



2016

Strata

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Strata

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 mixed media pieces and sculptural books, I explore the significance of *place*. Place is not just a geographical location; it is a layered history that tells a story. My experiences in a specific environment and how I relate to it, study it, remember it, or imagine it drive me to create pieces. While the choices I make are influenced by my own experiences, I want to evoke feelings of familiarity, intrigue, and a sense of nostalgia.

In my process, I intuitively layer paint, printed materials, and mixed media to make a foundation for exploration. I continue to experiment by applying more paint and developing layers of media and marks. I cut away, add to, and rework areas in an effort to build a reflection and sense of place. The process itself is as important as the outcome. The stratum of layers reveals the growth and evolution of a work and in turn discloses its own history.

Strata

Introduction

From an early age, drawing and painting from life in a realistic manner brought me joy and fueled my desire to create. I loved using traditional media, such as graphite, charcoal, pen, and acrylic paint to recreate my observations both from life and photographs. Throughout my childhood and into my teenage years, I attended various art schools and programs for gifted and talented children to further my knowledge and skills. Teaching art was a passion of mine and I knew that creating was all I wanted to do as an adult.

As an undergraduate, I took all the necessary classes to obtain a Bachelor of Fine Arts in the field of art education. It was because of my experience with different media that I realized my wide scope of interests. I worked in drawing, printmaking, and craft studios. I also made books, photo transfers, and mixed media pieces. It was during this time that I shifted from realism to a more experimental approach. I was being introduced to many new and exciting processes and soon felt that I was drawn in too many directions. However, I noticed that all of my pieces had the commonality of a process-oriented layering of textured media. Through an intuitive approach, my style emerged organically. I began to notice lines that seemed to develop into topographic patterns in dyed paper, fabric, and embroidery. I abstracted photo transfers to focus on visual textures and made paper from fibers, such as abaca, which took on a skin-like texture once dried. When making paste grain papers intended for book covers, I would apply paint and methylcellulose with both traditional and non-traditional tools in various patterns and colors. When a paper dried, I would layer it again, repeating this process. My perceived indecision about which material to work with led to my true creative methods of layering.

I knew I didn't want to stop making art when I graduated, but the process of finding a

teaching job and starting my career became a focus. I had been interested in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) when I was still an undergraduate. I decided that while looking for a position, I would enroll in a class. Later, after teaching for a year, I applied to and was accepted in the MIS-IAR Program. Continuing my education allowed me to further explore media and make a body of work. I chose the concentration areas of painting and craft and material studies, and included my previous media experiences in an interdisciplinary approach to creativity.

Aesthetics

My work is about the sense of place and the various aspects and strata of landscapes that shape the way we experience it. In the article, *A Space for Place in Sociology* (2000), Rudy Professor of Sociology at Indiana University, Thomas F. Gieryn, explains that, “A place is *remarkable*, and what makes it so is an unwindable spiral of material form and interpretive understandings and experiences.” (Gieryn, 472) I believe that everyone experiences place differently, and the multiple social and geological places affect the way we feel about them. Like Gieryn states, there are places that I find remarkable and significant. I use them as inspiration for my pieces and reflect the various layers that helped shape them.

Although there are many ways to study the sociological aspects of a place, I am usually drawn to the physical nature first. The term *strata* and its synonym *layer* are both used in geology to describe structures. Natural and manmade forces have either formed or altered the landscape. It is the connection between places and people that I present in my work. Whereas geologists see identifiable layers of rock, ash, and organic matter, I see patterns and surfaces. I study these textures and layers created by years of the earth shifting, decaying, and growing, and

incorporate these visual features in my work. I develop layers to symbolically mimic the natural landscape.

In my experiences, the memories of places I have been hold significance. There are many variables that make me feel connected to a specific place, such as the current state of my life, my history, and my interests. I am initially drawn to a place because of the patterns and colors I see. Then, I delve deeper into the history and social climate of the area. This approach to learning about a place started when I went to Yellowstone National Park for the first time. I saw amazing hot springs and learned that some had been ruined because of visitors in the park throwing debris into them. The north entrance to the park states *For the Benefit and Enjoyment of the People*. I understand that people are meant to experience the park and be enriched by the incredible landscape, but it comes at a cost to the natural environment. Also, without the park people lose jobs and the economies of small towns are affected. Despite my desire to honor and protect certain places, I know that there are many sides to every situation. I use photo transfers and maps to create a connection to the landscape. I want to show we should respect and honor the places we go, while still keeping a balance that does not disrupt the social significance. *Strata* not only refers to the geological layers but also to the many sociological layers that inform and affect an area.

