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Growth

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

by

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Artist's Statement

In nature we see a wide variety of bold colors and unique shapes. Trees personify these characteristics with their curved branches creating distinctive lines and shapes. Leaves and blossoms enhance their structures with an array of colors. Trees possess awe-inspiring energy. Each tree is a living thing, its growth shaped by its environment.

Similarly, my work is a response to the environment. I employ a spontaneous and bold technique in an attempt to capture the energy I perceive in nature. The use of vigorous lines and high keyed contrasting colors with varied textures conveys that trees are living, growing entities, each one unique. I remain open to new ways of expressing this aesthetic so that my work will continue to grow like a tree and evolve.

Introduction

I keep an open-minded approach to my art work. My background as a potter helps me not to worry about whether a piece will turn out successfully at the end of the creative process. I believe that for every ten pots I make, at least one is a “learning pot” that does not make it to the end of the process. By not focusing primarily on an end product during the process, I can experiment with new ideas that enable my artistic growth. This creative philosophy includes being open to the ideas of other artists as well. During the five years of enrollment in the Virginia Commonwealth University M.I.S. program, I have produced a body of work, appropriately titled *Growth*, because it reflects an evolution over time.

When I began studying visual art at Virginia Wesleyan College, I focused primarily on painting. During my sophomore year, I took *Introduction to Ceramics* with Neil Britton, a class that changed my direction in college. This was my first experience with clay and the potter’s wheel. Struggling at first, I learned to center clay on the wheel and became excited about making pots. I continued to paint while in college, but ceramics became the focal point of my studies.

After graduation, I worked at Creative Clay studios in Alexandria, VA for two years. I benefited from working alongside more experienced artists, including potters Debra Steidel and Ramon Camarillo. Their influence on my work was profound. I began to look at pots as canvases that I could manipulate to create a variety of forms and textures. Although my pottery improved greatly during this period, I was painting only occasionally.

A New Approach

I credit Kurt Godwin and the VCU M.I.S. program with getting me back into serious painting. In 2001, I took my first studio VCU painting class with Kurt Godwin. I enjoyed it and decided to take more classes. During my first two classes with Kurt, I used extensive drawing that served as an underpainting. While drawing is a good way to help formulate ideas for a painting, it seemed to stand in the way of painting itself. It was not until later that I learned this and my work began to experience real growth.

In the summer of 2002, I enrolled in the landscape painting course where my personal two-dimensional aesthetic and technique developed. The works I painted at this time contain my continuing interests of using energetic vigorous line work with high contrasting color.

Another interest was extreme depth perception, created by pushing and pulling the foreground and background areas. In *Rivers Edge (Appendix, #1)*, I painted four distinct areas: the background, middle ground, near foreground, and foreground. The piece is four feet long, making it possible to literally stretch out the space to produce the illusion of extreme depth.

At the same time that I was developing this concept, my technique was changing as well. Kurt encouraged me to stop relying on drawing and to go for the immediacy of paint itself. This led to works that were much faster and spontaneous. This new-found freedom led to a bolder, looser style. In *River's Edge*, I worked quickly at the onset of the piece, with intense energy that effectively transferred to the painting. At the end of the process, I added details including light and dark lines to enhance the spontaneity of its

beginning. Strengthening depth and contrast using this looser technique helped to greatly embolden my work

Making Connections

In the fall of 2002, I took ceramics as the other focus area of my interdisciplinary degree. My goal for this class was to create work that would correspond with the paintings I had done over the summer. The first connection was obvious: continuing the tree imagery on pottery.

A signature characteristic of my pots is the carved details. In the past, I carved pots with abstract line designs. In order to make a specific connection between the pots and the paintings, I carved trees on the sides of the pots and on the large flat surfaces of the platters also in production at that time. The pots were glazed with many different hues to create bold contrasting colors. Dripping glazes onto the pots for a more “painterly” look producing another connection between my two focus areas.

