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Layers

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Layers

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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Artist Statement

In my paintings and mixed media works, I incorporate rough textures and vibrant, high contrast colors. I find beauty and intrigue in the gnarled roots of a tree; the crumbling plaster on a wall; and the wrinkled, roughened hands of my grandmother. To explore these types of surfaces, the materials are distorted by twisting, ripping, and pulling the pieces apart. For instance, canvas is layered and stitched together in an uneven manner with knots and lumps added to the distressed surface. I view these distorted, strained surfaces as different forces in my life that push or pull me in varied directions. This metaphor helps me to express myself through formal elements.

I approach my compositions gesturally and intuitively by letting them evolve during my process. As a compositional device, I sometimes use a gridded infrastructure or multi-piece presentation. This underlying framework allows me to organize my presentation as I apply marks and manipulate surfaces. I use complementary color palettes that are bright and vibrant. These palettes have a virile quality that emanates a strong sense of purpose and commands attention from the viewer.

Layers

Introduction

I have always created art. At the age of three, I drew and colored little doodles on scraps of paper and hoarded them in my pockets. Considering that I was her first child, my mother assumed that all children did the same. She was surprised when my Montessori school teacher told her that I was talented; and rather skeptical when said teacher pulled out a stack of my bright little squiggles as evidence. Time went on, and so did the sketches. They seemed to expand exponentially. No paper was safe from me in my childhood home. After a different teacher at a different school parroted the advice of the first, my parents enrolled me in weekly art lessons. Combine that with art classes at school and my continuing obsession, and making art became an integral part of my identity.

During middle school and high school, I excelled in the field and won a healthy stash of recognitions and awards from my work. Everyone knew me as the *art girl*, even if they didn't really know me at all. You would think that a future in the arts would have been a given, considering the ubiquitous nature of it in my life. However, I would take a detour away from my passion as I chose a direction in college. My father remembers me coming home from a lecture about art careers looking dejected. The speaker was a commercial artist who had me convinced that majoring in fine art would result in poverty. His comments about eating cat food while living in a windowless basement may have been meant in jest but they functioned as a very effective roadblock to my seventeen-year-old sensibilities.

After that, art was relegated to a very small corner of my life. After earning an undergraduate degree in Fashion Merchandising, I worked long hours as a retail store manager. I

let the restrictions of my job and the pressures of everyday life eclipse my chances for new creation. I did not comprehend how far I had strayed until I gave birth to my son. After sitting over my son's crib for several naptimes, I drew a sensitive portrait of him sleeping amid the chaos of his blankets. The reactions of my family members were telling. My mother admired my work, and expressed relief that I hadn't lost my talent. My in-laws requested a copy, after expressing great surprise that I had the ability to draw an accurate likeness of my son.

I decided to make a career change. My re-awakened longing for artistic pursuits was palpable, and I wanted a schedule that gave me more time with my child. After being accepted into the Department of Art Education at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), I became certified to teach art from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Then, I accepted a job teaching middle school art. During the school year, my art making was limited to creating lesson examples for my students. In the summertime I produced art of my own. When it came time to renew my teaching certification, I took a painting class in VCU's Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program. It was exciting to be pushed creatively. This motivated me to enroll in the MIS-IAR degree program. I chose painting and craft studies as my concentrations. I never looked back.

Aesthetics

My paintings focus on rough, twisted surfaces that I find in everyday observances. They are a part of the landscape of my life, and are commonly regarded as blemishes to be corrected. In contemporary Western culture, perfection is worshiped and flaws are abhorred. We use Photoshop to edit flaws out of our pictures. We inject our wrinkles with Botox to extinguish them. We starve ourselves and spend countless hours in the gym to achieve an unrealistic

