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THE UN-STILL LIFE

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THE UN-STILL LIFE

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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The Un-Still Life

Contrary to the common definition of still life painting as a grouping of inanimate objects, I want my still life paintings to be full of life.

I have always been intrigued by the numerous approaches and different mediums used by artists for still life arrangements. I want the objects I paint to appear three dimensional. I strive to effectively create the illusion of actual senses: smell, taste, and touch.

To accomplish this, I carefully arrange objects in my composition so color, line, and form work to enhance a rhythmic flow. Contrasting warm and cool colors help add to this flow. My brush strokes turn with the curve of the objects to help create the illusion of depth and motion. This is what I call the Un-Still Life!

Introduction

As a young child, I always enjoyed creating things with drawing being my first love. I became interested in drawing the still life in middle school. To my delight, I learned of a special high school which offered all the academics but also offered concentrated studies in art. After months of preparing a portfolio, which consisted primarily of black and white pencil drawings, I was accepted into the High School of Music and Art in New York City. I received an excellent education at this school and knew an art related career path would follow.

In undergraduate school I enrolled in a variety of art classes but drawing remained my chief interest. I selected still life as my main focus of study. My goal was to create a still life that looked three-dimensional. Since I was only comfortable with working in black and white media, I tried my hand at charcoal and white chalk. Arranging objects to draw according to size, weight, and depth was the first challenge. My next step was to focus on a light source and pose a sense of value for each piece. Each drawing took an extraordinary amount of time as perfection was my goal, and perfection is a difficult concept to achieve.

A New Medium

Eventually I was ready for another challenge: to learn color theory and apply its concepts to my still life ideal. Having previously concentrated on black and white compositions, I needed to take oil painting classes to learn to work with color. After taking several painting classes, much to my dismay, this objective was not achieved. My problems arose when I found that one cannot just rely entirely on instinct to make colors work. As a result of this lack of expertise, only certain areas of my paintings looked realistic. I graduated and acquired a position as an

elementary art teacher, but I was not totally confident teaching art because of the knowledge and experience I was lacking. I also decided to teach myself by studying the masters. When I obtained an art specialist position in Fairfax County Public Schools, I was provided with an intense training program. I persevered until I felt successful.

Challenging Myself to New Heights

I entered the VCU/MIS program to fulfill my teacher accreditation requirements. I did not have much experience in working three dimensionally so I enrolled in a ceramics class that focused on clay. At first I had difficulty forming three-dimensional objects because I hadn't had much training or practice in this particular medium. Slowly, I developed hand building techniques. Pots and platters were my focus in the first class. In the second class, with the same instructor, I heightened my expectations and goals. Thus when objects broke and glazes did not work, I felt very frustrated.

Then I took two classes which focused on figurative sculpture, both taught by Virginia Commonwealth University instructor Charles Flickinger. I felt very successful as I became more familiar with clay and how to make it work for me. Although working with clay can be frustrating at times, I knew that I would become comfortable with it given time. In a summer sculpture class, taught by Virginia Commonwealth University instructor Morgan Kennedy, the curriculum was very open ended. I could create whatever I wanted. I decided to design pieces that I could use in the classroom. I used plaster strips with chicken wire and designed non-objective sculpture. I focused on form, balance, and open and closed spaces (positive and negative areas) as well as contrasting light and dark areas. Basically I became hooked on

sculpture. I also began to understand how I could apply these concepts to painting. I longed for my flat work to seem three-dimensional. I needed to study color theory specifically as opposed to just taking painting classes. With particular color combinations I could create concave and convex areas in my still-life painting, thus creating the desired illusion of solidity. Studying analogous, complementary color schemes, and the use of warm and cool colors was essential for achieving a harmonizing, realistic looking product. I needed to rediscover oil painting!

Artist Influences

As life long learners, we are inspired by many people. As a painter, my primary inspiration began with contemporary German expressionist painter, Gerhard Richter. I attended a large exhibition of his work at the Hirschorn a few years ago. He possesses an extraordinary range of abilities. His art fell into four categories: monochromatic gray paintings, color charts, photo-realistic paintings, and abstraction. He puts so much expression into his work that it stirs a viewer's emotions.

I was mostly intrigued with his photorealistic works. In his painting, *Two Candles*, he takes a very simple subject and through careful observation of color and form captures its beauty. My eyes are drawn to the intensity of the fires' light.

I also identified with his graphic black and white visuals, his study of color and how he applied this knowledge into very realistic images. Like Richter, I approach my work in a very systematic way: establishing composition, black and white sketches rendering form and value, and developing these into color with form. Although he

received very formal training, he is spontaneous and allows his personality and feelings to dictate his canvas.