In *Tree Platter (Appendix, #3)*, I used a combination of four different colored glazes to enhance the carved tree designs at the center of the platter. This approach with glazes was more expressive than my previous experience. It was similar to the looseness I had used in the initial stages of painting during the landscape class. Achieving this “painterly” correspondence between my ceramics and painting was evidence of my continuing growth as an artist.

A New Medium

In the fall of 2003, I took *Pen and Ink and Beyond*, a drawing class with Kurt Godwin. With very little experience working in black and white, I had no preconceived notions about what to expect. I chose to use landscapes as my subject because I had enjoyed painting them during my two summer classes. The first two medium-sized pieces were successful, yet seemed restrained because I wasn't handling the materials as freely as I had during the landscape classes.

During class one night, I saw a fellow student working with oil bars. I had never worked with this medium before. I borrowed one to add some white to a larger piece I had just started, *Briar Patch Road* (*Appendix, #5*). I immediately loved working with them because they were thick, rich, and messy. More importantly they helped me to achieve the gestural aspect I aim for.

In *Briar Patch Road*, I did a couple things new to me, notably using a large black matt board, 40 X 32 inches in size, with oil bars, charcoal, and wax. I had only worked on white surfaces previously. I also took Kurt's suggestion to draw with a White Out pen to produce crisp white lines. The size of the matt board and the new mediums of oil bar and White Out pen helped me work with a spontaneity similar to the landscape paintings. The result was a series of dramatic, starkly contrasted black and white landscapes. The introduction to a new medium and a new style of work broadened my approach, adding a significant step to my ongoing creative evolution.

Bridging the Gap

In the fall of 2004, I took my second ceramics course with Margaret Boozer.

During this class, I bridged the gap between two mediums, again creating another interdisciplinary body of work. Concentrating on a slab relief format took me out of my accustomed ceramics wheel comfort zone. Being in new artistic territory brought out a lot of experimentation, since I had very little previous experience to draw from.

I started out with a piece entitled *Water's Edge (Appendix, #6)*, essentially a clay relief of a landscape. It was similar to my painting: a landscape with a great deal of depth. Made of four separate slabs, it relates to the diptych and triptych formats of my paintings. As it is flat like a painting, it looks more like a drawing in clay than a three dimensional ceramic form.

One advantage of clay versus canvas or paper is that it can be manipulated during different stages of dryness. Once the clay slabs were at a nice firmness for working, I carved into them in the same manner as my pots. In addition to carving on the clay slabs to create the landscape imagery, I was also modeling slabs, creating new areas of positive space as relief. The combination of creating negative space by carving the clay and adding new areas of positive space by modeling the clay back onto the surface enabled the piece to have a wide range of texture, while also enhancing the depth of field. The slabs proved to be a perfect vehicle for a series that could transition seamlessly from two dimensional to three dimensional work.

Although *Water's Edge* was a solid connection between my two dimensional and three dimensional work, Margaret wanted me to see how far I could push this idea. Two more pieces in the series helped accomplish this goal. The first was *Tree Part 1*

(Appendix, #7), and the second was *Black and White Branches* (Appendix, #8). I originally constructed *Tree Part 1* and *Tree Part 2* as one piece, but when I displayed them later I found they worked better as two pieces.

After working on *Water's Edge*, I wanted to simplify my subject matter so I could get to the essence of the work. I modeled the *Tree Parts* pieces after the large trees I had painted in *Green Grist Mill* (Appendix, #2) from a landscape painting class. I used the same techniques as I had in *Water's Edge*, with a few modifications. The clay slabs in *Tree Parts* are thicker, making it possible to carve deeper into the clay. Modeling the clay back up onto the slabs helped make these pieces thicker as well, thus creating a more three dimensional piece than *Water's Edge*.

