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Light of Life

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Light of Life

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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Light of Life

The path through life is filled with light and darkness but light casts shadows and can darken one's life. With this metaphor, I use light to symbolize the positive and shadows to represent the negative things that every one of us encounters.

In my landscape paintings, the combination of light and darkness symbolizes my journey through life. There is a predominance of light in my paintings. Therefore, my intention is to portray the positive over the negative. In other words, I want to portray *the light at the end of the tunnel*.

Light of Life

Introduction

I am an art teacher at Legacy Elementary School in Ashburn, Virginia. However, I had not painted since graduating from college in 1993. The urge to paint began to creep back into my life when I took two art classes through Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in the summer of 2003 for re-certification points. After taking these art classes, I was excited and determined to learn more about the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) program at VCU. I was accepted into the program the following semester. My goals and dreams continued to escalate from this point on.

Symbolically, my journey began to pick up its pace and head toward the shining light, gleaming at the end of the tunnel, in this very same summer. I saw the MIS Off-Campus program as an opportunity to pursue higher education, which is something that I've always dreamed about. I lived in a refugee camp in Yemen when I was eight; school was not something that was available to refugee children. I spent most of my time babysitting younger siblings and taking care of household chores while my mother was at work. I began my formal schooling at the age of thirteen when my fourth stepfather adopted my siblings and me. This was the turning point of my journey in life. I portray this journey in my landscape paintings by symbolically using light to represent the positive and shadow to portray the negative things that I encountered.

Techniques Acquired

I found myself a bit off track when I got back into painting. Fortunately, I had wonderful painting professors who were able to help me. When I began working in this program, I learned to layer colors on the canvas, which was something that was new to me. I would start by painting a thin layer of color for the background. Then, I discovered that sketching on the canvas with a brush and paint instead of a pencil was more direct and more enjoyable. When a mistake occurred, I simply used the brush to blend the color in with the background. This process eliminated pencil eraser shavings laying on the surface of the canvas. After I sketched the images, I applied a coat of color on the images and then added details at the end. When I painted the trees and leaves in my landscapes, the colors looked more naturalistic using several thin layers of paint. I would apply one thin color and wait for it to dry a bit, then apply another coat of paint but not the same shade or tint. One of the technical things I've learned that is so crucial to my theme of light and dark is not to use black for shadows. I mixed cobalt blue with cadmium red to make my shadows. This gives the shadows more volume and warmth than black would.

Aesthetics of Images

Throughout the process of learning to paint and figuring out what is the most important image to paint, I decided on landscapes and from time to time seascapes. I have painted portraits and still lifes but nothing seems to give me as much satisfaction as landscapes. I would often paint landscapes from photographs or memory until one summer in 2002 when I took a class with Professor Kurt Godwin. He made me sit

outdoors to paint, even on days as hot as ninety-eight degrees. Every student in the class sweated profusely but by the end of our intensive two weeks semester, I had produced five completed paintings. He once made a comment that the heat got into us so we painted like crazy. Even though it was hot, the experience of sitting outdoors and observing what was going on around me was phenomenal. I treasured those moments of sitting out in the sun, smelling the freshness of the leaves in the air, feeling a gentle breeze blowing across my face, and hearing the soft chirping sound of the birds. This made me feel so relaxed and peaceful. In all of my paintings, my goal is to paint peaceful places where I can capture direct sunlight casting shadows on the ground or the trees.

When viewers look at my landscape paintings, they may wonder where are the people; none are anywhere to be found. Events in my life have influenced the choice to leave figures out of my paintings. When I was younger, my mother remarried several times and I didn't care for any of my stepfathers. Instead of spending time with them, I would find a place where I could be by myself, seeking for some quiet moment. Because of these experiences, I realized that my paintings are more peaceful without people.

My past experiences have influenced my art, I have painted scenes with darkness but often the light outweighs the darkness. Although I walked through many bumpy, dark roads growing up, I feel fortunate to have learned from these experiences and have begun to appreciate the smooth, lighted road that I see ahead of me.

I feel blessed to have met many warm hearted people in the United States; they helped me to see the bright sunlight of life. *Light at the End of the Path* (Appendix, 1) is the painting that reflects my life at this stage. I see myself as one of the trees standing two feet away from the lighted end of the path. The tree is almost covered with

sunlight, only a few parts of its branches are still in the shade. My painting *The Reading Chair* (Appendix, 2) portrays my life in the near future, where I will have accomplished all of my goals, live comfortably, and be a productive citizen. *The Reading Chair* portrays a landscape with a chair that has a book sitting on it. Both are in direct sunlight with a tall tree standing behind it. The book symbolizes me as an educator, the chair as a place to dwell, and the tree standing behind the chair is my past.

