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Finding Beauty

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Finding Beauty

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Artist Statement

My relationships and my environment define my life and my art. Through the use of collage and mixed media I express these relationships and places by making cut-outs from calendars, art books, and magazines. My collages were originally inspired by my own personal photography and memories of the area where I grew up, the Adirondack Mountains. As I expanded my techniques, I also began to find beauty in other environments.

Finding Beauty

Introduction

Coming out of my undergraduate training and entering the real world, I felt uninspired in the studio. I could not decide how to make my life experiences from the past twenty-two years interesting and compelling to a viewer. Wanting to create art, I was frustrated by not finding an inspiration or subject matter of interest. It motivated me to find an answer.

Having always succeeded in creating pieces of work that solved a problem that had been given to me by a professor, friend, or family member, I struggled to develop my own ideas and projects. In addition to this obstacle, I was convinced that it was necessary to experience a tragic event in life to be inspired sufficiently to create a meaningful piece of work. I was lost and looked into the idea of going back to school in an effort to get myself creatively on track. Finding some courage, I took a graduate course in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) program offered by Virginia Commonwealth University. After being accepted into the program, I was able to find the inspiration to develop a body of work.

Working through the MIS program provided me with the realization that my everyday life experiences are worthy of examination. I began to find the meaning and beauty in my life, and learned how to apply it to my art.

My Journey

In looking at and studying different art works I found that I was continually drawn to images that were organic and visually related to nature. By using images of trees as a way to convey feelings about a personal relationship, I could metaphorically relate the structure of the tree to aspects of my life. Symbolically sculpting the trees as human figures, I positioned the branches to symbolize my feelings of sadness and loneliness. Sculpting the branches of two trees intertwined mimicked the closeness and intimacy of two people when dancing. Sharp-edged branches symbolized the tension and uneasiness that can be felt in a relationship. By instilling emotions through gesture and position in trees and branches, I was able to add my own feelings into my art for the first time. The direction my art was taking pleased me. I began investigating the idea of metaphorically using organic images to interpret my relationships further.

My first focused piece, *Home* (Appendix, 1), was inspired by a piece of work by Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) created during his Gold Phase. Klimt, an Austrian Symbolist painter, used gold leaf on his painting. This period of his artwork was inspired by Byzantine imagery and mosaics that he saw during his trips to Venice, Italy. Like Klimt, I was interested in and collected iconic images from the Byzantine time period. In *Home*, I cut up a postcard with the Klimt image on it, along with natural and organic elements from a variety of other images. Then, I cut out shapes of loons, cat tails, and trees, which were reminders of my childhood environment. Using 3"x2" pieces of light blue cardstock to make backgrounds for these small cut-outs, I ended with a total of nine small collaged cut-outs that I arranged in a storyboard format. Evenly spacing the pieces a

centimeter away from each other, the result was three columns and three rows. I found the contrast to be too high when originally using a dark blue mat board as a support for the nine images. The board was visually too flat and bright and distracted the eye from the collaged imagery. I went into my cluttered and unorganized stash of crayons, oil pastels, chalk, and mediums and began creating textures on different small scrap pieces of mat board. The most successful result for subduing the flat brightness of the support occurred using a thin translucent layer of black oil pastel and two coats of the high gloss medium. I used this technique over the entire support. This manipulation gave the support more depth and less contrast, pushing the mat board visually into the background. Lastly, the small collaged pieces were attached onto the support and an additional two coats of gloss medium were applied over the entire piece. The top coats of gloss made the piece more cohesive. This work was encouraging and motivating because I had creatively found a way to tell about myself and my family home in New York.

In the next piece, *Textured Adirondacks* (Appendix, 2), I continued with the same cut out and collage process. This time my work was inspired by quilting. As a child, my grandmother had taught me how to make quilts. The patchwork quality of a well-made quilt has always appealed to me. I have found that quilting could aesthetically be connected to collage. Since I began working with collage, I had become interested in the variety of different papers that were at my disposal. The thought of fabric and quilting as a new inspiration opened up a whole new world of ideas and possibilities that I had not seen before. In *Textured Adirondacks*, I chose to use one large image and complement it with two smaller rectangular images on the top and bottom. I spaced the top and bottom

rectangles one centimeter away from the main rectangle. The rectangles were treated as accent pieces, visually working together with the main image. I used the same tree and landscape elements from my piece *Home*. Being continuously drawn to bright colors and interesting patterns, I used arbitrary colors for the mountains and trees but kept the forms true to life.

