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Shifting Focus

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Shifting Focus

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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Table of Contents

Artist Statement	iii
Introduction	1
Aesthetics	2
Influences	3
Photography	5
Crafts	8
Mixed Media	10
Conclusion	12
Bibliography	14
Appendix	15
List of Figures	15
Figures	16
Resume	27

Artist Statement

My photographic and craft works focus on the flowing forms of flowers; the delicate, ruffled edges of feathers; and the complex veining patterns of leaves. To highlight these natural elements I use a limited palette, often no more than two close value colors. My photographs are extreme close-ups and are referred to as macrophotography. The images are abstracted yet still hint at the organic original. In my crafts, which include jewelry, textiles, and books, I also use a reduced palette when presenting abstracted natural structures.

I use a process-oriented approach to allow for repetitive tasks. The repetition is rewarding in both the calm it grants me and the meticulously created end result. My imagination wanders as my hands are engaged in crocheting for hours or when I am shooting a range of digital photographs. Within these media, I experiment with different techniques to create variety within my work and to build my skill-base as an artist and an art teacher.

Shifting Focus

Introduction

I did not always know that I wanted to have a career in the arts. I have always been very practical and the stereotype of a starving artist was something that scared me. The artist role models around me in the small Alaskan town where I grew up fit the typecast too well. However, I could see why many chose Alaska's diverse landscapes as an inspiration.

The beauty of nature is a fascination that I cannot escape. Waking up everyday to surroundings that most people only see on postcards inspired my work as a child and still inspires me to this day. My father taught me about the flora of Southeast Alaska and memories of him are tied to many of my pieces. I found that through a greater understanding of the lifecycle and properties of each plant, I appreciated more than just the eye-catching flowers but also the geometric perfection of their forms.

When I left Alaska to start college at Northeastern University in Boston, I thought I would become a great architect. In fact, I only enjoyed my studio art classes. It was then that I changed my major from architecture to art education and transferred to Western Washington University in Washington state, once again avoiding becoming a starving artist. Later, after working as an art teacher for four years in Northern Virginia, I felt creatively stagnate. I needed something new to work towards and found the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). I was excited to further my career as an art teacher and get back to creating, which had always brought me joy.

Outside of formal art classes, I only created crafts. Crafts often involve tedious,

repetitive tasks and I find an uncommon pleasure in seeing the end result of those efforts. My crafts often have the colors and forms of flowers and leaves. To have craft studies as a focus for my MIS-IAR degree was very important to me. It recognized that traditionally feminine art deserves equal standing with historically male-dominated art media, like painting and photography. Photography was my other focus area. My macrophotography captures the tiny details of natural objects, transporting me back to my childhood in Alaska where I felt I discovered something new every time I went outside.

Aesthetics

In my childhood, I developed a deep appreciation for the miracle of nature. In my work, I want to show the variety and beauty that I find in nature. No two flowers, even of the same species, are exactly the same. Plants, while robust and resilient, are also delicate and fragile. Objects from the natural world are uniquely adapted to their environment in order to survive and reproduce. The same brightly colored petals, perfectly curved leaves, or delicate feathers that keep a plant or animal alive also attract my interest as a photographer.

My work is experimental and process-oriented. In photography, this means that I might choose a singular subject matter and incorporate various backgrounds and lighting in addition to shooting from different angles to explore a range of details. For instance, when very close to a feather, I focus on the end, middle, or quill. I might tilt the feather to bring parts into focus and blur other areas. I am looking for an image that captures a recognizable object in an unexpected way or highlights an overlooked detail.

In crafts, learning new techniques and developing new processes in hand work allows me to push past traditional uses for crochet and stitching. I often incorporate crocheting or

embroidery as elements in my photography and printmaking. I experiment with what material is best to print a photograph on in order to be able to stitch on it. I also crochet abstract forms and attach them to prints and photographs. I have even used crochet pieces to emboss paper and create monoprints.

While one piece is often linked to a previous piece, I generally strive for variety in my materials and methods. Once I feel that I have created something unique, I try to push my creative boundaries and work towards the next new result. Earlier in my artistic career, I worried about mistakes and would not take chances with a piece for fear of destroying it. As I progressed, I learned to relax and enjoy the unknown results of explorations. Now, through experimentation, I am able to explore and expand my ideas.