standard of beauty. We painstakingly construct our Facebook profiles to project an idealized and unrealistic image of our lives to the world. A typical mainstream assumption is that everything must be smooth and perfect. I disagree. Where some find fault, I find beauty. I am intrigued by the rusted shed roof, paint peeling from rotten wood, and vines twisting and bulging around a tree. I bring these types of surfaces to the foreground and make them the subject of my work. I twist, layer, and rip my canvas. I wad it up and unevenly stitch and bunch it. These things combine to reflect highly-texturized surfaces that have meaning and inspire me. When I juxtapose these surfaces with brilliant, high contrast hues of acrylic paint, I want them to pulse with life. The pairing of the two realizes my vision of creating something new and unexpected. I focus on the beauty of imperfection, with color that intensifies that effect. I have chosen to leave all my pieces untitled. I want the viewer to draw their own conclusions and have a pure reaction to my work.

Influences

My inspirations came to me in an unexpected way. One day on a walk, I became captivated by the roots of trees. They were relegated to tiny dirt patches between the sidewalk and the curb, and were exploding out of their restraints with vigor. The roots bulged and tangled. They were piling on top of themselves and creating a plethora of texture. They seemed to ooze onto the pavement like bread dough. I could not get enough. I shot through two rolls of film, relishing their visual depth and value. This was the starting point for my focus on physical texture in my work.

Every time I go to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, I visit Lee Bontecou's (1931-) *Untitled (No. 25)* (1960). She is known for her relief sculptures of irregular strips of fabric

stretched over a frame, with a deep void in the center of each piece. They hang on the wall like paintings, and yet aggressively project out from the wall in three dimensions. I adore her work. I realized that there are a couple obvious parallels between my work and hers. Bontecou includes both physical depth and the illusion of depth in her work. Her central voids are backed with black velvet on the inside, to enhance the illusion of depth. When you attempt to look inside, you cannot tell where the void is at its deepest point. It looks endless. I also incorporate both physical and implied depth in my work. The twisting, bunching, and overlapping of my canvas pieces creates reliefs that have physical depth. As I paint the surface, I add shades in the deepest areas, and tints in the shallowest ones. I also add folds and shadows on flat surfaces, to create a *trompe l'oeil* effect. The real depth and the illusion of depth combine to fool the eye. In constructing her surfaces, Bontecou uses a mishmash of uneven, irregular sized canvas or leather strips, and stitches them together using wire. I also use assorted uneven canvas pieces, but I stitch them together with thread. Thread has personal significance to me. I learned to sew when I was very young, and it is part of my personal identity and a natural extension of myself. In regards to color our directions diverge. Bontecou's work is monochromatic and she uses deep earth tones. In contrast, my color choices consist of a bright, vivid palette.

In researching Bontecou's work from the late 1950s through the early 1960s, I found a group of other artists' work that I related to. These artists were involved in the show *Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void 1949-1962* (The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago). It featured artists that altered the traditionally painted two-dimensional canvas by cutting, burning, or attaching objects to it. Sand, plaster, twine, metal, and paper were all twisted and bent in an exhaustive array. The layering in *Ponte S. Felice* (1958), by Italian artist Salvatore Scarpitta (1919-2007), immediately captured my attention. Scarpitta obsessively overlapped and wound

bandages around and around his canvas, creating dynamic lines. When the exhibit curator, Paul Schimmel, describes Scarpitta's technique as "geometric patterns created by the interweaving of the strips ripple with a poetic sensuousness," (Schimmel, 201) I associate that with the gridded infrastructures that I create. As I pull, twist, and manipulate my raw canvas, Scarpitta's description of his own studio process springs to mind. He said, "I bandaged them, wrapped them, pulled them in different directions, and found that even though I was getting into something that is called tridimensional, it was offering me a greater input..." (Schimmel, 200) The description of the physicality of his process calls to mind my own work building compositions. I strive to make the tension of the surface palpable. The physical process of stretching and pulling to create that surface adds significance to my work.