I did not develop the surface in *Tree Parts* as I had in *Water's Edge*, because it would have interfered with my goal of simplifying the imagery. The resulting piece is a shallow relief deviating from the interest of creating a deep space. The tree itself has fewer details and leaves than the trees in *Water's Edge*. These two changes help the viewer to see the tree as a simplified form.

In *Black and White Branches*, I attempted again to simplify the imagery. It seemed logical to break the tree down abstractly into its parts of just leaves and branches. The choice of two clays that fired to black and white was a conscious attempt to create work that had similarities to the black and white drawings. This provided a technical challenge because the two clays I used, porcelain and cassius basalt, have different chemical properties that make them behave differently during drying and firing. I dried and fired the piece at an extraordinarily slow rate to try to keep the clays from cracking

and separating from one another. In the end it worked, with the piece coming out of the kiln intact.

The slab I started with in this piece has very large dimensions (30"X40"), so large that I had to work with it on the floor because the tables were too small. Before firing it had to be cut into pieces so it would fit in the kiln. The size of the slab enabled me to loosen up and work quickly, similar to how I paint and work on the potter's wheel. I made the slab out of black clay, and the branches and leaves out of the white clay, ensuring a strong contrast between the two areas. Both clays were soft when I worked with them, so they were more sensitive and showed every mark. Instead of rolling it out with a slab roller as I had the other pieces, I pressed it out by hand, giving it a more free-form shape. The softness of clay and the overall size and shape of the piece give it a more energetic look than the previous pieces. Again, the choice of colors connects it to my black and white drawings, just as the flat surface and loose energetic style correspond with the paintings. Lastly, the carved and modeled surface texture relates to my pots. This particular piece ties all of the work together more strongly than any other piece in this series. It was a fitting way to end the series, because it showed all of the aesthetic growth I had in my other work, synthesized into one final piece.

Conclusion

The M.I.S. program has helped my work grow significantly in the past five years. I used to think of my paintings and ceramic work as two separate entities with no connection. In this program, I have discovered ways to connect the two mediums. The connections, as expressed through my slab work, have created a cohesive body of work.

I have developed a looser, freer way of working, which has helped me to create the bold contrast that I strive for. This new, more energetic style, coupled with the more cohesive body of work, is a clear indication of cognitive, personal artistic evolution. These two changes didn't just happen overnight; they evolved slowly. I attribute this growth to remaining open to the ideas of others, and to focusing more on the creative process than the product. In the future, I hope to keep the same approach, so my work will continue to evolve.

Appendix
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- Figure 1. *River's Edge*, acrylic on canvas, 24"x 48", 2002
- Figure 2. *Green Gristmill*, acrylic on canvas, 24"x 48", 2002
- Figure 3. *Tree Platter*, stoneware, 16", 2002
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- Figure 5. *Briar Patch Road*, mixed media, 36"x 48", 2003
- Figure 6. *Water's Edge*, clay and wood, 30"x 50", 2004
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- Figure 8. *Black and White Branches*, porcelain and cassius basalt clay on wood,
2004