Influences

My mother originally taught me how to crochet, which I continued to do for years on my own. I taught myself new stitches and struggled through patterns written by others to create utilitarian items. As I began to create items of my own design, I struggled with how to construct garments intended to cover three-dimensional forms without relying upon the most basic stitches. Then, I found the work of contemporary artist, Doris Chan, who uses repeated motifs to construct complex designs that are easy to create. She stated:

What makes lace so interesting is the pictures we see in it, the conclusions our brains draw when we observe the solid parts (the stitches) juxtaposed against the empty spaces (the holes formed by the stitches). Some lace stitches combine to make us see shapes like flowers and leaves; some don't make a big picture but rather suggest geometry, symmetry, and balance (Chan, 10).

After studying Chan's work, I developed a deeper understanding of how each small piece of a crochet design works together to create the larger whole. I was now able to plan new forms that

mimicked my first love, flowers.

The Modernist artist, Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986), inspires my photographs. In her works *Black Iris* (1936) and *Pink Sweet Peas 2* (1927), enlarged views of curvilinear petals approach abstraction. O’Keeffe made references to nature. She worked to express the strength in the most fragile parts of the environment. By painting flowers much larger than life, O’Keeffe was able to dwarf her viewers and impress upon them the importance of nature. She said, “When you take a flower in your hand and really look at it, it’s your world for the moment. I want to give that world to someone else. Most people in the city rush around so, they have no time to look at a flower. I want them to see it whether they want to or not” (Lisle, 167). In my macrophotography, I want to compel a viewer to look at a small object more closely by enlarging the details.

Similarly, I have always admired Robert Mapplethorpe’s (1946-1989) flower photographs. The stark, pure black grounds emphasize the softly veined flower petals. Each detail is crisp and well defined. In *Poppy* (1988), Mapplethorpe alters the standard compositional style of photographing a flower with the stem emerging from the bottom of the frame. Here, he presents the flower with the stem entering the frame horizontally from the right edge. This unexpected depiction of flowers, which simultaneously clings to classical aesthetics through the use of a floral still life yet challenges classical aesthetics with an unexpected composition, is my aim in photography.

My compositions are also inspired by the photographs of Edward Weston (1886-1958). Weston, an early Modernist like O’Keeffe, approached abstraction with his series of untitled nudes from the early 1930s. The depiction of the naked human body moved beyond its inherent sexual undertones to represent curving lines and forms. For Weston, the nude offered as many

possibilities as nature does for me. He stated, “I am stimulated to work with the nude body, because of the infinite combination of lines which are presented with every move” (Stebbins, 26). Like Weston, I compose my photographs with an emphasis on the formal elements of form, color, and texture.

All three of these influences have connections to sexuality in their work. O’Keeffe always denied that her flowers were veiled depictions of female anatomy. Mapplethorpe is well known for his homoerotic photography and did not discourage sexual interpretations of his floral photographs. Weston’s portraits and nudes were often sexually charged. I admire each of these artists for a variety of reasons, but my work relies on sensual elements not sexual ones. For me, a flower is an element of nature that reflects variety in form and color. I create tactile sensations through actual textures in my crafts and mixed media, and implied textures in my macrophotographs.

Photography

Proper set up for a macrophotograph is vital to the quality of the finished image. I prefer a black or white studio backdrop to simplify the image and place attention on the object. In the studio setting, the lighting must be diffused but strong enough to allow for a quick exposure. My breathing can disturb an image, so a shorter exposure helps to avoid a blurred photograph. Often, to keep the camera as still as possible, I mount it on a tripod with a remote for the shutter. I use a macro lens with one or more extension tubes, which are rings that increase the distance between the camera and lens. The tubes allow for greater magnification but narrow the area of focus. The resulting photograph has blurred areas paired with very sharply focused areas, lending an impressionistic aspect to the image.

As a photographer, I aim to create a perfect image *in camera*. In other words, I change very little about an image in post-production. I take hundreds of images of the same object or group of objects. I often bracket images, taking underexposed and overexposed photos. I capture the image in a range of scales and compositions, photograph from different angles, and move the area of focus. The multitude of photos allows me to challenge myself to try new arrangements and forces me to be adventurous. My goal is to create a visually interesting image, not a scientific record of a natural object.