Another artist from this exhibition that I had a strong reaction to was Alberto Burri (1915-1955). His piece, *Sacco e verde (1956)*, was constructed from ripped and tattered burlap sacks. They were stitched together and painted in a warm, earth-toned palette. In addition to the rough hewn, layered texture, there is a conceptual layer that helps me to respond to his work. He worked as a doctor in World War II and he reflected the damage that he encountered in his art. Much like him, I also have inserted metaphors concerning personal painful struggles in my work. My son's difficult battle with ulcerative colitis was my battlefield that I reflected on the canvas.

The texture and battered appearance of *Ohne Titel (Untitled)* (1963) by Otto Muehl (1925-2013) also appealed to my aesthetic. The way he used sand, plaster, nylon stockings, and emulsion to build up the surface made it appear organic and produced exciting texture. He also cut holes in his canvas and used string to bind up areas and create an uneven, bulging surface. Like Muehl, I use thread in my work and use it to not only bind together but to bunch and create uneven surfaces. I also frequently add holes, and stretch my thread across the surface of my

canvas in a crosshatched web. He shared my view that these flawed surfaces are full of allure, as evidenced in his quote: “I destroy the surface, its glorious whiteness, and at the same time stroke the old order, the world. I drive it towards its ruin, although you might just as well say towards its perfection.” (Schimmel, 202) Although these pieces are inspirational in their texture and technique, where I part from these artists is color. Scarpitta, Burri, and Meuhl all used an earth-toned monochromic palette, similar to Bontecou’s.

While I found texture revelations everywhere, color was a little more of a conundrum. These mid-twentieth-century artists did not use a colorful palette. Their work was a response to the destruction and chaos of World War II. Their somber palette reflects that. I was coming from a different place. Mine was not a somber attitude of mournful contemplation. I wanted my work to embody a feeling of bold celebration. Therefore, I developed a personal palette of bright colors, such as high-keyed complementaries of blue and orange. When I looked at the dynamic texture that I had created, it made me think of my journey as both an artist and an individual. I started out painting pretty pictures that were realistically rendered and technically accurate. They were quiet and unobtrusive. I began young adulthood as a meek, polite girl that would defer to others and quietly hope that things would work out the way she wished. That was no longer me. As I grew as an artist, my growth as a person also developed. I wanted my color choices to be full of strength and energy. I wanted them to capture the viewer’s attention and keep them engrossed. I wanted the color to intensify the impact of the surface, and reflect the emerging strength of my character. I wanted to use color as a symbolic and expressive tool.

As I developed my color choices, I happened to see an image of a remarkable tree called the *arbus mensii*, or strawberry tree. It was like nothing I’d ever seen. A bright violet and red-orange top layer of bark was flaking away like birch bark. It revealed an almost fluorescent

yellow-green underneath. These acidic, high contrast colors were the natural colors of the tree. These split complementary colors created a powerful and dynamic visual impact. It immediately grabbed my attention and held it. I found that this color system would allow me multiple ways to bring my compositions to life and intensify their impact.

Works on Canvas

My process for creating my paintings and mixed media works begins with a highly textured painting surface. I do not pre-plan or sketch out my work ahead of time. Instead, I work intuitively with the media and surface. The first step is to pick the size. I always choose a stretcher that is deeper than the traditional 1". I want my paintings to be considered objects and not just flat picture planes. I want attention to be paid to the surface as well as the edges. I use a wide variety of sizes and experiment with single and multi-panel paintings.

The next part of my process is applying overlapping layers of canvas pieces to a stretched canvas. To do this, I tear or roughly cut the raw canvas in an assortment of shapes and sizes. I staple on the back and stitch on the front. Then, I twist, pull, and weave the frayed pieces together. I bunch and fold the canvas, adding loose threads that add tension and wrinkle the canvas. Sometimes, I add additional stitching for visual interest.

When I developed my painting, *Untitled #2* (Appendix, 1), I thought of my son's painful struggle with ulcerative colitis. I unexpectedly hit a creative wall when working on this piece. My studio process usually flows smoothly and gesturally. However, this was not the case this time. This was a period of time in which my very sick teen-aged son was in the hospital for six months. He was in constant pain and a resolution was not forthcoming. He finally endured surgery that, although it had complications, resolved his issues and rendered him healthy. My

son was scarred and battered and, like Burri's motives, I wanted to address this physical suffering in my work.