Another major influence is Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986). The first time I saw her paintings, I was astounded. What captured my attention the most was her use of sharp color contrast and flowing line to work together to enhance a rhythmic flow. When observing her work, I feel as if I can actually smell the flowers and taste the fruits that she paints. Her images dominate the canvas as she abstracts them through simplification and enlargement of their basic shapes. It seems as if they possess a bold and wild energy. Her stark precision of line and color render the objects three-dimensional and full of life.

My first painting was patterned on O'Keeffe's use of color and line. I wanted my colors to be both bold and in harmony with each other. I placed a large bowl on a table and covered it with a flowing dark blue cloth. Inside the bowl, I arranged several red and yellow apples. I then adopted her magnified perspective. I took many photographs of this one arrangement. Once I selected the photograph that appealed to me, I used a magnifying glass to see clearly the variations in color and how the colors changed with my light source. I entitled this painting *Still Life for Georgia* (Appendix I, Number 1) in honor of her and the inspiration she instilled in me.

Her paintings, as well as mine, are the result of intense direct observation and familiarity with a specific subject. She had a vision of what she wanted to paint and followed that vision until it worked for her. I also begin with a vision. I persevere until I captured the essence of my objects. In this regard I also have taken up to a year to complete a painting.

As I have been trying to find my personal style as a painter, I read an excerpt from an article about O’Keeffe’s life which I found inspirational. I learned that in her early career she placed all the art she had created in a room to evaluate it. She then destroyed it all because she thought each work was derivative of someone else’s style. She started over hoping that her new art would reflect only herself. Although I enjoy O’Keeffe’s abstraction of objects, my work is grounded in realism. However, the strength of color and rhythmic lines that O’Keeffe used are an element I have adopted in my work.

In conclusion, I am comfortable with my artistic growth. It bears repeating: I paint objects naturalistically focusing on color, line and form. My love of these elements was an influence from O’Keeffe, but my subject matter and composition is evolving. I’ve enjoyed using O’Keeffe as an artistic reference throughout my creative development, but believe I have developed my own personal style.

My Changing Aesthetics

I began to approach my second painting as if it were my first. This painting I entitled *Blue Vase* (Appendix I, Number 2) as the fruits and bowl surround the ever present vase. I tried to achieve the photo-realism I had been learning from Richter. I carefully arranged the subject according to the principles of design, focusing intensely on my color choices. Then, taking photographs of the objects from many points of view with an emphasis on light, I chose the arrangement that made the biggest impression on me. When I painted, I took the colors directly from the tubes. I mixed colors on the canvas. In the past I mixed them so much that each color lost its identity. They were flat!

Now the colors were intense, just what I always wanted to achieve. As my art processes were evolving, it was time for an additional approach. At this point I learned about glazing from two of my Virginia Commonwealth University professors, Kurt Godwin and John Figura.

Glazing is a technique in which paint is thinned with a medium. When I painted in acrylic I laid a dark glaze over my canvas and let it dry completely. When the paint was dry, I painted light and bright colors on the areas that I wanted to highlight. This produced a more three-dimensional effect. When I painted in oils, I mixed linseed oil, varnish, and turpentine and applied this mixture to oil paint before applying it to my canvas. This helped me achieve the depth I needed. After six months I polished each piece with varnish. The color in each piece became fully illuminated. My work started to blossom. In other words my “flowers were starting to bloom!”

In my next paintings, entitled *Galaxy* (Appendix I, Number 3) and *Flow* (Appendix I, Number 4), I continued to focus on photo-realism. These paintings were the largest I painted. In *Galaxy* I arranged a variety of fruit and a large vase so the objects balanced in size and color just as I did in the previous paintings. In this painting I wanted to capture the reflection of the objects on the shiny table on which they were laying. I placed a thin glaze over the table and faintly added the forms of the objects in the glaze with paint. I was pleased with the results. In *Flow*, I arranged candles in brass holders and grapes on flowing blue cloth. I experimented in painting metals. I studied paintings containing metal objects and practiced until I painted them realistically. I was thrilled with my continuing growth as a painter.

In *Light* (Appendix I, Number 5) I wanted to increase the direct light source on the objects I was painting so the contrast between the light and dark objects intensified. I draped a bright white cloth on a table and raised the cloth on the wall behind the table. I placed three bottles on this table. To accentuate the white cloth, I added a quick drying extender gel, Resengel, to the white oil paint to make the color exceptionally strong. As a result, the painting looked more three dimensional. The finished product was extremely successful.