Weston “firmly aligned himself against Pictorialism and on the side of ‘straight’ photography, allowing dodging or retouching only to correct ‘some minor fault’” (Stebbins, 14). Pictorialism dominated photography in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries. It is generally marked by manipulations to a photograph as a means of showing the artist’s hand in creating a photograph, rather than simply recording a view. Like Weston, I adjust my photographs for minor imperfections but they are not works of digital art, which are heavily manipulated and created in a computer. The impressionistic appearance in my work is created *in camera*.

My process begins with the selection of an object. I search for things that make me want to look closer at them. These can be small details on larger objects or small objects that beg to be studied up close, such as the intricate details of flower blossoms, feathers, and insects. Natural objects fascinate me because each form has evolved for a specific function and purpose, yet retains a grace and beauty. Color and form are the most important to me in making a macrophotograph, but both do not have to be present. A dried, brown seedpod can produce a strong, monochromatic image just as easily as the veins and color changes on a single flower petal produce a painterly photograph.

Weston's influence is most noticeable in *Feather Landscape* (Appendix, 1). I cropped the feather tightly to eliminate many of the distinguishing characteristics, as Weston did with his series of nudes. The softly undulating edge of the feather is highlighted against the black ground and the play of shadows across the surface is the focus of the image. This image came about as the result of experimentation. I found a feather on the ground and placed it under my macro lens to see what it would look like up close. I focused on a portion of the feather to emphasize the lines and values in the image and encourage others to take the time to appreciate the intricate detail and beauty of nature.

The crocus flower holds great personal meaning for me. When I was twenty-seven, my father passed away unexpectedly. He taught me to appreciate many plants but he always had a special love of crocuses. They are typically the first flowers to push through the snow in the early spring and symbolize regrowth and resiliency to me. They only bloom for a few short weeks and then the bulb goes dormant in the ground, building up the necessary nutrients to flower again the next year. I planted crocus bulbs around my house after his death and waited for them to bloom in the spring.

That spring, I attached extension tubes to my lens to increase the distance between the lens and camera's sensor and allow a closer focus. The extension tubes allow for a very narrow area of focus with very little depth of field. In *Crocus Triptych* (Appendix, 2), the pistil is crisp and sharply detailed as the petals blend and blur in the background. Each flower is a different jewel tone but together they show some of its many variations. The out of focus areas and cropping of the images helped me to distinguish them from scientific recordings of crocuses and present an enlarged view, much like O'Keeffe.

As the seasons change, I take advantage of new opportunities with my photographs.

Droplets (Appendix, 3) was shot in the middle of a snowstorm. I had worn a wool hat outside and noticed that as it warmed up when I returned indoors, the snowflakes left behind tiny water droplets on the fibers. Once again, I pulled out my extension tubes and focused on the beads of water that were at varying levels of depth. The formal elements of line, shape, and color were emphasized, thereby making it an abstracted image.

My photographs highlight the variety of textures and forms in the natural world. I show the fallacy in the old adage: *when you have seen one, you have seen them all*. All of the intricate details of natural objects should be observed and appreciated for their unique beauty. By abstracting the subject matter, I invite a closer inspection. By enlarging these tiny elements, I bring them to the viewer's attention and imply a texture that begs to be touched.

Crafts

My crafts are marked by actual textures created through repetitive processes. Folding a hundred papers for a handmade journal, stringing a thousand beads for a necklace, or executing a stitch many thousands of times is very calming to me. These processes also produce tantalizing tactile details. Many of my works start out as small experiments, after which I ponder what a work would look like with hundreds more of the same mark, stitch, or bead. This question leads me to producing books and jewelry pieces with intricate, repetitive elements.

Handmade bookbinding satisfied the desire to work with my hands that crochet work originally fed. Stitching *signatures* (booklets) of pages together takes time and patience but produces a complex structure of thread on the spine of the book. A desire to explore the possibilities with thread structures led me to create *Aqua Caterpillar* (Appendix, 4). *Aqua Caterpillar* is a *Coptic stitch* journal with a *caterpillar stitch* running from the front cover, across

the spine, to the back cover. Coptic stitching is a method of binding a book by hand sewing signatures of papers together. The caterpillar stitch is meant to replicate a caterpillar and can serve as a decorative or bookbinding stitch. The front and back covers are paste papers with shades of gray, black, and aqua paint smeared, scraped, and dabbed to produce a rough texture. Each of the sixty black pages have rounded corners inspired by the curving form of the caterpillar stitch. The caterpillar is made of variegated blue thread that wraps around the central core and anchors itself on the left and right sides in evenly spaced holes in the cover. It adds a decorative, dimensional element to the covers of the book, a functional strengthening to the binding, and a reference to nature.