Figure 1 *River's Edge*
acrylic on canvas, 24"x 48", 2002

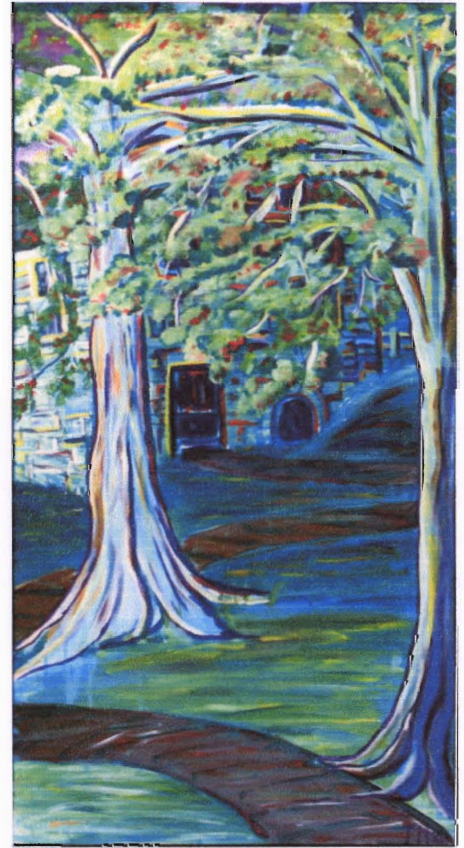


Figure 2 *Green Gristmill*
acrylic on canvas, 24"x 48", 2002



Figure 3 *Tree Platter*
stoneware, 16", 2002



Figure 4 *River Scene*
acrylic on canvas, 18"X 36", 2003



Figure 5 *Briar Patch Road*
mixed media, 36"x 48", 2003



Figure 6 *Water's Edge*
clay and wood, 30"x 50", 2004



Figure 7 *Tree Parts I*
red low fire clay, 9" X 22" per slab, 2004



Figure 8 *Black and White Branches*
porcelain and cassius basalt clay on wood, 30"X40" , 2004

PETER LAWRENCE FITZGERALD

EDUCATION

- 2006 Candidate for Masters of Interdisciplinary Studies, (projected graduation, 2006), Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA.
- 1996 Bachelor of Arts, Virginia Wesleyan College, Virginia Beach, VA, Major in Art Education, (Concentration in Ceramics).

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- 1998-present Art teacher, Gunston Middle School, Arlington Public Schools, Arlington, VA.
- 1996-2002 Ceramics Instructor, Creative Clay Studios, Alexandria, VA.
- 1997-1998 Ceramics Instructor, Fairfax County Adult and Community Education, Alexandria, VA.
- 1997-1998 Artist in Residence, Sunrise Valley Elementary School, Reston, VA.

RELATED EXPERIENCE

- 2004, 2005 Co-Founder and Instructor, Summer Express Art and Writing Enrichment Program, Gunston Middle School, Arlington, VA.
- 2001 Co-Founder and Instructor, Latino Summer Art Institute, Gunston Middle School, Arlington VA.
- 2000 Visual Arts Instructor, Kenmore Arts and Technology Institute, Kenmore Middle School, Arlington, VA

EXHIBITIONS

- 2005 **Masters of Interdisciplinary Studies Art Exhibition**, Virginia Commonwealth University, Verizon Gallery, Annandale, VA.
- 2003 **Arlington County Public Central Library Monthly Juried Exhibition**, Arlington, VA.
- 2002 **Arlington Public Schools Annual Art Teacher Exhibit**, Arlington, VA.
- 1999 **Creative Clay Studios Annual Holiday Show and Sale**, Alexandria, VA.
- 1998 **Arlington Public Schools Annual Art Teacher Exhibit**, Arlington, VA.
- 1997 **Creative Clay Studios Annual Holiday Show and Sale**, Alexandria, VA.
- 1996 **Creative Clay Studios Annual Holiday Show and Sale**, Alexandria, VA.

GRANTS AWARDED

- 2005 Gear- Up Grant, \$3500, Summer Express Art and Writing Enrichment Program
- 2004 Arlington Community Foundation, \$1000, Summer Express Art and Writing Enrichment Program
- 2004 Gear- Up Grant, \$3000, Summer Express Art and Writing Enrichment Program
- 2003 Arlington Community Foundation, \$1000, Student Permanent Collection
- 2002 Arlington Community Foundation, \$1000, After School Art Club
- 2001 Arlington Community Foundation, \$1000, Summer Latino Art Institute
- 2001 Arlington Forest Foundation, \$5000, Summer Latino Art Institute

COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS

- 2006 Faces of Gunston Multi-Media Show
- 2006 Oprah Claymation Project
- 2005 B.B. King Claymation Project
- 2004 Romaire Bearden Claymation Project
- 2002 Duke Ellington Claymation Project