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Contexture

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Contexture

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 Statement

As I work with mixed media and computer technology, I am reminded at how evolved our lives and society have become in spite of how incredibly primal our individual needs remain. I began addressing those needs with drawing and painting; now, I find myself flung into a digital world of hard drives and pixels.

Working with electronic imagery satisfies my immediate need to explore many options simultaneously but at the same time there is a detachment, a distance if you will, between me and my work. Developing a tactile-rich surface for a digital image by applying paint, wax, and surface marks creates a physical, immediate relationship with the work. The mix of a digital click with the mark of a physical stroke is a unifying experience for me.

Working through these pieces, I explore my origins. In the calm, I listen. Applying, removing, mixing, and editing the present and past, the complex and simple, I experiment until I hear agreement on some level. Each aspect utilizes the other.

Contexture

Introduction

As a freshman in college, I was given opportunities to explore different discipline areas in the arts and found myself interested in communication arts and design (CDE). My organizational skills, desire for detailed craftsmanship, and creative problem solving abilities were a good fit for this program of study.

Once graduated, I was hired as a graphic designer and worked on local, national, and international projects. The challenges included taking pieces of information and visual elements to create a product communicating the desired message. I loved the meticulous demands of the prepress process. It was exciting to see multimillion dollar equipment set up according to my project specifications to create the final glossy and crisply folded product. Soon thereafter, Apple computers, Aldus, and Adobe software developed desktop publishing systems that drastically reduced my manual prepress production time. With this shift, the tactile phase of my work was gone and with it the ability to physically manipulate the intellectual aspects of my work.

After years in the digital world of corporate visual communications, I started teaching the art of graphic design. I love creating new projects and sharing the process with students but the need to be physically connected with my own art continued to be compromised while in front of a computer screen. During the transition from the corporate world to teaching high school, I was given opportunities to be involved with fine arts as an instructor and as a student. I was able to revisit my roots in drawing,

painting, and art history. A sense of pursuing art for me was revived. I desired to incorporate aspects from phases of my life into my work and I was finding great difficulty in doing so. The question that arose was *Where to start? What medium? What subject matter? What purpose?* Enrolling in Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) program was the first step in my search for answers.

The format of the MIS graduate program gave me the opportunity to revisit and explore fine art materials and develop a method in which to incorporate my graphic art interests in a fine arts application. This new combination enabled me to include my need to be physically in contact with the subject matter I prefer.

Early Influences

Over the years, I studied many artists and their work. I had great respect for the modern, contemporary, and abstract artists' ability to break up and activate space in a nonrepresentational way. For instance, the Suprematist Kasmir Malevich (1878-1935), who focused on form and color, was one of the first artists I remember studying in design school. Malevich's *White on White* paintings of 1918 were the first abstract works with which I connected. The subtlety of space and form without the distraction of saturated color or other graphic elements expressed abstract painting in a pictorial language I could comprehend. The use of quiet form moves the viewer around the space simply, without distraction.

Then, Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) started to make more sense to me too. His

abstractions focused on line, color, and asymmetrical balance. Primary colors, black, and white were used in varying amounts and placement to gain visual balance. The color expressed its own characteristics in the space it occupied rather than being used to represent something else.

Another significant artist for me was Jasper Johns (1930-). His use of graphic subject matter coupled with contrasting colors and tone-on-tone approaches expanded my focus beyond form and pictorial space. I found myself now considering, examining, and obsessing over texture, layers, and history of surface. The *White Flag* (1955) and *Green Target* (1955) exemplify John's focus on surface. The transparent surface at first glance appears tone-on-tone however the newsprint layers beneath include headlines, body copy, photos, and advertisements placed at various angles and overlaps. In his later work, these typographic elements stepped out from the newsprint layers beneath the surface, as in the *False Start* series (1959). These large works are enjoyed from a distance, yet with the complexity of surface, the viewer is invited closer for a more intimate view.

Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008), a contemporary of Jasper Johns, incorporated the everyday object into his work. Rauschenberg illustrates the potential for anything to be worthy of our attention if given the proper presentation. *Automobile Tire Print* (1951) is an example of an unnoticed mark in our environment made noteworthy. In *Heroes/Sheroes* (1991), images are depicted in negative form with vigorously applied brush strokes, which create a sense of movement and cohesiveness between the multiple collaged images. Rauschenberg has an acute awareness of image and ground. His choices of materials and process reinforce what is expressed.