Influenced by Other Master Painters

I am inspired by Edward Hopper's (1882-1967) use of light in his canvases. I see my works relating to Hopper's work in the emphasis on sunlight. As Robert Hobbs said in his book *Edward Hopper*, "What is important is how Hopper saw his objects, preferring to portray them early in the morning or at night, removed from human presence."¹ In support of his choice to emphasize light, Hopper said of his own work, "Maybe I am not very human. What I wanted to do was to paint sunlight on the side of the house."²

Another similarity between my work and Hopper's is the intuitive approach. There are times when I just paint on the spur of the moment, spontaneously placing images on the canvas with very little forethought. On that note, I agree with Hopper's statement, also found in Hobb's book, in which he stated, "So much of every art is an expression of the subconscious that it seems to me most all of the important qualities are

¹ Heinz Liesbrock, *Edward Hopper Forty Masterworks* (New York, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 16.

² Robert Hobbs, *Edward Hopper* (New York, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1987), 23.

put there unconsciously and little of importance by the conscious intellect...”³ I feel that this intuitive approach lends itself to my symbolic self-referential work.

Another example of unintended symbolism is that I always looked for the dark, shaded area to sign my name. I don't want my name to interfere with the scene so I often sign it in a discreet place on the canvas. After doing the research on Hopper, I realized that signing my name in the shaded area is symbolically and literally a way to find a quiet, peaceful place.

Another artist who influences me is John Constable (1776-1837). My painting *The Cows In Paris, Virginia* (Appendix, 3) was directly inspired by Constable's *Hampstead Heath* (1820). In his painting, lights and clouds fill the top portion of the canvas. This allowed for a dramatic casting of shadows on the ground. Its massive sky looks powerful and yet the whole scene looks so peaceful. I noticed that his sky covered over half of the canvas. I have used this format in my paintings.

I have also adopted Constable's techniques of painting trees. Ian Flemming-Williams described a painted tree, in *Constable and his Drawings* (1990), as “The gestural, virile outlining of trunk and branches, the short bursts of parallel strokes running up the trunk, the near foliage defined by little clumps of outline and the small areas of zig-zag shading for further leaves in shadow...”⁴ This description inspired my use of Constable's techniques, where I hoped to capture the essence of naturalistic trees, as in my painting *The Trunk* (Appendix, 4).

All of my works incorporate elements of my aesthetic ideas, my learned

³ Robert Hobbs, *Edward Hopper* (New York, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1987), 88.

⁴ Ian Fleming-Williams, *Constable and his Drawings* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers Limited, 1990), 50-63.

techniques, and my influences (Appendix, 5-9). My time in the MIS Program has allowed me to study and merge all of my interests and skills. It was through this program that I have developed my own techniques as a painter.

Where Am I Going From Here?

After three years of taking art classes with VCU, I feel accomplished and confident as a teacher and an artist. I used to hear that some art teachers painted in addition to teaching, and I couldn't figure out how that was possible with a full time job. But, I've come to realize that anything is possible in America. There are so many opportunities for one to get an education. I sought out the MIS program at VCU and was determined to set enough time aside to take classes every semester. I have a sense of satisfaction and feel rewarded for having learned so much from the classes that I took. I have acquired tremendous skills, learned different ways of applying oil to the canvas and how to manipulate the materials. I've learned to use the torch to weld copper, and to hammer with a chisel to carve marble and limestone. I've taken printmaking with Professor Warren Corrado and bookmaking with Professor Ginna Cullen, who made these new media enjoyable and understandable to me. I've been exposed to new materials and techniques. I've also taken writing classes with Professor Sara Clark who had been absolutely wonderful in guiding me through the writing process. I feel very fortunate to have a positive learning experience with VCU. I am taking what I have learned into my classroom to help my students overcome some of their difficulties when making art. I have learned to accommodate some of my students to meet their learning needs, just as some of the VCU professors were doing to help me succeed in my

education.

I truly feel that the MIS is a wonderful program offered to art teachers through VCU. The flexibility of times and locations are fantastic. What I like most is there are so many different types of art classes that are being offered. Sometimes, I liked the class so much that I was willing to drive for an hour and thirty minutes to get there. The professors were very enthusiastic and knowledgeable in their subject areas. They were very positive with all of the students and they made their classes very comfortable for every student to learn.

I also think what made the program so successful is that it works with my school system and the school system assisted in funding teachers in some of these classes. I just love this program and I hope that it will continue for years to come for other art teachers to have a wonderful learning experience, like the one I had.