My connection and response to a landscape informs my palette. When creating pieces that are inspired by natural resources and geological formations, I use media with natural earth colors, such as varying shades of browns and greens. However, I often use pure hues in glass pieces to contrast with the sepia tone of photo transfers, or to show the depth of the layers of glass. I also add found imagery, such as old maps, book pages, and photographs to provide a starting point for a color scheme. These materials also reference physical features of the

landscape.

In my painting and mixed media, I incorporate textured materials that remind me of organic matter, such as transparent or handmade paper, abstracted photos of landscapes, found imagery, and textural media. I rip, tear, and cut materials and layer them intuitively. These torn and manipulated layers reveal the history of my process as well as characterize the history of a place.

In my craft works, my approach also involves a layering process. In glass, I fuse pieces multiple times while adding photo transfers, frit, wire, and gold leaf. In bookmaking, I bind various papers together and develop textures on the edges of the book. I cut away parts of pages to reveal the layers and add photographs from my experiences.

All of my work involves repetitive processes. The layers are made with multiple materials, and by using this approach, I want to relay the look of natural features and give a glimpse of what physically lies beneath the surface.

Influences

I am largely influenced by the natural landscape and its cultural significance. As I was finishing my undergraduate degree, I enrolled in an interdisciplinary course that took place in Yellowstone National Park. It was there that I was first introduced to the idea of place and the significance of the land. Since that initial trip, I have been back eight more times as a teacher's assistant and logistics manager. My time in Yellowstone was spent with a diverse group of people including professors, students, and locals to the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. By spending time with individuals that I might not normally have the opportunity to meet, I was given different perspectives on the landscape and its significance. It was here that I first read A

Space for Place in Society (2000). I started to understand that the physical environment affects society and that places affect our culture. In other words, there is no separating the landscape and who we are. I now look at landscapes and social issues in a new light.

I travel whenever possible and I am able to see places and learn about their history and cultures. I incorporate parts of nature that inspire me, such as rock layers in canyons or the patterns created by lichen growing on rocks. Sometimes, the words used for descriptions of geological change inform my process and help me see similarities in the way the earth was formed and how my pieces are made. While seeking information, I came across *The Earth* (1962) by Arthur Beiser, a physicist and science writer. This book is part of the *LIFE Nature Library* series about the natural world. It covers topics such as the development of landforms, the structure of the earth, and the study of geology. While reading this book for inspiration, I came across the following passage that reflects my feelings about the ever changing landscape.

In the relentless rhythm of change, the earth sporadically raises up on the continents new mountain masses and high plateaus, while the unceasing motions of water and air sluice the dry land into the sea. In the course of their blind task of diminishing the continents, these forces of erosion often carve a landscape into shapes that men sometimes find beautiful- and always find strange. (Beiser, 113)

I found this passage to be more poetic than informative in a geological sense. The words *relentless rhythm* struck a chord with me and I realized that along with representing the earth and its history, there is also a rhythm to my process and outcomes.

In addition to geology, I have found other artists who have similar approaches to process and strategies for lessening creative anxiety. While reading *The Penland Book for Handmade Books: Master Classes in Bookmaking Techniques* (2004), I came across the work of contemporary book artist, Susan E. King. She creates books that are informed by her process. For example, King is quoted as saying, "I'd rather abandon myself to the process and tolerate a

certain amount of not knowing exactly where I am along the road.” (LaFerla, 92-93) She also discusses that if anxiety presents itself to her, she thinks of processes as experiments. This resonated with me and changed the way I work. I find the repetitive nature of my work to be soothing. Because I work intuitively without a distinct finishing point, I am able to work without feeling the paralyzing fear of making mistakes.

Another influence is Melissa Jay Craig, an artist that I personally worked with. Craig is a paper, book, and installation artist. I was particularly inspired by the texture of the abaca paper that she used to create a three-dimensional form in her piece *Edition* (2009), an installation of ninety-nine sculptural books. After seeing more pieces, I learned that Craig works with materials that minimize their impact on the earth. Similarly, I try to incorporate recycled material in my work such as found imagery from discarded books. After learning about the various fibers that Craig uses in her work, I made my own abaca paper and used it in a number of works.

