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American Splendor

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

My photographs and paintings are reflective of a simpler and slower paced, rural life. This focus is in high contrast to what contemporary urban life often requires. I depict scenes of tranquil landscapes, farm animals, old barns, fields of grasses, and growing crops.

I alter my digital photographic images with computer software. I use various filters that transform color, clarity, and value to give the photographs of nature an intentionally peaceful mood. These photographs are a basis for my paintings where I soften nature's contours and emphasize tranquility. My desire is that viewers will look at my work and take a moment to stop, think, and breathe. Like myself, I want them to slow down and take in the simplicity and beauty of country life.

American Splendor

Introduction

Growing up as a young girl, I was extremely fortunate to live in large European and Asian cities. I also lived in the suburbs of Virginia. Although I feel grateful for my range of experiences, I have always felt most at peace whenever I made visits to the American countryside. Venturing off into the rural landscape of Northern Virginia and the Blue Ridge Mountains was an exciting and anticipated event when I was a child. These early experiences in nature are the foundation for my inspirations in photography and painting.

I have always enjoyed art making experiences. In my undergraduate education, I pursued my interest in both creating art and teaching children. As an art education major at Radford University in Radford, Virginia, I started to more seriously investigate various media in both two- and three-dimensional art forms. After graduating, I became an art teacher at Fort Belvoir Elementary School in Fort Belvoir, Virginia, where I have been teaching art for seven years.

Midway through my career, I decided to further my education and improve my skills as an artist. I enrolled in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). Through the MIS-IAR Program, I have been able to focus on the important impact of my youthful experiences. It has allowed me to examine and present a sense of splendor that I find in nature. In my concentrations of photography and painting, I have advanced my skills as an artist and passed down my knowledge to my students. I realize the more that I grow as an artist, the more I can teach my students.

Aesthetics

My busy life in Northern Virginia is filled with many distractions. Demands of working

long hours at my job, personal responsibilities after work, and urban congestion literally seemed to kill any sense of peace within my life. When I discovered that the Japanese word for *busy* literally translates as *that which kills the heart*, it seemed to describe my urban existence. One way that I rebalance my life is through my creating process. It is through this process that I begin to feel peace in my life.

In my work, I reminisce about long days playing out in grassy fields, horseback riding through rolling hills, sunsets melting over the mountains, and early morning sunrises over dewy grasses. Hints of manmade structures or objects are also present in my imagery but do not take priority. My goal is to reflect the peacefulness that I felt as a child. I want to recapture serene memories in my work and in turn present them to an audience who might fondly connect with their own memories of the countryside.

My process involves taking photographs at specific times of day, such as the early morning or evening hours to keep lighting and shadows soft on my subject matter. Often my ideal image is when I capture naturally lit scenes or objects. First, I decide on the time of day and weather conditions. Then, I spend time driving around looking for imagery. After taking multiple exposures, I bring home my work and cull through the views and imagery selecting those that provoke a peaceful reaction. I then digitally alter these photographs to emphasize their beauty and peacefulness.

In my oil and acrylic paintings, I often select from my edited photographs as a starting point. I build each painting with intuitive and spontaneous marks. I manipulate the compositions and coloration to enhance the placid qualities that I found in the photographs. My palette varies according to view, yet remains within the natural variations found in the landscapes.

My work develops from an intentional and set process. I start with making photography based decisions on times of day and the weather. Then, I manipulate my photographs that in turn will lead to painting. In these consistent steps, I want to reflect and recreate the tranquil feelings I felt from country life in my youth. From start to finish, my process is used to bring attention to my vision of the peace evoking aspects of rural America.

Influences

My photography and painting have been significantly influenced by three American artists of the twentieth-century. These artists are Grant Wood (1891–1942), Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975), and Ansel Adams (1902-1984).

Grant Wood is a well-known Regionalist who painted imaginative scenes of country life in the Midwest. He had a great passion for the people and their simple, rural life in his native Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Many of his works, including *Stone City* (1930) and *Fall Plowing* (1931), present realistic and utopian scenes of rural everyday life. Wood is also known for his stylized organic and geometric forms which can be seen in his depiction of architecture as well as shrubbery.