Jewelry, like handmade books, combines form and function. *Stained Glass Iris* (Appendix, 5) is a beaded necklace with a silver pendant depicting an iris. To create the pendant, I carefully laid down strands of Sculpey clay to outline an iris design on a circle of clay. I baked this model to harden it. Then, I created a negative impression in a second piece of clay and baked that to cast a mold. Finally, moist Precious Metal Clay (PMC) was pressed into the mold. PMC is composed of microscopic particles of metal mixed with an organic binder that once heated to a high temperature burns the binder off leaving solid silver. When the PMC piece was out of the kiln and cooled, I added blue, green, and purple glass frit (fine glass powder) to the spaces between the PMC outlines. The piece was heated one last time to melt the glass.

To create the necklace for the pendant, I taught myself how to crochet with beads. In this process each bead must be strung onto the thread in advance of a single stitch. Working in a pattern of two purple glass beads and three green glass beads, I threaded over seven feet of beads onto white cotton crochet thread. The construction of the stitches causes the purple beads to slowly spiral around the green beads. The weight of the glass beads, the bumpy texture, and the

flexible feature of the rope gives the strand the feel of a small snake.

I used some of the same PMC casting techniques to create *Cast Silver Crochet Bib Necklace* (Appendix, 6). First, I crocheted six radially symmetric designs of various sizes and shapes, inspired by traditional doilies. I also created one organic, freeform shape that reminded me of flower petals. To harden these pieces for casting, I saturated the cotton with glue and let it dry. I made a negative of each piece in clay and used it to create a positive copy in PMC. I refined the dried PMC pieces before firing to open up negative spaces and better define the stitches. After the finished silver pieces came out of the kiln, I added soft crochet borders with silver thread to blur the distinction between threaded crochet and cast PMC crochet. Finally, I attached the seven pieces together with connecting *jump rings* to create a bib necklace that covers part of the chest.

The long, involved processes of each of my craft pieces allowed me to experiment with natural forms and tactile sensations. Each piece began with a concept but evolved as my processes developed. I viewed problems as challenges to be solved. I took these learning experiences to other media.

Mixed Media

The first time I was exposed to alternative photography processes, such as image transfers, I felt like it destroyed the perfectly crafted photographs that I had captured. Soon, I realized that it allowed me to continue developing my photographs. *Sea Life* (Appendix, 7) is an abstract mixed media piece. I used an image transfer process to apply a digital photograph of a graffitied wall to a wooden panel. First, I brushed an even layer of gel medium onto the wood. Then, I applied a laser print of my photograph, colored side down, onto the surface and

burnished it. After the gel medium had dried, I gently scrubbed the paper off, exposing a slightly distressed reverse of my image. Using a white paint pen, I drew small repetitive patterns and organic designs.

For the central focus of the piece, I used a very small hook and thin white thread to create amoeba-like forms. The three-dimensional curling, rounded, and tubular elements protrude from the surface of the piece. These soft forms contrast with the rough texture captured in the photograph. The white crochet and white drawings also contrast with the blue and green colors of the ground. The image transfer process and crochet pieces expanded upon the organic quality I found in the original photograph, opening up a variety of new modes of expression for me.

When I created prints, my process was very similar to when I photographed. I changed one element from print to print to see variety and options. This plethora of prints inspired me to compile them as a book. *Book of Leaves* (Appendix, 8) is a bound book of twenty monoprints based off of my photograph of a Japanese maple leaf. The covers and case are made of wood. These monoprints were either dry point plates or from a stencil with the same contours as the plate. In *Book of Leaves, page 4* (Appendix, 8a), I used a print from the stencil with a *running stitch* (simple repetitive stitch) in royal blue sateen embroidery thread. *Book of Leaves, page 18* (Appendix, 8b) was also created from a stencil. I ran the inked stencil and an inked freeform crochet piece through the press. On the right side, the crochet embossed the paper with the texture, curling forms, and slight inked color. At the same time, the centered inked stencil left an imprint of mottled purples and blues. Next, I backstitched a base in the lower left corner to add crochet work. With thin, white cotton thread I crocheted around the perimeter of the backstitch, slowly covering the space until only a small, flared opening was left. I created this form because I wanted a three-dimensional textural area to balance the embossed paper.