Two local artists whose process and media influenced the way I create are Tanja Softic and Jason Keith. In Softic’s work, I was inspired by her decision to use photogravures and maps. So, I incorporated this type of imagery in my pieces. In her series, *Sarajevo Story* (2013), she addressed the culture of post-war Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the closing of its cultural institutions for lack of government funding. (Softic) Softic’s mixed media work represents the relationship between culture and place which is also addressed in my work.

The other local artist is Jason Keith, a mixed media artist. His work drew my interest because of his layering of paint that shows the history of the piece. In his piece, *The Dance is Over* (2013), Keith layers brightly colored paint and paper underneath more subdued white and gray paint. The layers are visible after the top surface has been removed in places. After I had seen his work, I placed attention on layering paint and scraping through it to reveal layers. This

allowed me to reveal the history of the landscape as well as the history of my process.

Similar to the materials and processes I use, I am inspired by a broad range of influences. I experiment with my work based on what interests me at a particular point in time. Artists' use of media or processes that draw me to their work then inspire me to investigate different avenues. The natural environment is in a continuous state of change and provides me with new patterns, colors, and textures to reference in my work. I am also in a constant state of change due to my experiences. This is reflected in my work as I absorb and reflect new information about places, media, and processes.

Painting

In painting, I often represent the iconic topographic lines that are associated with maps. I generally work on multiple pieces at a time within the same palette. This helps me create a unified series of works. I also add layers of paint, scraping parts of it away and observing the color relationships between the layers. As I continue this process, I add modeling paste to create more depth and texture. Using these materials, I am able to develop paintings that reflect topographic qualities in landscapes.

When integrating a sense of place into my paintings, I am most inspired by maps. Visually, I appreciate older maps and the documentation of history. I am also drawn to topographic lines because of the simplicity of the repetition. In *Small Study of Topography 1* (Appendix, 1) and *Small Study of Topography 2* (Appendix, 2), I decided to experiment with layering paint mixed with modeling paste. While the paintings are not about a specific location, I wanted to reflect the lines seen in maps. After layering paint, I carved topographic patterns into the thick, wet acrylic. With this process, I realized I could use the imagery of maps without

having to recreate specific places. This approach to abstraction was a pivotal moment for me. I felt free to work and use intuitive mark making in the process.

Topographic Triptych (Appendix, 3) is a work that also reflects maps but is intended to reflect the strata in the landscape. In this piece, I added paint mixed with modeling paste with both brushes and palette knives. I layered the paint in different areas and in different thicknesses on the canvases. I let some of the earlier layers of paint show through. After letting each layer of paint dry, I added another thicker layer of modeling paste and carved topographic-like concentric circles into the surfaces. Next, I mounted and framed the three canvases on wood painted black. The black frame provided contrast to the paintings while streamlining the presentation. By framing the pieces together, I presented three different aspects of a place.

When my work is displayed, I want the viewer to feel that my paintings are connected to a place even though the location is intentionally ambiguous. The media and processes are used to reference the strata found in the landscape and natural elements. I want to show the application of media and the implied connection to places as relayed by the coloration, marks, and textures. I invite the viewer to look and see the history of each piece.

Craft and Material Studies

My work in material studies helped me incorporate aspects of place with an intuitive application of media. The use of materials such as glass, photos, embroidery floss, and various papers has allowed me to broaden my interpretation of the concept of place. Although the processes and materials differ from my paintings, the act of repetition and the incorporation of layers are consistent in all of my pieces.

I use embroidery as a means to draw and express lines in topographic patterns. When I

began stitching, I found a sense of peace in the repetitive motion. Embroidery became a way of mark making that satisfied my desire to draw as well as my need to have freedom and fluidity in my process. *Textile Topography* (Appendix, 4) is an exploration of mark making with embroidery to show the general aspects of landscapes and place. To begin this piece, I started with a light purple embroidery floss, using a back stitch to create organic patterns. As I continued using the same stitch, I changed the colors and encircled the previous stitching. I kept the lines tight and close to create a more intricate, topographic pattern. After I finished the central embroidery, I quilted a traditional log cabin pattern around it with a purple fabric. I also altered the dye in some pieces using *shibori*, a Japanese resist dyeing process in which existing dye is extracted using chemicals. Using this technique, I tightly wrapped parts of the fabric in rubber bands in various patterns. Doing so protected those areas from the chemicals that would draw out the dye. When using this process, the end result is often a surprise because it is unknown what the fabric will look like after the commercial dye has been removed. What I ended up with was a neutral yellow color that contrasted with the purple. The organic patterns reminded me of natural landscapes and mimicked the topographic lines in the embroidery.