In both Malevich and Mondrian's paintings I saw a commonality with the fundamentals of graphic design. As a designer, I worked with images and type where the visual weight and balance were controlled by style, weight, size, kerning, and leading. Breaking down the elements of these letterforms runs parallel with the concepts of abstract art where minimal form and the weight of color become the focus and subject matter of the work. The creative and physical processes seen in both Johns' and Rauschenberg's work express and chronicle the process which created the pieces. Capturing these experiences on the surface was something I had been seeking for my own work.

Getting Started

After studying and being inspired by these particular artists, I started taking studio classes to put some of their techniques and my hands back into the art process. My first experience was working with clay. The more physical the process, the more satisfied I became. I carved into and through the surfaces creating positive and negative shapes. I found my way back to a physical interaction with materials in clay but it was not to be my media of choice.

Next, I experimented with transfer techniques. I had created digital art in graphic design and printing prepress applications but thought of it as a method for commercial production only. Now, I learned to see the potential of digital methods in a fine arts world, expressing personal thoughts and inviting physical interaction with the media and imagery. Unlike the commercial setting, where machines finished my designs by the

thousands, I was creating a single finished piece by hand and making decisions along the way that produced unexpected results. I began to see the transfer as a part of the process and part of the work, not just a means to the final product. I began to believe that working and manipulating the surface and showing the history of that process brings the work into being.

Next, I worked in mixed media. My first explorations focused on becoming acquainted with different materials and methods, such as the tactile experience of handling the materials and expanding my techniques. While these experiences were helping me develop skills in various materials and techniques, I was not developing my subject matter to my satisfaction. I stepped back and decided to start over conceptually. I thought long and hard about what I have known and loved for so many years. I decided to try my new methods with my old loves. In so doing, my work took a turn for the better.

The New Combination

I decided to focus on typography as object and subject matter. I had studied letterforms and worked with them extensively in a commercial setting for twenty years. I now saw an opportunity to take something I had worked with professionally and utilize it in my own work. The majority of the forms in my compositions are abstractions from typographic elements. These abstractions attempt to break up the space, directing and redirecting the eye through the composition and surface. Unlike graphic arts and commercial printing, where accuracy and consistency of final product is critical, I found great satisfaction in leaving evidence of the work process. The decisions I made were

captured and there for observation and reflection. Finally, an opportunity had arisen for me to merge my design experiences with my need to be physically interactive with the materials in my work.

From this point forward, I focused on capturing typographic forms in multilayered, complex surfaces. Gesso, oils, and wax were the physical materials I used. I worked with and without the computer to create typographic forms. I created digital paragraphs and lines of type to incorporate in the grounds of my surfaces. I layered or transferred these printed pages on top and between layers of gesso and wax. Some would be applied in strips, others as entire sheets of paper. While wet, I sometimes removed parts of the paper revealing areas of the type that had transferred. Other times, I would apply additional layers of gesso or wax to obscure some areas. Scratching or scraping into areas was also an option if I did not like the dominance of an element in the composition. When the layer was dry, I might add additional printouts or transfers, gesso, wax, or oil paints. Depending on the desired effect, I would rub or scrape away areas that were painted to reveal the underlying layers or texture created by the mixing of various media. Heat might also be used to merge and meld the layers more, creating a more solid, amalgamated surface.

Worn (Appendix, 1) is a combination of digital art with traditional art materials. I built the original surface with layers of gesso applied with large brush and extra wide palette knife. Once dry, I applied multiple prints and transfers of blue-black rows of type by overlapping them, then partially removing them. Additional strips and areas of other digital type, as seen in red, were applied and manipulated. Some of the areas are opaque

while others are transparent. I used gesso in various consistencies to add surface modulations for additional interest. Wax sealed the layers and created a more pliable surface on which to carve. I used heat to reduce the visible brush strokes. A “W” inspired the form carved in the surface. I mixed blue-black oil paint and applied it to the surface, covering all areas and working into all the surface crevices and pits. Once tacky, the paint was partially removed in areas revealing the carved lines of the “W” and surface imperfections.

Continuing to experiment with materials, in *Compose* (Appendix, 2) I created a surface by the same process of gesso layers. Paint and digital printouts and transfers are layered into the surface. The overall shape of the digital letters formed an “e”. Many of the overlapping letters were lost in the heat transfer process. I worked ruled notebook paper into the hot surface. Using notebook paper in this manner works well in conveying an overall concept of the letterform as the basis of written ideas.