The whole time my son was sick, I aggressively cut apart my piece. I ripped it off the stretcher and began again. I worked it and re-worked it and was rewarded with frustration. As soon as he was well, it came together beautifully and easily, as if my former clarity was restored. The twisting and stretching went to a higher level this time. The canvas was interwoven in a much more strained and tortured way. I felt that the perforated and swollen large intestine removed from my son's belly was reflected on my canvas.

Untitled Pentptych (Appendix, 2) was my first foray into utilizing a multi-piece presentation. It started out as a triptych and kept growing, until I resolved it at five panels. Many compositional and coloristic elements continue between one panel and the other, seamlessly. Other components end abruptly, without connecting to the next. This was a purposeful decision that I felt added interest to the composition. Next, when dealing with coloration, I painted the ground, or underlayer, yellow. I shifted the values of yellow to respond to the value of blue on the textural layers. For example, if the blue was a dark shade, the yellow became a tint. If the blue was a light tint, then I darkened the yellow's hue. This helped create the illusion of being three-dimensional. I also created the illusion of three-dimension in the top layers of my work. I painted shades in the creases, but I also created false shadows by employing *trompe l'œil* techniques. I wanted my work to give the viewer illusionistic schisms to engage them as they approached it and examined it closer. Creating three-dimensional effects helps me to achieve that.

Untitled #3 (Appendix, 3) is a work that was inspired by the unusually colored bark of the strawberry tree. Instead of the complementary color schemes of my past works, this time I

used the three secondary colors in a triadic color scheme. Triadic color schemes tend to be bright and vibrant. This visual effect is in keeping with the intensity and strength that I value in my work, and felt like a perfect next choice. The violet and orange dominate the painting, while the green falls back in the secondary role of the accent color. I feel that my dynamic color choices help to reveal the beauty of the imperfect surface. It presents the texture and trauma of the surface in an unexpected manner, so the viewer can see surfaces in a new way.

This was the largest of all my works, at 48”x 42”x 2.5”. The structure of this piece relies heavily on diagonal lines. Whether they are seen in the bunching and pulling of canvas folds, or smooth, clean torn strips that span the surface, contrasting diagonals are a major element. The juxtaposition of long smooth pieces with the rougher, textural areas is meant to create tension and contrast. In this piece, I used lines of thread to help hold the composition together visually. I painted these lines with a very strong contrasting color to the canvas it traveled across. This gave the thread the ability to hold a weightier symbolic and visual role in the work.

Works on Paper

As I worked on canvas, I realized that I could create dramatic surface textures with different media. My works on paper begin with corrugated cardboard. I peel and rip off parts of the top layer of brown linerboard, to reveal sections of the fluted corrugated sheet beneath. I tear off this top layer with an awareness of the compositions that I am creating. My goal is to contrast the texture of the revealed corrugation with the smooth surfaces that remain intact. This subtractive method of removing surface elements replaces the additive method that I used while creating my works on canvas. After tearing, I coat this surface with many layers of gesso before adding color. My aim is to give the surface a thick, wax-like quality that will elevate it beyond

the mere cardboard.

The first piece that I created in this manner was *Untitled #3* (Appendix, 4). I chose a cadmium orange color scheme. Very dark shades were painted in the corrugated crevices. I then began with a medium cadmium orange on the surface of the linerboard. I built layers on top with tints of cadmium orange, tinting each layer a little lighter than the previous one. While I was satisfied with the texture of the surface, I felt I needed to abandon monochrome in favor of the complementary and triadic color schemes that I used in my canvas works. I missed the contrast that these color schemes bring. Something seemed lacking.