Continuing to represent place, I started working with glass. I had experimented with photo transfers on fused glass and realized it was a new technique that I could incorporate in my body of work. The photo transfers allowed me to represent place and landscape, and the transparent nature of the glass provided a new avenue for layering and repetition. This process allowed me to represent the experiences I had and the places I found significant while keeping the imagery abstract and ambiguous. In *Hydrothermal* (Appendix, 5), I started with a photo of a hydrothermal feature from a geyser basin in Yellowstone National Park. After turning the photo black and white, I repeatedly increased the contrast until it became abstracted. Then, I printed

the photo on decal paper used for photo transfers on glass. I applied it to a clear piece of glass and then fired it at a full fuse so the kiln was hot enough to fully transfer the photo. The result was that the parts of the photo that were black turned a sepia color. This color change is because the printer ink used to create the decal had a high level of iron oxide in it and the extreme temperature in the kiln turned the iron brown. Although the sepia is a result of the photo transfer process, it is more easily incorporated in my pieces and better represents the color schemes of the earth.

Next, I created another layer of fused glass to show through the negative space in the photo transfer. I used a piece of white glass that was the same size as the glass with the photo transfer. Then, I lightly sprinkled purple frit on the top surface. From there, I added pieces of gold leaf in sporadic areas, making sure I didn't put too much in one place. Gold leaf is not actually gold but it is very thin aluminum. When aluminum is fired at a hot enough temperature it will turn a turquoise color. I wanted to represent the turquoise water in the hydrothermal features. I then placed the clear glass with the photo transfer on top of the white glass with frit and gold leaf and fused them together. When it was finished, the gold leaf had created air bubbles in between the sheets of glass, unexpectedly adding to the representation of the hydrothermal feature. Once I ground the edges of the piece to smooth the sharper areas and make all the sides more uniform, I mounted it in a black shadowbox. I floated the piece so that light could still reflect through the layers of glass.

The next piece, *Physiography* (Appendix, 6 and 6a), is a mixed media book consisting of six pages. It was made with handmade paper and thread. This piece is about the origin and development of the landscape. In terms of geology, it is about studying the characteristics of topographic patterns and the development of the earth's surface. In this work, I wanted to

contrast the texture of natural abaca paper with the line work I could achieve with embroidery. I started with abaca paper that I had made years earlier and decided to use different threads for the embroidery. The abaca paper had areas where air had been trapped in the paper making process and it created small, organic circles. I used a thick, green thread and embroidered along the outer edge of these shapes to start my topographic line work. From there, I continued to stitch with brown and other shades of green. I worked on each page separately and bound the pages back to back using another sheet of abaca in the middle to make the pages sturdier. Then, I made dowel rods to which the pages would be bound to make it a three-dimensional structure. After attaching small beads to the bottom of the dowel rods, I painted them brown in keeping with a natural color scheme. Once they were done, I used a bookbinding technique called a *Japanese stab binding*. This binding technique allows single pages to be individually bound as opposed to being bound in sections. After binding the pages to the dowel rods, the piece became moveable and free standing.

My craft and material studies allow me to explore various media while continuing to use layers and repetition in my work. The freedom allowed by the different avenues I can take with each piece gives me momentum and I am able to make art more easily. This also satisfies my need to experiment with new processes and reflect what is currently influencing my life in a variety of ways.

Mixed Media

The process of layering and repetition are most apparent in my mixed media pieces. When I create pieces without the restriction of one media, I let my intuition influence my choices and am able to work more freely. I also incorporate more found imagery and recycled materials

that then inform my process.