In the photographs, *Cherry Blossoms* (Appendix, 9), I also added tactile elements. These macrophotographs were a particular challenge because they were taken outside without the advantages of a studio setting. I had to work with the light that was available, making adjustments as clouds passed overhead. The wind was constantly causing the tiny blossoms to tremble on the branches. Despite all this, I used my extension tubes and macro lens to capture a narrowly focused area of the delicate cherry blossoms and blurred out the background. Next, I experimented with substrates to print the photos on that were also conducive to hand stitching. For instance, papers left oversized holes after the needle passed through, and many fabrics were too loosely woven to capture the details of the photo. Finally, I found a canvas that was intended for inkjet printing that was easy to stitch on. I used a sateen thread in colors that matched the photographs to add dimension to the flowers. In the image on the left, the magenta anthers (where the pollen resides) were covered with a series of close, parallel stitches called *satin stitch*. On the image on the right, the golden yellow anthers on the pink blossom were highlighted with looping *French knots*. Coupled with the soft, smooth appearance of the petals and background, the embroidery serves to highlight delicate details of the flowers.

My photographs inspire my mixed media pieces. Each piece expands upon an element from a photograph and elaborates through hand stitching or crochet. Mixed media, by definition, combines all aspects of art making. I am able to experiment with processes, challenge traditional media uses, and transform a simple piece into a complex work. The freedom to expand my own preconceived notions of art is what makes mixed media the most rewarding to me.

Conclusion

The impetus to enroll in VCU's MIS-IAR Program was a desire to learn and grow. I

have accomplished that and more. I worked alongside other students and teachers and made connections with working artists. Working in a community of artists, not alone, demonstrated to me that my creative struggles were shared and not insurmountable.

The renewed confidence in my own abilities has made me a better teacher. I experience more happiness from the art of teaching, and the art making that I witness in the classroom. I also emphasize that mistakes are a part of the learning experiences. No longer do I stress that students complete an assignment perfectly, but instead that they learn from and appreciate the inevitable missteps. Going through the MIS-IAR Program at a professionally pivotal point in my lifetime has made me a better artist and art teacher.

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Appendix

List of Figures

- Figure 1. *Feather Landscape*, digital print, variable size, 2014.
- Figure 2. *Crocus Triptych*, digital prints, 7" x 5" (each), 10" x 19" (matted), 2013.
- Figure 3. *Droplets*, digital print, variable size, 2013.
- Figure 4. *Aqua Caterpillar*, handmade journal, 4" x 4.75" x 1" (closed), 2014.
- Figure 5. *Stained Glass Iris*, PMC and fused glass on bead crochet, 24" length, pendant 2" x 2" x .5", 2012.
- Figure 6. *Cast Silver Crochet Bib Necklace*, silver, thread, glass beads, and ribbon, 16" x 4" x .25", 2012.
- Figure 7. *Sea Life*, photo transfer on wood with cotton thread, 7.75" x 7.75" x 1.5", 2012.
- Figure 8. *Book of Leaves*, handmade book of prints, 9" x 12" x 3" (closed book in wooden case), 2015.
- Figure 8a. *Book of Leaves, page 4*, monoprint with embroidery thread, 5" x 7.5", 2015.
- Figure 8b. *Book of Leaves, page 18*, monoprint with cotton thread, 5" x 7.5", 2015.
- Figure 9. *Cherry Blossoms*, canvas prints with embroidery thread, 6.5" x 4.5" (each), 10.5" x 14.5" (matted), 2013.