In *Untitled #4* (Appendix, 5), I chose a yellow and blue color scheme. The juxtaposition of two highly contrasting colors brought back the vibrancy and energy that I was missing. In addition to reverting to highly-keyed color, I also wanted to try a different format. Therefore, I glued two sets of surfaces back to back, and added modeling paste to the edges. I wanted these surfaces to appear to be one thick piece, with color and texture on both sides. I decided to make these boards into covers of a hand bound book. I deckled the edges of the paper pages to add another rough texture. I was excited to see this surface as part of a functional object, and was very confident about my switch back to a complementary color scheme.

At this point, I continued to explore different ways to feature the surface. For *Untitled #5* (Appendix, 6 and 7), I developed a multi-piece cardboard presentation and added textured layers of paper. I used both complementary and triadic color schemes that I had used in earlier work, and integrated them in a pentaptych that is arranged vertically from smallest to largest. Torn and curled poster board was layered to create organically shaped frames for each cardboard square. After ripping, bending, and layering the poster board, I glued it together and painted it with many coats of gesso. Then, I painted them in titanium white and finished with a coat of matte medium.

I centered each cardboard under strong lighting to create strong cast shadow that added visual elements and enhanced the dimensionality.

The progression of my work into a mature voice has been a very uplifting experience. I was able to explore and expand my ideas about color and texture in new ways. I will continue to push myself to develop new techniques and processes to feature my view of the world.

Conclusion

The MIS-IAR Program has greatly affected my work as an artist. When I was first accepted into the Program, my main goal was to get my master's degree. I wanted the bump in pay that it would give me, after several years of no raises for teachers in the state budget. Most of the art that I was creating was limited to demonstration models for lessons to teach in my classroom. When I did make my own art, I would jump around between different subject matters, themes, and media. Nothing could hold my interest for very long. I didn't realize how invigorating the studio environment would be. Making art alongside of so many other artists generated creative energy in me. I was able to find my voice and develop a large body of work in a style all my own. With the help of the Program and the mentors that I found there, I realized that I wanted to be more than an art teacher that occasionally dabbles in the studio. I wanted to be a teaching artist who shows her work. I joined a gallery and began exhibiting my work. My thesis show was my first solo show, and I plan for it to be only the first of many. I am thankful for the experiences and growth that I've encountered within the Program. I also feel that these experiences have energized my work in the classroom. I have incorporated new techniques and am filled with renewed vigor in my teaching. I look forward to where this is going to take me as I continue on this path.

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Appendix

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Figure 1. *Untitled #2*, acrylic, canvas, thread, 30"x 30" x 1 3/4", 2011.