After I created *Hydrothermal* (Appendix, 5), I wanted to continue layering photo transfers on clear glass with colored glass, frit, and gold leaf. Using the same approach but with different photos of hydrothermal features and other pieces of glass, I created *Into the Mantle* (Appendix, 7). After editing photos, transferring them to pieces of clear glass, and firing them in the kiln, I chose a few to work on. To create the fused glass pieces, I chose three sheets of glass to be the bottom layer of each piece. Two were brightly colored and one was white. I added gold leaf and frit to the surface of the white glass to add a layer of color. Knowing that gold leaf would eventually turn turquoise, I added purple frit to create a cool color scheme to represent water and to contrast against the sepia color of the photo transfer. I placed one of the photo transfers on top of each clear glass piece and fired them. After firing all three pieces, I added some texture to the tops of the photo transfers by piling up medium and coarse frit. When I fired the glass again, I used a lower temperature so that the frit didn't fully fuse and remained textured. I was drawn mostly to the red frit color, so I subtly embroidered organic patterns with red thread on red fabric. Lastly, I mounted it to a piece of wood and then floated the pieces of glass on top.

Tactile Terrain (Appendix, 8) is inspired by my painting process and represents textures found in the natural environment and imagery that refers to a sense of place. To create a more complex image, I used maps that I found in a U.S. Geological Survey publication from the early 1900's. I chose the old maps to reflect a sense of nostalgia. The actual locations aren't important, so I intentionally presented ambiguous locations. I lightly painted over parts of the maps, obscuring some of the text but still leaving enough of the map showing. I used the maps as a starting point for many of the color choices I made. As I added modeling paste, I

concentrated more on textures that I felt mimicked the natural elements found in landscapes. Then, I highlighted some of the textures I had created by lightly brushing acrylic paint over the more textured areas. Once the canvases were complete, I mounted them on wood and built a natural frame around them to present the pieces as one. The natural wood frame was light enough to create separation and contrast while still creating a streamlined presentation. The application of found imagery mixed with the texture from the paint, and modeling paste helped me relay a sense of place.

Continuing to use my experiences as a starting point, I created a piece inspired by Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I was initially drawn to the site because of striking images taken by one of my photography students. Upon further investigation, I learned more about the history and evolution of the prison. It was the first prison to establish the philosophy of using solitary confinement so that offenders could show penitence for their actions, hence the term, *penitentiary*. Although this philosophy influenced more than 250 prisons around the world, it was closed in 1970 and fell into disrepair. I found the deteriorated and crumbling physicality of the building to be beautiful. Along with the aesthetics, I was drawn to its cultural transformation from prison to National Historic Landmark.

I visited the historic site and photographed the crumbling remains that are both beautiful and evoke a feeling of fear. Using the photographs, I created *Cultural Reform 1/5* (Appendix, 9 and 9a) which is the first in an edition of five accordion books. These books explore the many historic, social, and physical layers of the historic landmark. I wanted to show that a landscape can have a broader definition and that this specific place had significance that could be conveyed visually.

To begin, I made the accordion binding out of heavy cardstock with enough space for six

sections of pages. Then, I edited the photos and printed them on heavy cardstock. The cardstock colors vary and include shades of gray, tan, and yellow. I used these colors because they echoed much of the physical nature of walls in the prison. After printing the photos, I grouped and layered them. Each section of the accordion book had three layers of photographs and in the top two layers I cut away parts of images to reveal what was underneath. I put the images together this way because it is how I had experienced the actual penitentiary. The doors to some of the cells were open, but many were closed and could only be viewed by peering through small openings. Next, I attached the image pages to the accordion binding.

After constructing each book, I created small boxes with thick paper and tape to be the covers. I added pieces of plastic garden fencing to the outside to reflect a caged appearance. To incorporate the fencing and to imply a sense of decay and ruin, I applied modeling paste and acrylic. The final step was to design a way to open and close the box covers, so I cut a small, square hole through the cover along the inside of the garden fencing. This created an opening similar to a window on a cell door from which the viewer can open the cover and take out the book.

The pieces I have created allow me to feel a sense of place and to honor the landscape. The processes I use have given me a way to present my interpretation of *strata* and the multi-layered world around me. When I view my works, I feel as though I have found a way to show how place and people are interconnected. The variety of media I use has allowed me to explore different ways to represent aspects of place and given my body of work diversity while remaining focused.

Conclusion

The MIS-IAR Program has given me the opportunity to find my voice as an artist. It allowed me to use experimentation as my guide to create a body of work that I would not otherwise be able to make. Without the Program, I would not have had the influences and structure needed to compile a focused portfolio.