Finding Beauty

Alternative Photography is a broad process that covers any way of processing and creating an image other than using the traditional darkroom. While still being interested in collage, I found that this media could be incorporated into my art making process successfully. Using a digital camera, I began taking photographs of everything that struck me as beautiful or interesting. I used solvents to transfer a laser print of a digital image onto a piece of Bristol board. By applying the solvent to an image and burnishing it onto a new surface, I was able to achieve texture in addition to a sensation of movement from a still image. Immediately, I saw an opportunity to incorporate collage into this process.

In the piece *Collage 1* (Appendix, 3), I created a collage on 14"x11" Bristol board using Byzantine images of angels, and incorporating watercolors, colored pencils, and other textured papers. Using a black pen I added stylized tree branches throughout the composition. I placed the angels, birds, and hand-painted flowers around the branches. Finding the piece to be too bright led me to scanning the entire piece into Photoshop and cropping the image. I then printed the image on a color laser printer and used solvent to

transfer this final image, *Beautiful Day* (Appendix, 4), onto a fresh piece of 2"x3" Bristol board. The colors and forms of the new image were more cohesive than the original collage; there was not one area competing for dominance. However, the image still retained its collaged and layered look. I now had the ability to create a collage and manipulate it further; the collage was no longer the end of the process.

From this point, I began to look for ways to combine photo and collage in my process. I chose two images of tulips that I digitally photographed to create cyanotypes, *Flower 1* (Appendix, 5) and *Flower 2* (Appendix, 6). Cyanotypes are an alternative form of developing an image from a 35mm or digital negative onto a surface that has been painted with a sun sensitive solution. The final cyanotypes were high contrast, which created very interesting and dynamic images. The contrast between the blue and white areas of the flower produced definite shapes. This inspired me to replicate these shapes with cut paper. Using these cut out shapes, I replicated the floral image in collage form in the next two pieces.

In *Finding Beauty* (Appendix, 7) and *A Summer Day* (Appendix, 8), I used reproductions from an old book that had images from Eastern Asia to recreate the cyanotypes. In these two pieces, I used a softer color palette than in my earlier collages. The incorporation of solid black lines produced definite edges to the petals and leaves. This is the first time I added any graphic black contours into my work. I also ventured away from the earlier storyboard format of my pieces and created these as two individual works. Not originally intending for the pieces to work together as a pair, I found they

could be presented alone or together. At this point, I was expanding my combination of media and processes, as well as my image sources.

I have now added the digital camera to my toolbox of media. I bring the digital camera with me everywhere because I never know if I'm going to encounter something interesting on the ground walking to work, or just in my own backyard. I have been creating a library of these spontaneous digital images to use in my future works.

New Ideas

The MIS program compelled me to explore and look for new ways of thinking about art. I found that I love working with paper and textures as well as learning new techniques and media. After researching image transfers, I discovered that printmaking could aptly be transitioned into my process. The options for creating new work using the press and pulling hand prints seemed endless. The ability to layer images and colors fit perfectly into my collage process. I found that my monoprints were in need of something more, after they had been pulled from the press. I found the colors to be somewhat lusterless. By using them as an interesting support for a collage the final image could be more dynamic visually.

Tropical Forest (Appendix, 9) was created from a print by placing speedball ink on a plexiglas plate. In the beginning, this was an exercise I used to grow familiar with the media and to experiment with the press and its variety of settings. I pulled the print and was initially disappointed with the results. I reworked the image by using magazines and other textured paper to add flowers, leaves, and vines. Using an image of a flower

carved out of linoleum, I printed on top of the piece in different areas. This repetitive floral motif added to the cohesiveness of the work. I found that by using a variety of techniques I could create a piece of work with depth and range.

I wanted to continue to use printmaking in my art and I began to go through all of my digital images from Key West trips to find ideas for subject matter. In *Key West Vespas* (Appendix, 10) I started experimenting with a technique of printmaking using watercolor pencils and a mylar sheet as a plate. I used the photo as a guide and lightly drew the image of Vespas that were lined up outside a Key West restaurant. I then used the watercolor pencils to intuitively add color. I chose to use bright colors that reminded me of the island environment. I used a piece of hot pressed watercolor paper and soaked it in water. After the water had absorbed into the paper, the excess water was blotted off using a clean, white towel. I set the 8"x10" mylar on an 11"x14" inch piece of Plexiglas. Then, I carefully placed the watercolor paper on top of the mylar and ran the piece through a tightly set press. The final image was a smooth, well-blended version of the original drawing. The color was highly saturated and vibrant.

Key West Vespas was the first piece that I had created which was entirely inspired from newer experiences. It was also a piece of work that was not a collage. I did not feel I needed to add any elements of collage to this piece of work. I designed a few more pieces with this technique of printmaking. However, I missed creating in a collage format because it allowed me to layer and manipulate images more freely and imaginatively.