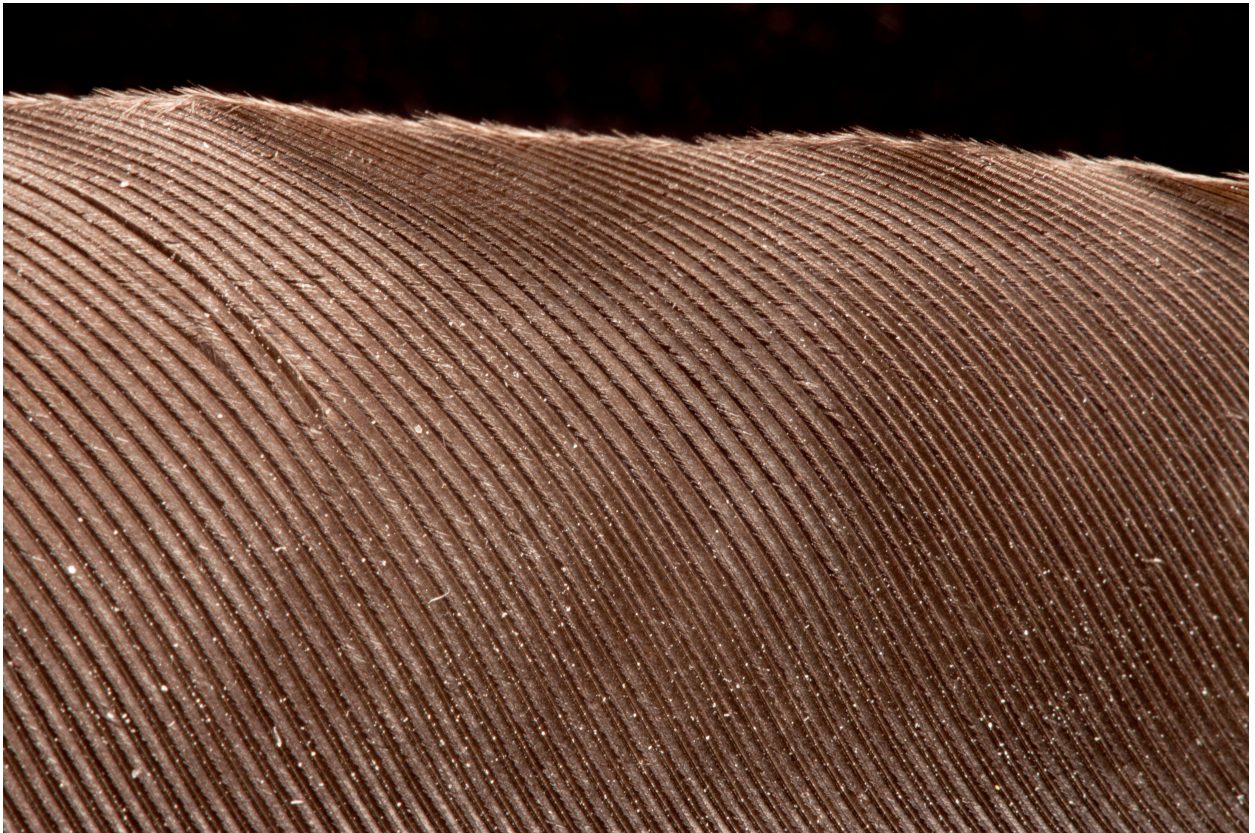


Figure 1. *Feather Landscape*, digital print, variable size, 2014.