As a teacher, I am constantly learning and growing to better suit my students' needs. Because of the Program, I introduce to my classes many new and different processes that I wouldn't have been able to show them otherwise. I was also able to connect with them about being in school, meeting due dates and deadlines, as well as show them what it is truly like to be a contemporary artist in modern society.

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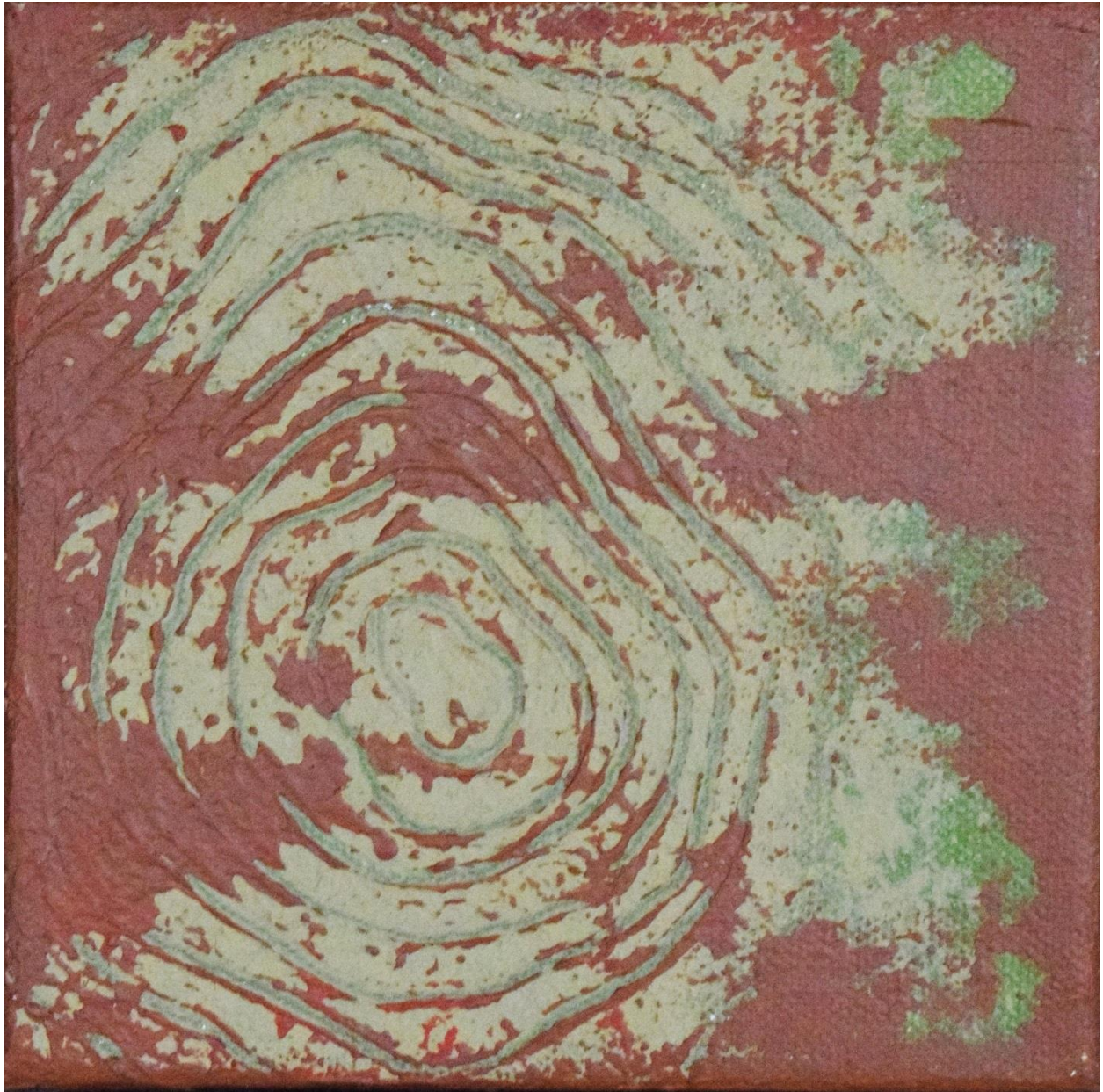


Figure 1. *Small Study of Topography 1*, acrylic paint on canvas, 5"x5"x2", 2014.



Figure 2. *Small Study of Topography 2*, acrylic paint on canvas, 5''x5''x2'', 2014.