Like Wood, I have a great love for the local countryside and its life. After studying Wood's works, I began to incorporate some of his painting approaches into my own work. For instance, I stylized forms within my landscapes of Northern Virginia. I softened the contours of the shrubbery and trees to create organic and soft geometric forms. I also transformed the realism in my photographs into more utopian and poetic scenes.

Thomas Hart Benton was also a well-known Regionalist. Benton was concerned with depicting the socially and politically revealing story of American history through the portrayal of people in everyday life. However, what I found most appealing within Benton's work was his

expressionistic and rhythmic distortions in the compositional elements. *Trail Riders* (1964/1965) is one of Benton's large paintings in which he incorporated distortion in the landforms. I began to manipulate natural forms and manmade structures in my own paintings after studying both Wood and Benton.

In my photography, I look to another American artist, Ansel Adams. Adams had a life-long career as a dedicated landscape photographer. His Western landscapes of natural elements are orchestrated with great pictorial depth and tonal values, such as in *Clearing Winter Storm* (1944). In many of his black and white photographs, Adams used a red filter to help him capture strong contrasts in natural features. *Thundercloud* (c. 1967) is an example of his presentation of high contrast featuring a black sky against white, billowing clouds. Later in his career, Adams used his photographs of nature to help lobby for the preservation of areas of the West. He wanted to keep these areas pure and untouched. His landscapes of the wilderness have been of great inspiration to me because I too have a deep passion for photographing nature, and in particular the countryside. I am moved by his approach and philosophy to create images that hold nature in high esteem.

I have taken conceptual and technical elements to my own work from each of these three American artists. In many ways, these artists have helped me to more clearly define my subject matter and purpose, and have provided me with great visual inspiration from which to gather and to learn.

Photography

My work begins with my photographs. Weather is an important factor because the atmosphere has effects on how a photograph will turn out. Ideally, I like a sky with some sort of

cloud coverage to add a dramatic appearance to my photographs. I prefer to photograph in the early morning when softer light is cast on the earth. This lighting adds a peaceful serene mood to the land. Sometimes, I revisit certain shooting spots to capture varying effects of light.

Once a series of photographs are taken I bring them home to process them digitally. I use two editing software programs. These programs allow me to manipulate each image individually or in a batch. Some of the editing tools alter sharpness, color saturation, and tone of an image.

In *Purple Earth* (Appendix, 1), I photographed a field of seedlings at sunrise. I kept my aperture high so that my depth of field would reveal the rich textures of the soil as well as the tender green plants. The converging lines of the crops are meant to relay the beauty and vastness of American farmland. As I sat down to edit this image, I increased the saturation within the green and brown hues of my image. Then, I used split toning to make the shadows a cool purple hue to highlight the lines of the crop merging in the distance.

In *Daybreak in the Plains* (Appendix, 2), I captured a single tree in a fenced field. Solitary trees were left in fields to give both human and animal a break from the sun. Just like this tree has invited many to rest in its cool shade, I wanted to invite the viewer to feel rested by the view. This image was taken in the early hours of the morning, just as the sun was rising. In my editing process, I took the temperature bar and slid it towards yellow to warm up the image and also increased the sharpness. These editing choices were intended to create an inviting, calm image.

In *Wishful Morning Dew* (Appendix, 3) I present a field of millet. I captured this close-up in the early morning. Dew from the night air rests on the millet making the stalks heavy and bent. I used a shallow depth of field to focus on the millet, which is a grass. Grasses are common vegetation, they are everywhere and most of the time these grasses go unnoticed. I

wanted to bring attention to this ever-present element in nature. I focused on the quiet detail of this field to offer a view of the simple and beautiful features of our environment. Beauty is all around us, we must take the time to stop and enjoy it even in the smallest or seemingly insignificant things.

In my photography, I took inspiration from an American artist and looked to my surroundings for subject matter. Like Adams, I invite the viewer to take in the beauties of the American countryside.