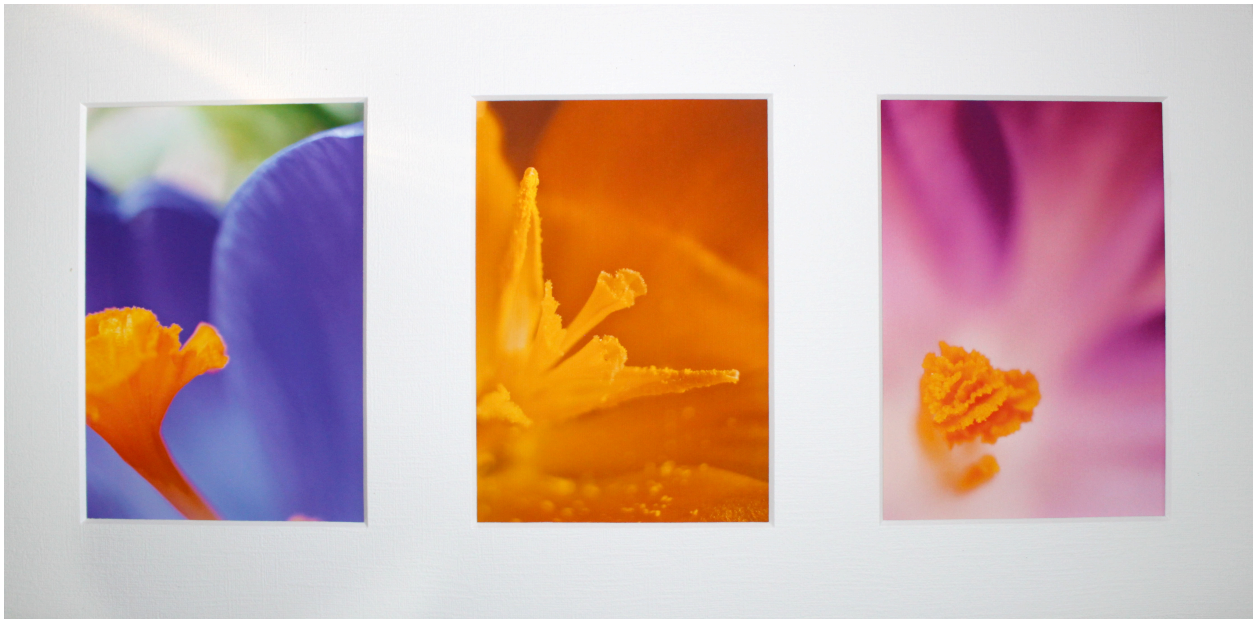


Figure 2. *Crocus Triptych*, digital prints, 7" x 5" (each), 10" x 19" (matted), 2013.



Figure 3. *Droplets*, digital print, variable size, 2013.

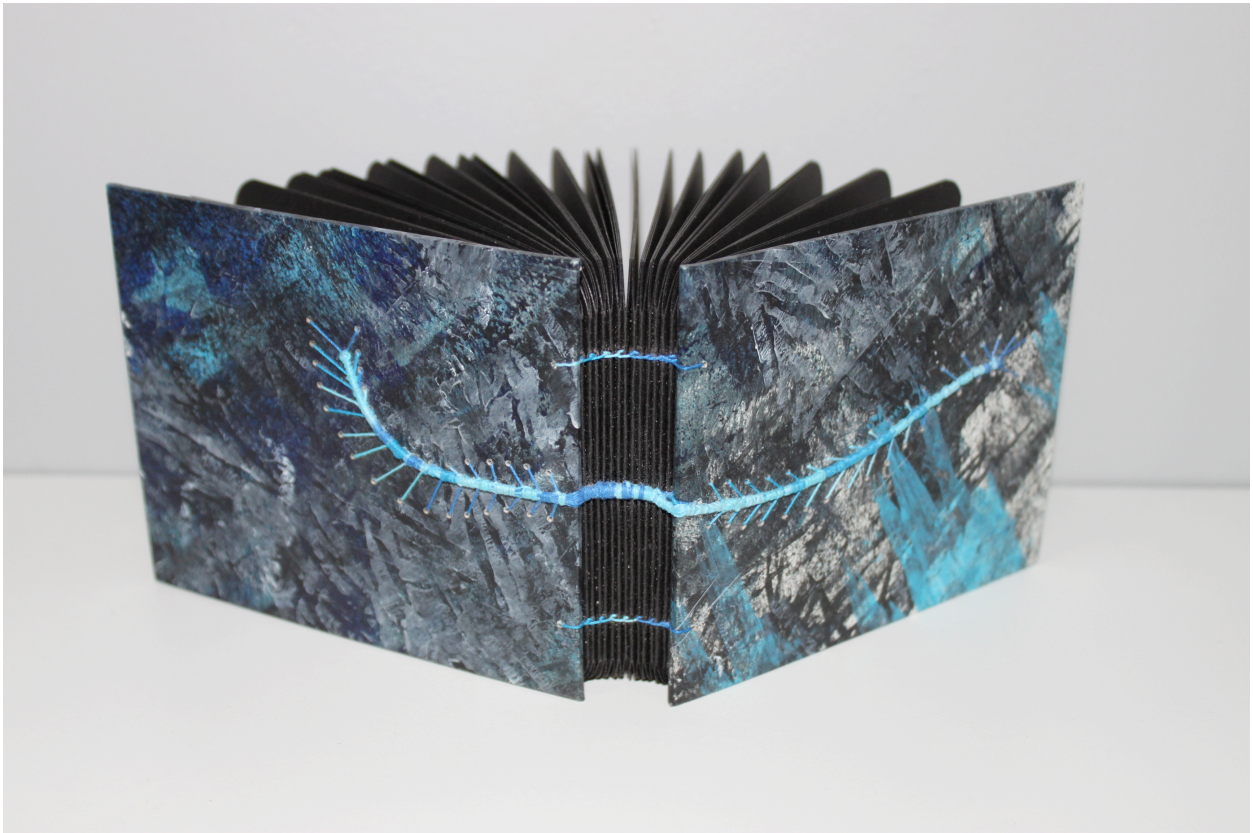


Figure 4. *Aqua Caterpillar*, handmade journal, 4" x 4.75" x 1" (closed), 2014.