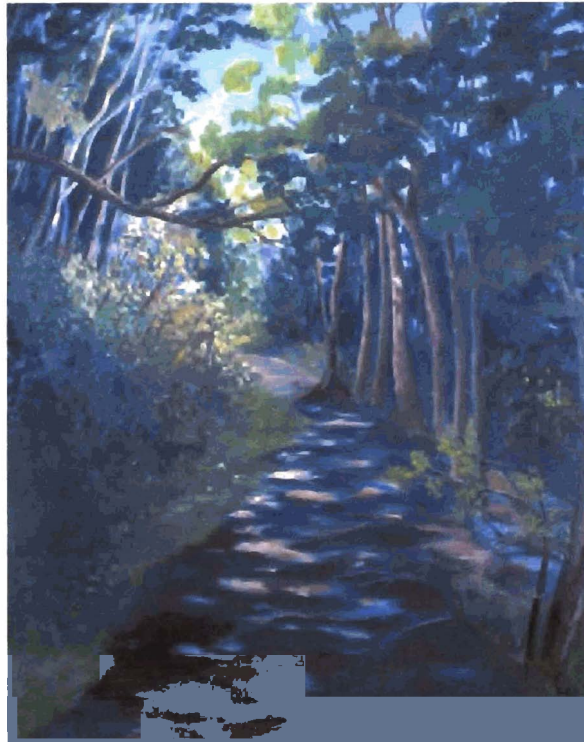
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Appendix

Image List

1. *Light at the End of the Path*, oil on canvas, 40" x 30", 2004.
2. *The Reading Chair*, oil on canvas, 24" x 18", 2004.
3. *The Cows in Paris, Virginia*, oil on canvas, 48" x 60", 2005.
4. *The Trunk*, oil on canvas, 48" x 24", 2004.
5. *George Washington's Grist Mill*, oil on canvas, 30" x 40", 2004.
6. *Octagon House, Winchester*, oil on canvas, 24" x 36", 2005.
7. *Park in Alexandria*, oil on canvas, 30" x 40", 2004.
8. *The Pond in New York*, oil on canvas, 24" x 30", 2003.
9. *The Farm*, oil on canvas, 20" x 28", 2003.

Images

1. *Light at the End of the Path*, Oil on canvas, 40"x 30", 2004



2. *The Reading Chair*, Oil on canvas, 24"x 18", 2004.



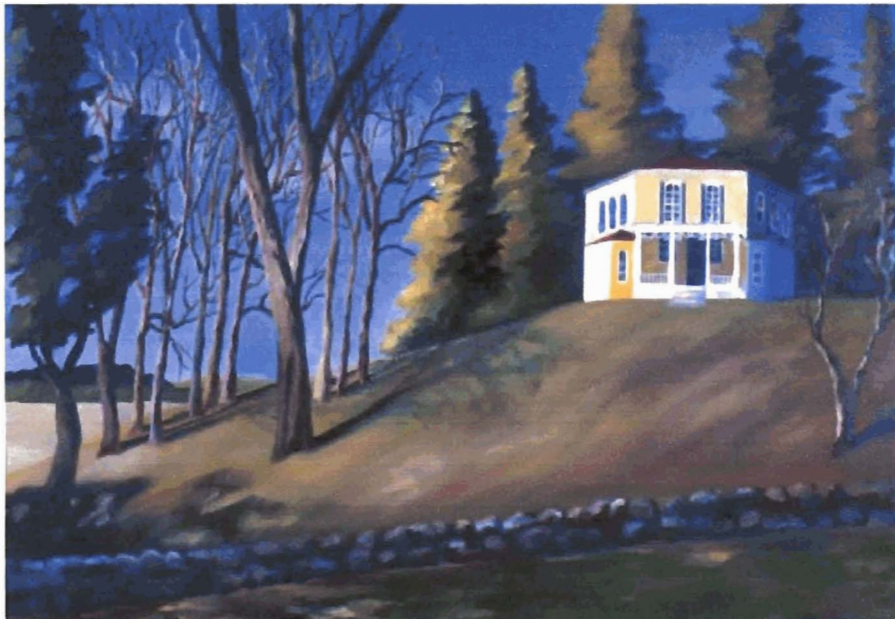
3. *The Cows in Paris, Virginia*, Oil on canvas, 48" x 60", 2005.



4. *The Trunk*, Oil on canvas, 48" x 24", 2004.