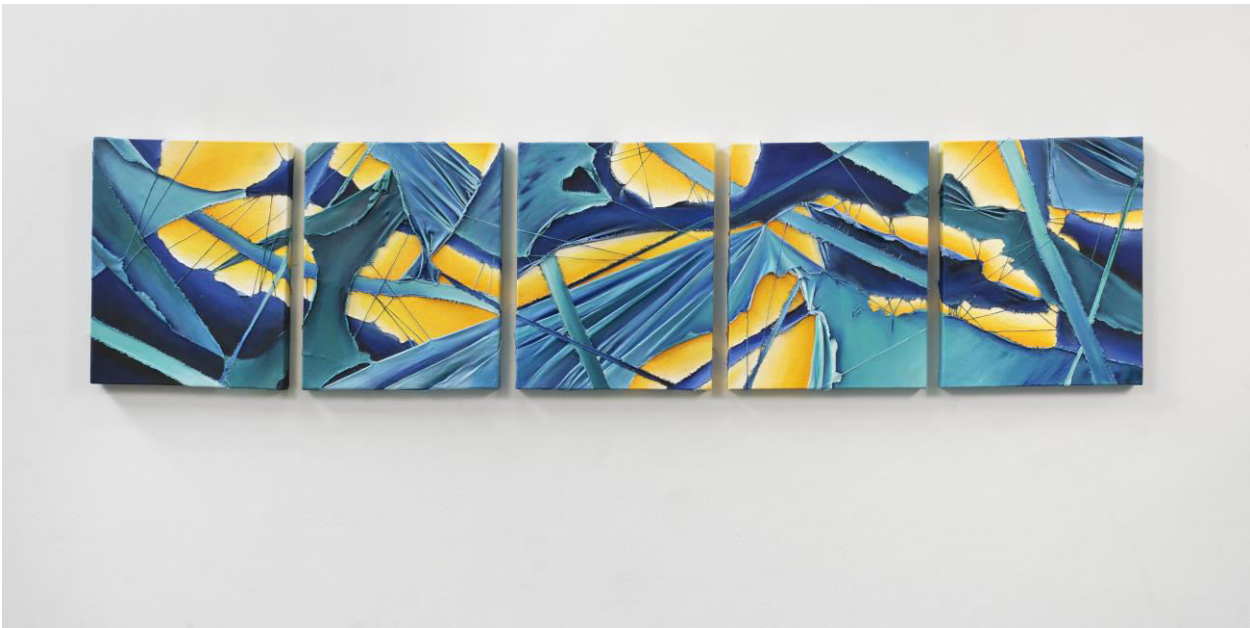


Figure 2. *Untitled Pentptych*, acrylic, canvas, thread, 24" x 90" x 1 3/4", 2011.



Figure 3. *Untitled #3*, acrylic, canvas, thread, 48"x 42" x 2.5", 2014.



Figure 4. *Untitled #3*, acrylic cardboard, 12"x 9", 2011.