Developing My Personal Style

In my paintings which followed, I found myself moving away from photo-realism and more into how the painting makes me feel. I still emphasized space, color, and form but because of times in which I had difficulty capturing the objects realistically, according to my definition at the time, I started pushing myself to exceed my normal comfort level.

In one painting, which I entitled *Red on Oval* (Appendix I, Number 6), I arranged three tomatoes on a white plate with an intense dark green background. I painted this image from a photograph but I was growing intensely frustrated because I did not think I was capturing its photographic beauty. I worked on this painting for months until I decided to shift my thought and paint how I felt about the subject. I wanted to be able to feel the tomatoes. I started to rely on my instincts and the painterly curve of my lines to capture their essence. I needed to grow away from my first attempts to become more comfortable with the medium and myself as a painter. I know that this was a turning

point for me; I became more comfortable with my instincts, style, and the knowledge of how I worked with the subject and medium.

In the paintings that followed, *Tumble* (Appendix I, Number 7), *Slice* (Appendix I, Number 8), and *Composition* (Appendix I, Number 9), I relied on my instinct, brush strokes, and feelings about the subject to continue to be comfortable with my self expression. It has been very gratifying for me to work through these processes.

Although I am still grounded in realism, I have developed a new definition of realism. This new definition pushed me to achieve what I keep in my artist statement: I want to be able to smell, feel, and almost taste the fruit. I needed to release my self placed boundaries and become spontaneous in my work. I am pleased with my latest works as I anticipate my future growth.

Conclusion

In completing the MIS program I look back and realize that I have truly grown as an artist. I feel a sense of solace with my approach to creating and teaching. As I look back to the series of paintings I created in my undergraduate studies, although I was comfortable with my progress at that time, I now realize I still had much to learn. In addition to painting and sculpture, whether in clay or other media, my research has helped me grow as an artist and teacher. As I teach a subject and demonstrate how to use the medium, I know that the children are comfortable and excited about learning. I bring examples to work and talk about my approaches, successes, and failures. They are very receptive to what they see and how I approach each piece. The instructors that directed

me at Virginia Commonwealth University gave me the knowledge that helped to accomplish my goals. The impromptu discussions held during my classes about individual works and teaching classes have given me a new direction for both teaching art and learning about art.

I have always taught in schools with a lower socio-economic income bracket with the students being very challenging in many ways. I discovered that using a tri-modal approach has always been the best way to reinforce creativity and thinking. A tri-modal approach uses a combination of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic methods of grasping concepts. By combining these methods with my MIS program training, I have risen to new heights as a teacher. I have always been quite successful as an arts educator, but now I know that I have also begun to realize my potential as an artist.

Future Endeavors

Now I plan to continue my studies in painting but gladly accept two challenges which are new to my comfort level. I want to abstract still life. I feel that I am ready to begin a new artistic endeavor. Gerhard Richter and Georgia O'Keeffe inspired me to remove my inner boundaries and to express freely thoughts and feelings in my art work.

My next quest is to write and illustrate books for elementary aged children. I am networking with colleagues as to how to approach this challenge. In addition to being an elementary art instructor, I am also an elementary education teacher. I taught children and trained teachers for over twenty years. I have always combined classroom curriculum with art skills and studies. I know that this creates solid programs.

Illustrations will always enhance text. Ask any Caldecott award winner of a well accepted and successful story. All well-created art will take its viewers to a higher plane!

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Appendix

Slide List

1. *Still-Life for Georgia*, oil on canvas, 20" x 24", 2002.
2. *Blue Vase*, oil on canvas, 20" x 24", 2002.
3. *Galaxy*, oil on canvas, 24" x 36, 2003.
4. *Flow*, oil on canvas, 24" x 36", 2003.
5. *Light*, oil on canvas, 16" x 20", 2004.
6. *Red on Oval*, oil on canvas, 20" x 24", 2005.
7. *Tumble*, oil on canvas, 24" x 30, 2005.
8. *Slice*, oil on canvas, 18" x 24", 2005.
9. *Composition in White and Blue*, oil on canvas, 24" x 30", 2005.

Joyce Beiermann



EDUCATION:

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TEACHING EXPERIENCE:

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- 1999-2003 Art Teacher, Westlawn Elementary, Fairfax County Public Schools,
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PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:

- 1986-Present National Education Association
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EXHIBITIONS:

- 2005 *The Un-Still Life*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis Exhibition,
Verizon Gallery, Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale, VA