Painting

In painting, my goal is to paint elements of nature. From nature, I want to reflect the beauty and vitality of the outskirts of the Northern, Virginia region. To present the landscape, I start by choosing an image from my photographs. As I paint, I attempt to enhance the natural beauty of the land and its tranquil life.

In my oil painting, *Exit 31* (Appendix, 4), I capture a barn which is located just off Interstate I-66 at exit 31 in The Plains, Virginia. This is a location that I have frequented in different seasons and times of day. It is a farm that is operational in the fall as a venue for community activities, such as a pumpkin patch and corn maze. In the summertime, this farm is a sleepy place where wild grasses take over the landscape as the farm rests for the season. I was driving one morning and saw this barn. The lighting was peaceful and calm so I stopped and took some pictures as a painting reference. I relied on Wood and Benton's painting approaches as inspiration for this piece. For example, I applied soft, painterly brushworks to simplify the surface treatment. These brushwork techniques helped me to convey a bucolic, peaceful view. I wanted to paint this barn in its resting season to highlight the peacefulness of the setting.

In my acrylic painting, *Jacob's Field* (Appendix, 5), I present the subtle evening light setting over the mountains. The photograph I used for this painting was captured in broad daylight in Luray, Virginia. When I sat down to paint, I knew I wanted to change the time of day in order to convey a thoughtful quietness. I used bright, light colors in the sky and darker colors in the landscape. I wanted the viewer's eye to initially be captured by the sunset sky. The dark colors in the field and mountains were intended to produce a feeling of calm. I left out manmade structures in this painting because I wanted the viewer to experience a sense of solitude. Another technique to project quietness was to develop the landscape contours in flowing horizontal lines.

In my acrylic painting, *King George* (Appendix, 6), I painted a close-up view of a black and white, Holstein dairy bull. I used gestural and painterly brushstrokes to draw the viewer's attention to the surface and detail. In the bull's eyes I painted a reflection of the countryside. This detail was intended to invite the viewer to lock eyes with this gentle being. I kept the background of this painting simple, by using large, soft brushstrokes so that all the attention would be focused on the bull. *King George* is a symbol for the simplicity yet hard work of farm living.

Through my paintings, I reveal scenes of unpretentious rural America. I attempt to enhance the beauty and peace that I see in the environment. I want to show the viewer the pristine beauty within the landscape.

Conclusion

My studies through the MIS-IAR Program have been invaluable. I have learned much about myself, as a person and as an artist. I have come to value even more the beauty that our rural countryside offers, and have a strong desire to share and spread the awareness of that

beauty with others.

As an artist in this program, I have exposed my strengths and weakness. As I became more consciously aware of my abilities, I was able to develop myself more fully as an educator and artist. Working alongside many artists and educators has been beneficial. We have been able to grow in spirit and knowledge with one another as we worked side by side. From the knowledge I gathered, I have been invigorated as a teacher and in turn have invigorated my students to learn and perform at higher standards. Through this program, I have gained confidence that will continue to push me forward in this life-long endeavor of learning and teaching.

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Appendix

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- Figure 2. *Daybreak in the Plains*, digital photograph, variable size, 2012.
- Figure 3. *Wishful Morning Dew*, digital photograph, variable size, 2015.
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- Figure 5. *Jacob's Field*, acrylic on canvas, 12"x16", 2015.
- Figure 6. *King George*, acrylic on canvas, 22"x28", 2015.



Figure 1. *Purple Earth*, digital photograph, variable size, 2012.



Figure 2. *Daybreak in the Plains*, digital photograph, variable size, 2012.



Figure 3. *Wishful Morning Dew*, digital photograph, variable size, 2015.



Figure 4. *Exit 31*, oil on canvas, 16"x20", 2012.



Figure 5. *Jacob's Field*, acrylic on canvas, 12"x16", 2015.



Figure 6. *King George*, acrylic on canvas, 22"x28", 2015.

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Education:

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Professional Organizations or Memberships:

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Solo Exhibitions:

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Group Exhibitions:

- 2007 *Metallically Speaking*, The Gallery, Radford, VA
- 2006 *The Juried Student Show*, Radford University Art Museum, Radford, VA