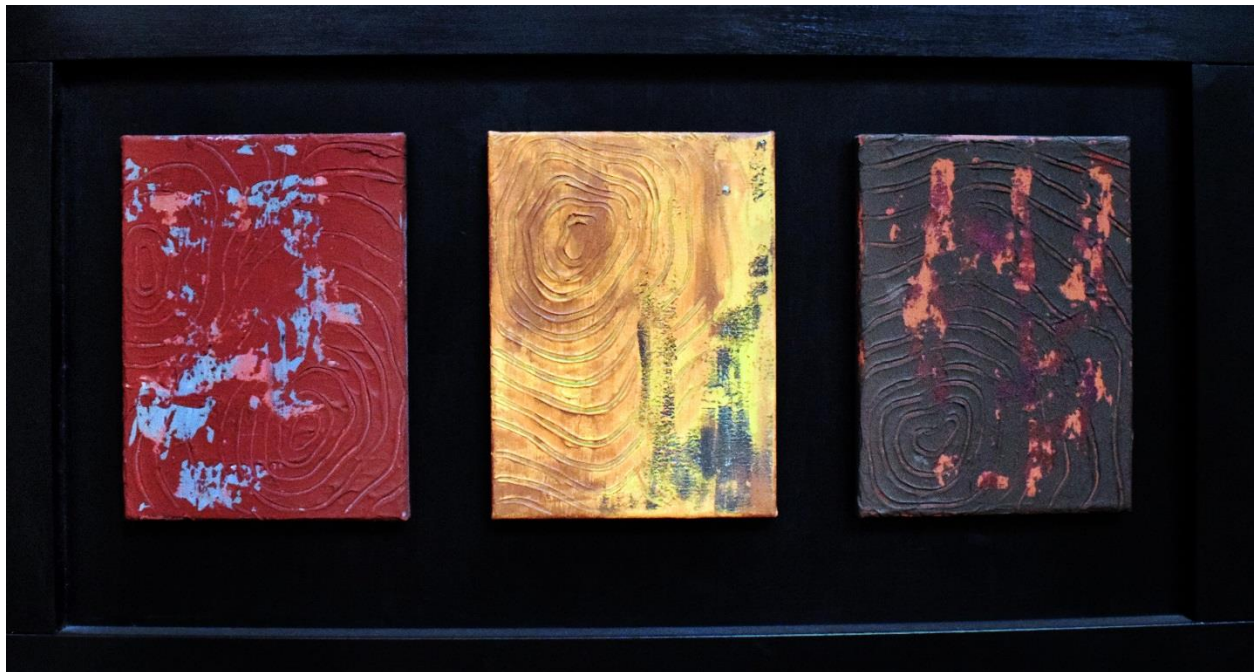


Figure 3. *Topographic Triptych*, acrylic paint on canvas mounted on painted wood, 20"x38"x1", 2014.



Figure 4. *Textile Topography*, embroidery on textiles, 9"x9"x1/4", 2012.