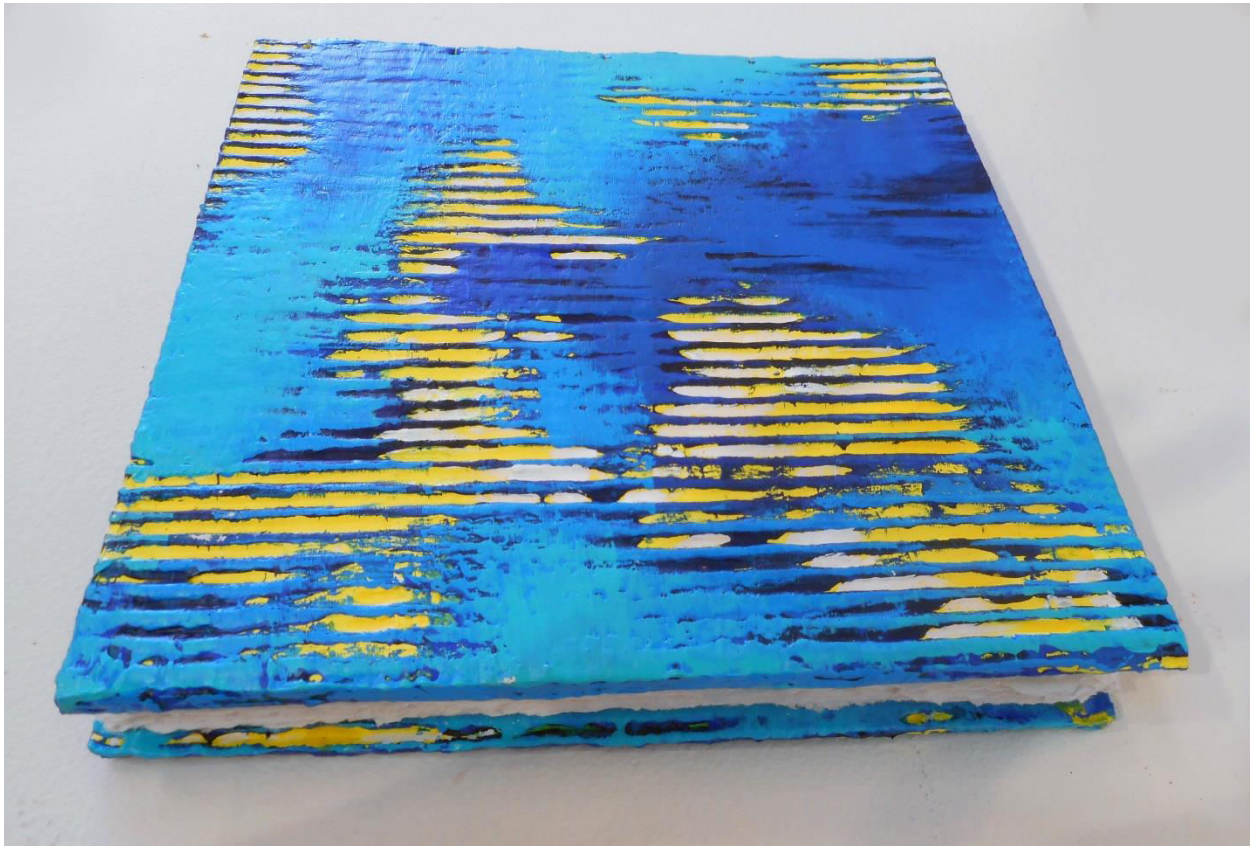


Figure 5. *Untitled #4*, acrylic, cardboard, paper, thread, 12"x 12" x 2", 2015.



Figure 6. *Untitled #5*, acrylic, cardboard, paper, 54" x 16" x 2", 2013.



Figure 7. *Untitled #5*, (detail), acrylic, cardboard, paper, 12" x 10" x 2", 2015.

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EDUCATION

- 2016 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
(Painting and Craft Studies)
- 1990 Bachelor of Science
James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA
(Fashion Merchandising and Interior Design)

CERTIFICATION

- 2000-2016 Art, K-12

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- 2000-present Art Teacher, Brookland Middle School, Henrico, VA

RELATED EXPERIENCE

- 2014- present Fine Arts Department Chair, Brookland Middle School, Henrico, VA
- 2004-2011 Art Teacher, Summer Arts Enrichment Program, Henrico County
Public Schools, Richmond, VA
- 2003-2012 Art Teacher, After School Arts Program, Henrico County Public Schools,
Richmond, VA

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND MEMBERSHIPS

- 2000-present National Art Education Association
2006-present National Education Association
2014-present Artspace Gallery Artist Member

AWARDS AND HONORS

- 2015 **Published Student Work**, *VAEA Quarterly*, Richmond, VA (Work also
published in 2004, 2006, 2007, 2010, 2012, 2013).
- 2013 **Central Region Middle School Art Teacher of the Year**, Virginia Art
Education Association, Falls Church, VA
- 2013 **Middle School Art Teacher of the Year**, Henrico County Public
Schools, Richmond, VA

AWARDS AND HONORS (continued)

2007 **Middle School Art Teacher of the Year**, Henrico County Public Schools, Richmond, VA

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2015 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA at Artspace Gallery, Richmond, VA

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2015 *Think Small 8*, Artspace Gallery, Richmond, VA
Artspace Outreach Exhibition, Gellman Room, Main Richmond Public Library, Richmond, VA

2014 *Member's Biennial Exhibition*, Artspace Gallery, Richmond, VA
Art Educator eGallery, VAEA 2014 Fall Professional Development Conference, Richmond, VA
Artspace at Twenty-six, Town Center Gallery, Capital One West Creek Campus, Richmond, VA
For the Record: Acts and Actions Captured, Artspace Gallery, Richmond, VA
January All Media Show, Art Works Gallery, Richmond, VA

2013 *HCPS (Henrico County Public Schools) Educator Exhibit*, HCPS Central Office, Richmond, VA
VAEA (Virginia Art Education Association) Artist as Educator Exhibit, Crossroads Art Center, Richmond, VA

2007 *HCPS Educator Exhibit*, HCPS Central Office, Richmond, VA

2006 *HCPS Educator Exhibit*, HCPS Central Office, Richmond, VA
Faculty & Staff Art Show, Brookland Middle School, Richmond, VA

2004 *Faculty & Staff Art Show*, Brookland Middle School, Richmond, VA