Alternative approaches to photography and printmaking led me to experiment with incorporating fabric and paper into one piece. I began to experiment with this idea by layering fabric onto my collage *It's 5 o'clock Somewhere* (Appendix, 11). The original idea for this piece came from another digital photo I took in Key West. The bright, vibrant colors and eclectic feel of the environment captivated me. I began by creating the image with pencil on a piece of watercolor paper. I then used watercolor and colored pencil to render the bird. I wanted the flowers to move forward in space, so I chose to contrast them with the drawing and construct them entirely with collaged paper. For these elements I used old magazines and textured paper that I had made. For leaves and other flowers I incorporated cut out shapes of fabric. I used colored pencil to add shadow to the fabric elements.

In *Fabric Flower* (Appendix, 12) I experimented entirely with fabric as the media. I went to a local fabric store and found fabric that I thought had interesting color and pattern. I cut petals and leaves from the fabric to represent a flower. I treated the cut pieces of fabric the same way I treated paper when creating a collage. However, instead of using glue to create the overlapped effect of the image, I used a sewing machine to appliqué the pieces. I found that I could manipulate fabric to create an image or scene the same way I could manipulate paper. Experimenting with different techniques and media has allowed me to create a body of work that is unified by its subject matter. It has been rewarding to find inspiration in each piece of work which then leads me to create the next.

Conclusion

The MIS program has given me the courage and support I need to continue my journey as a practicing artist. I have a growing interest in exploring more printmaking techniques, and new ways of incorporating them into collage. I feel that my art and confidence has grown exponentially throughout the past few years. I have begun to submit my work to competitions and exhibit my work. I now have the confidence to critically discuss my work with others. The program has been supportive in guiding me to become a more accomplished and confident artist.

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Figure 1. *Home*, collage and mixed media, 10"x8", 2006.