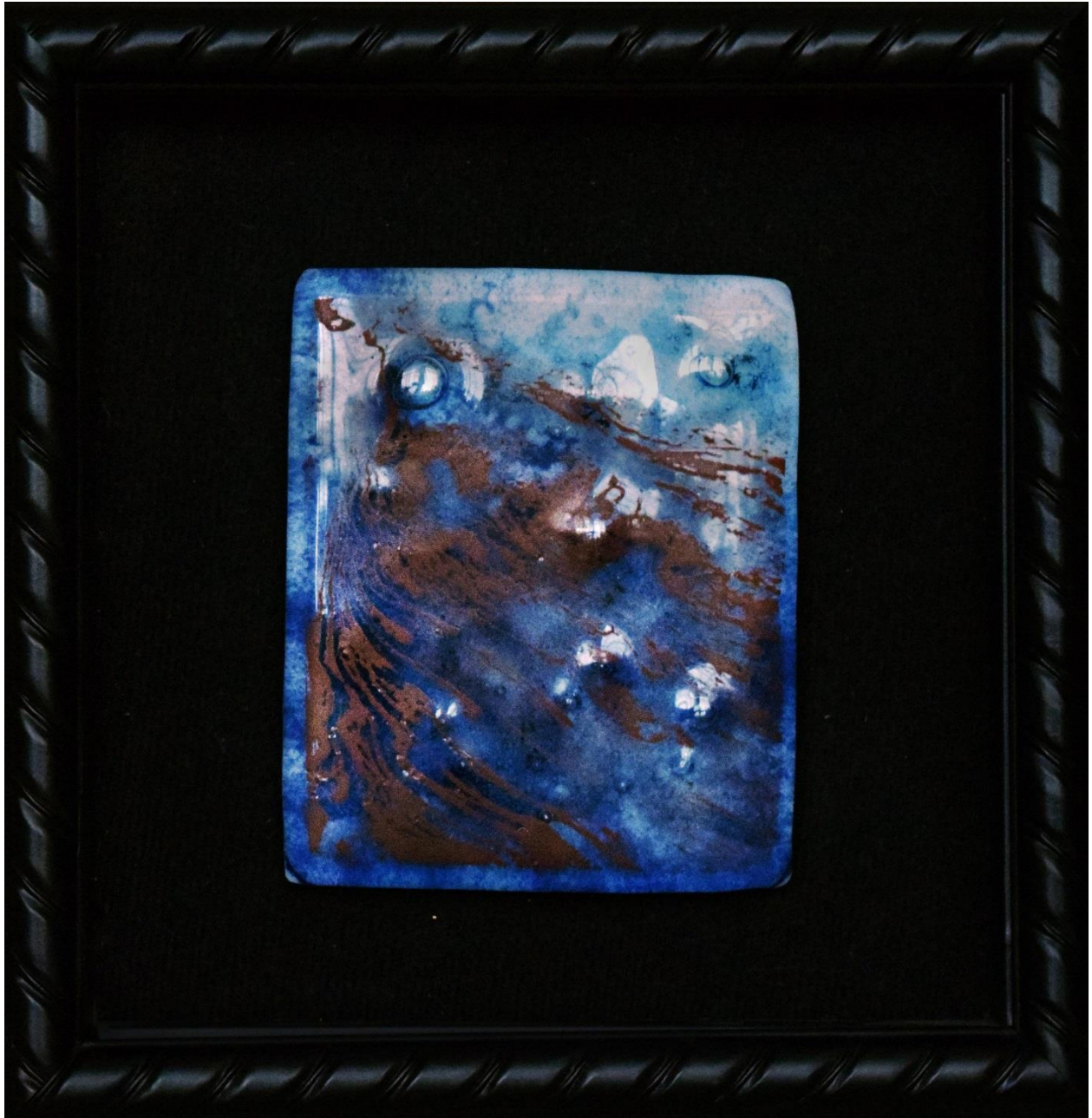


Figure 5. *Hydrothermal*, photo transfer on fused glass mounted in black box, 9"x9"x2", glass piece: 5"x4"x1/4", 2013.



Figure 6. *Physiography* (side 1), embroidery on abaca bound to dowel rods, 12"x29"x1/4", 2015.



Figure 6a. *Physiography* (side 2), embroidery on abaca bound to dowel rods, 12"x29"x1/4", 2015.



Figure 7. Into the Mantle, mixed media, 18"x24"x1", glass on left: 7½"x 5 ½" ¼", glass in center: 8"x5½"x¼", glass on right: 7"x5 ½"x¼", 2013.



Figure 8. *Tactile Terrain*, mixed media, 13½"x28"x½", 2014.



Figure 9. *Cultural Reform 1/5* (detail), mixed media, 5½”x4½”x½” (closed), 2015.



Figure 9a. *Cultural Reform 1/5* (detail), mixed media, 5½"x33"x4½" (opened), 2015.

Liz Hale

Education:

- 2017 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia
- 2009 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Longwood University, Farmville, Virginia

Licensure:

- 2009 K-12 teaching licensure

Related Experience:

- 2016 Logistics Manager, Longwood University (Farmville, Virginia) at Wrangell-St. Elias National Park, Alaska.
- 2009-2015 Logistics Manager, Longwood University (Farmville, Virginia) at Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho.

Teaching Experience:

- 2014-Present Art Teacher, Warhill High School, Williamsburg, Virginia
- 2011-2014 Art Teacher, York High School, York County, Virginia

Exhibitions:

- 2017 *Strata*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond Public Library, Richmond, Virginia
- 2012 *Short Twig: A Collection of Paper Works*, Main Art Gallery, Richmond, Virginia