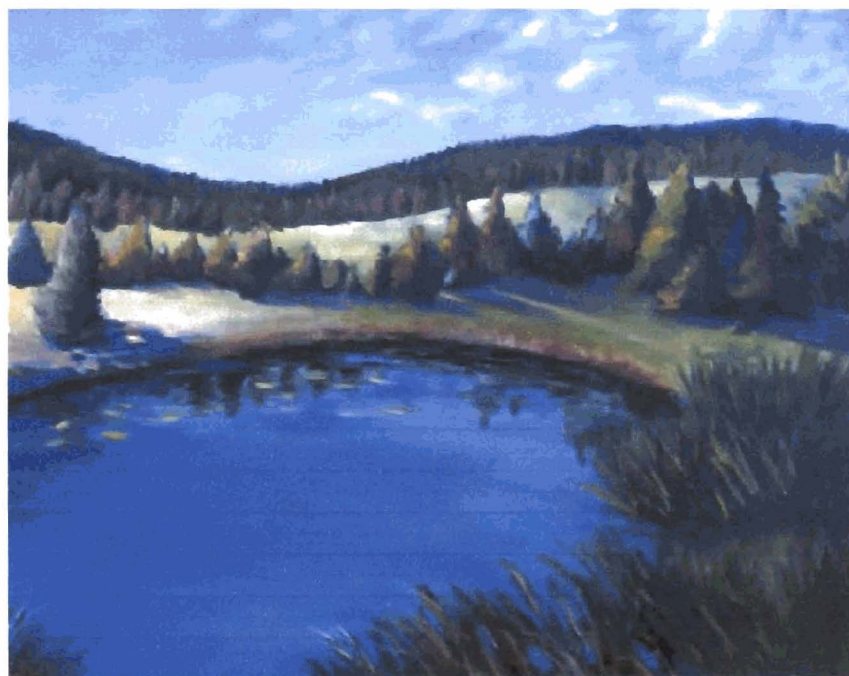
5. *George Washington's Grist Mill*, Oil on canvas, 30" x 40", 2004.



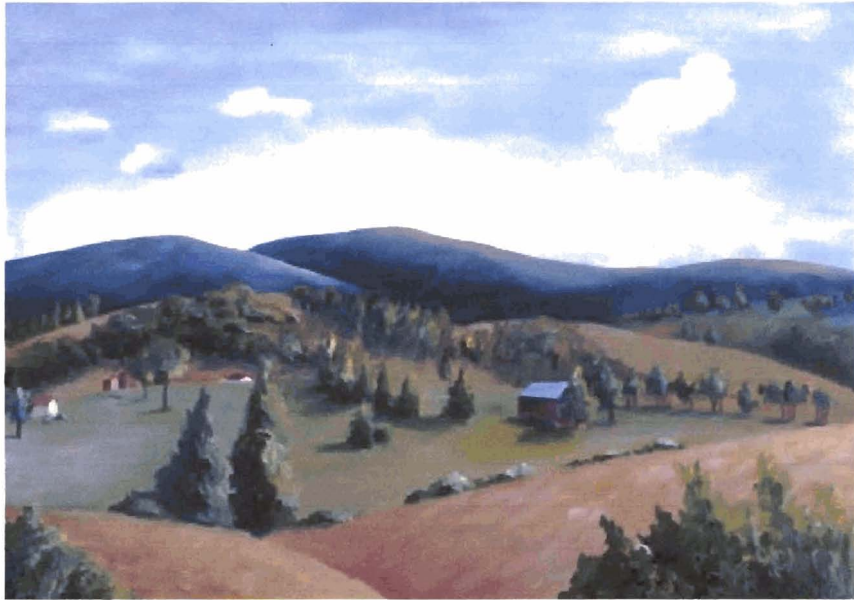
6. *Octagon House, Winchester*, Oil on canvas, 24" x 36", 2005.



7. *Park in Alexandria*, Oil on canvas, 30" x 40", 2004.

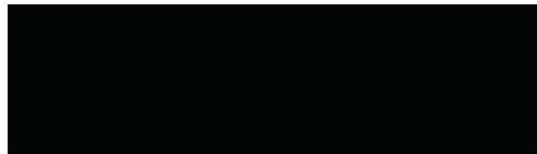


8. *The Pond in New York*, Oil on canvas, 24" x 30", 2003.



9. *The Farm*, Oil on canvas, 20" x 28", 2003.

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EDUCATION:

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Painting and Sculpture
 Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia
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 State University College of Buffalo, Buffalo, New York

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TEACHING EXPERIENCE:

- 2005-Present *Art Teacher*, Legacy Elementary School, Ashburn, Virginia
- 2002-2005 *Art Teacher*, Hutchison Farm Elementary School, South Riding, Virginia
- 1999-2002 *Art Teacher*, Garland Quarles Elementary School, Winchester, Virginia
- 1997-1999 *Art Teacher*, North Hartsville Elementary School, Hartsville, South Carolina

RELATED EXPERIENCE:

- 2002 *Teacher*, Homework Center for grades 2-5
 Douglas Elementary School, Winchester, Virginia
- 1999 *Art Teacher*, Art Summer for the gifted and talented in grades 7-12
 Coker College, Hartsville, South Carolina
- 1998 *Art Teacher*, Art Summer School for grades K-3
 Pate Elementary School, Darlington, South Carolina
- 1998 *Coordinator and Teacher*, Homework Center for grades 2-6
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PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:

- 2001-Present American Association of University Women, Winchester, Virginia

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