Figure 5. *Stained Glass Iris*, PMC and fused glass on bead crochet, 24" length, pendant 2" x 2" x .5", 2012.



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(closed book in wooden case), 2015.



Figure 8a. *Book of Leaves, page 4*, monprint with embroidery thread, 5" x 7.5", 2015.

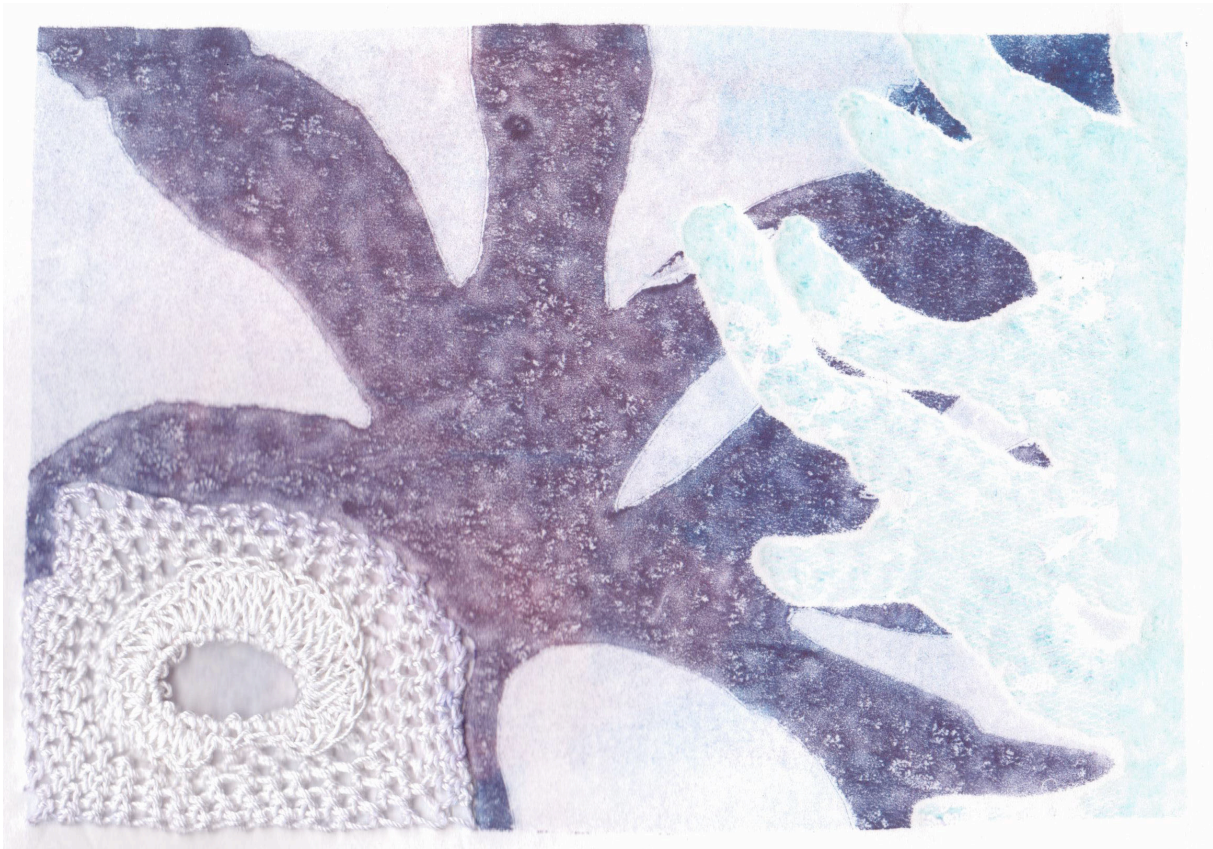


Figure 8b. *Book of Leaves, page 18*, monoprint with cotton thread, 5" x 7.5", 2015.



Figure 9. *Cherry Blossoms*, canvas prints with embroidery thread, 6.5" x 4.5" (each), 10.5" x 14.5" (matted), 2013.

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