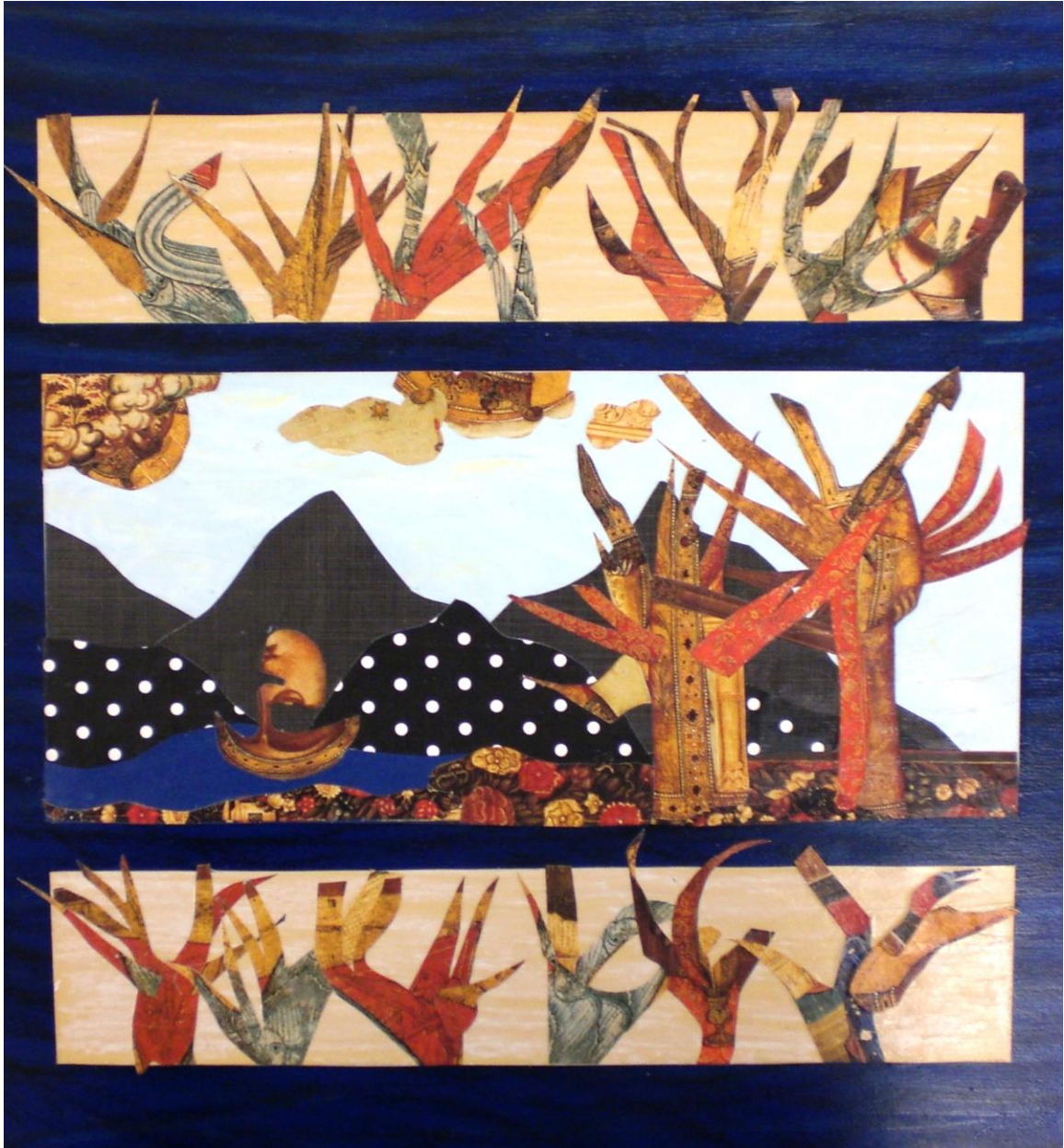


Figure 2. *Textured Adirondacks*, collage and mixed media, 11"x14", 2006.



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Figure 7. *Finding Beauty*, collage and mixed media, 5"x7", 2006.

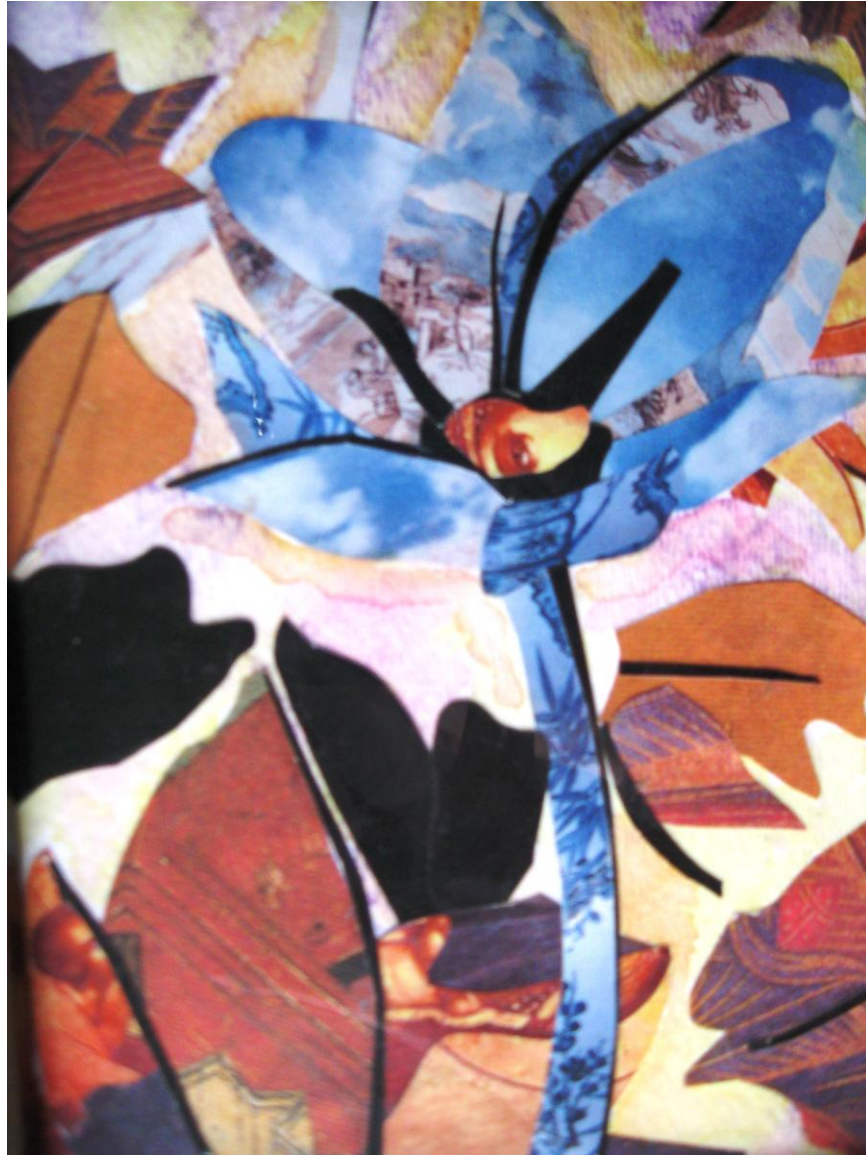


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Figure 11. *It's 5 o'clock Somewhere*, collage and mixed media, 14"x11", 2009.



Figure 12. *Fabric Flower*, fabric, 22"x17", 2009.

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