Graffiti style text inspired a small 8” x 8” series. In *Yellow Pass* (Appendix, 3), the composition was inspired by a letter in some graffiti I saw on a passing railroad car. The colors are saturated and multilayered. The contrast and vibrancy of form and color expresses the passionate energy associated with graffiti artists and the creation of their work. Another piece, *Weathered Gray* (Appendix, 4), focuses on the surface textures and weathering of the paint on the surface. The impact of the industrial environment may alter the graffiti’s appearance, but the impact of its message, “I was here”, as it moves from city to city does not change.

The larger 16” x 16” piece *Expend* (Appendix, 5) was inspired by an old-style

typeface (Times Roman or Garamond) letterform “e”. I worked it into a highly developed textural surface. Layers of newsprint lie beneath wax and oil paint. Into the waxed surface, I carved an abstracted letterform. Then, I added additional layers of colored wax and used heat in limited areas to enhance the texture of the surface. An additional application of oil paint was worked into the surface. Some areas of this oil layer are rubbed away revealing layers, texture, process, and form. The final product captured many of the experiences I longed for in my work. Design, process, materials, and tactile experiences came together for me in this piece.

My work expanded to include multiple vantage points of the subject matter. *Vacant Palm* (Appendix, 6) is a 24” x 24” piece that includes multiple textual images from different perspectives of a motel sign. The original sign was in good repair and still being used today. Its message has not changed over the decades, “vacancy”, *come stay with us*. I electronically assembled several images together creating a single square composition. Using various digital techniques, I altered the color from its original red and white to a vibrant and glowing yellow-green with deep violet accents. Altering the original colors enabled me to express the energy of electricity illuminating the neon sign’s message and capturing the glow of neon that can only be appreciated at night. After I transferred the images, I decided to work more with oil paint and less with wax. By doing so I was able to achieve the brighter color range I desired for this piece.

Conversely, *Enter Red* (Appendix, 7) was inspired by an abandoned neon sign. Using multiple images, I chose to keep the colors accurate to what I saw in the originals. The colors were muted with less contrast. I applied these images to a surface prepared

with layers of gesso. I worked with wax and oil paint with less precise, more physical strokes to capture the worn, neglected, textural surfaces and structure. Sadly, while I was working on this piece, what remained of this sign that had been a fixture on US Route 1 for decades was bulldozed as the property was offered for sale.

I see a shift in society to a more temporary digital use of letterforms and language. While completing this piece, I realized I want to capture some of the relics of the past as they pass on railroad cars or are torn away from our landscapes. That past could span days or decades. As much as I embrace technology and all it has to offer, I still have a need to make a primitive mark on a physical surface.

Moving Forward

For years I floundered around with various types of self expression, all of which fell short of what I was seeking. Incrementally, the pieces started to come together for me during this graduate program as I started to experiment and mix my media and graphic experiences together.

It would be easy to simply credit the artists mentioned earlier as my source of inspiration, but it would be a gross oversight if I did not credit the faculty and staff involved in this program too. If it were not for this group of artists and educators, I don't know if I would have made the strides I have on my own. The dedication and encouragement I have experienced are what kept me moving forward whenever I encountered a creative block.

I am excited about the discoveries I made during my experience in the MIS

program at Virginia Commonwealth University. I have found materials and processes with which I adequately capture my experience and the creative process. I am addressing that tactile need to be physically involved in my art which was lacking for so long. The years I have spent in the commercial arena are being utilized in ways I would have not imaged in the area of fine arts. For the first time, in a long time, my physical and creative aspects are congruent and working toward a common goal.

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Figure 1. *Worn*, digital and mixed media, 16" x 16", 2008.



Figure 2. *Compose*, digital and mixed media, 16" x 16", 2008.



Figure 3. *Yellow Pass*, mixed media, 8" x 8", 2008.



Figure 4. *Weathered Gray*, mixed media, 8" x 8", 2008.



Figure 5. *Expend*, mixed media, 16" x 16", 2008.



Figure 6. *Vacant Palm*, digital and mixed media, 24" x 24", 2009.



Figure 7. *Enter Red*, digital and mixed media, 24" x 24", 2009.

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