**  
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Ernst Cultural Center Gallery- Northern  
Virginia Community College  
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2003 **And They Teach**  
Group Show  
Reston Art Gallery and Studios  
Reston, VA

2001 **Senior Exhibition**  
Group Show  
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