Experiments and Discoveries

by

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Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate,
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our Light, not our Darkness, that most frightens us.
We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant,
gorgeous, talented, fabulous?
Actually, who are you NOT to be?
You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the World.
There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.
We were born to manifest the glory of God that is within us.
It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone,
And as we let our own Light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.
As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

-Nelson Mandela
1994
Inaugural Speech
Textiles dominate our lives. They may be found everywhere from the clothing on one’s body to the draperies which decorate a window to the rug beneath our feet. They keep us warm, comfort us, and add color to our existence. The medium of fabric design, which is so tightly woven with human nature, permeated my spirit from my first encounter with it. Five years after my introduction to fabric, my love for the materials, the processes, and the possibilities are greater than I could have imagined when I began this investigation.

**Background**

I have reached the place I am today through a long and winding road with many forks and even more dead ends. As a person who is well known to be indecisive and fickle, I had more than a fair share of undergraduate majors before finally settling into my niche in Art Education. I received my Bachelor of Science degree in Art Education in 1996, but it was while fulfilling the requirements for that degree that I fell in love with Fabric Design. I took an introduction class toward the end of my undergraduate studies, and I felt an instant attraction for the medium. As I entered into Graduate school, again in the area of Art Education, I began to feel a yearning for studio work which was not being fulfilled in my chosen area. I enrolled in Screenprinting, another Fabric Design course, and subsequently requested a change of major.

The following year and a half was spent learning the basic techniques which I was lacking, having only had two prior courses in the area. It seemed that each new technique was, for me, a new world of opportunity and possibility. The difficulty with all of the new possibilities was my inability to focus on one. I was so excited by all that I was learning that I could not decide which techniques were best suited to my goals. Thus, I spent the next year working through my ideas in one form after another, never feeling quite certain that the work I was doing was wholeheartedly my own.

In the Spring and Summer of 2000, I was privileged to attend Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts as a Studio Assistant. This experience was much needed when it came about, because I felt that I had reached a stagnant state in my work. The instruction I received there, as well as
the indirect influence of the other instructors, students, and overall environment, refreshed my outlook, and gave me a new enthusiasm for my work. I returned to school in the Fall with a new attitude and a determination that I knew what I wanted to do, but that soon changed.

Upon returning to the university, I fervently began what I deemed would be the work for my MFA exhibition. It was painstakingly planned out, such that it left no room for unexpected occurrences or changes of heart. After struggling for months with the strict and unsuccessful nature of these pieces, I decided that I needed to take a break from them to allow my creative juices to flow again. I needed to do something I would enjoy. So, I stretched out a large piece of blank cotton canvas and began to “play.” There was nothing at stake here. I had the freedom to make mistakes, because I never became emotionally attached to the piece. If I added something that I immediately regretted, I would simply add something to change it, and amazingly, it would work out advantageously. I continued “playing” with this piece for weeks until I ended up with a finished result. In looking at the final product, later titled Entropy, I knew that I had truly found my technique and my medium. I would discard the previous pieces and head into an adventure of experimentation and discovery, which would become my body of work for the MFA exhibition.

Influences

I was lucky enough to have been awarded graduate assistantships for 1998-99 and 1999-2000, during which times I taught the foundation course, Color and Composition. The opportunity to teach this class was largely influential in my work. I had always had a love of color and an appreciation for its power to attract or repel a viewer, however, I learned so much about the element by teaching it, that my appreciation grew considerably. I became aware of phenomena that I had never before been taught. I also learned a great deal from the students in my classes. This experience was a direct influence on the work that I have since produced.

I also find myself influenced by quilts I encounter. I, myself, have worked within the quilting genre, and have a deep appreciation for the amount of effort involved in creating one single quilt. Although not in my mind as I am working, I see that the intense colors, gradual color
changes, and the crisp lines present in my pieces are all inspired by my love of the quilt. I am able to accomplish, however, through the use of screenprinting and direct application of the textile inks, effects which would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, through piecing and quilting alone. For example, I can use the silkscreen to print multiple circles or brushstrokes quickly, an effect which would be very laborious to replicate by piecing.

A third influence on my work is optical art of the past. In particular, the work of M.C. Escher has always fascinated me (see Figures 1 and 2). This influence has definitely been a subconscious one, because it only recently occurred to me that there were any similarities at all. I never sought to try to incorporate Escher’s style into my work, but I suppose after having been an admirer for many years, the influence was bound to be there. His illusions of space, and his ability to draw the viewer into the work are characteristics which I have unwittingly attempted to emulate. My pieces are neither narrative nor as detailed as Escher’s, but I feel that his influence is apparent in my work.

The final source of inspiration that I will mention was an unlikely influence at this stage in my life. During the time I was working on these final pieces, I was also enrolled in an undergraduate Freshman Chemistry class. My reason for taking Chemistry was to fulfill the necessary prerequisite requirements for Veterinary school, which I hope to attend at some point in the future. Thus, for the past four months, I have been dividing my time almost equally between art and science, constantly switching my brain’s thinking from left to right and back again. The ironic part of this is that I found common ground between the two. Both worlds require some level of experimentation and the reward of each is in the discovery of something new. My creative art background aided me in my studies of science, and the logic of the science inspired me in my art. The excitement of the unknown in a Chemistry experiment was parallel to that of a yet uncompleted work of art. I learned to allow for the inherent nature of a piece to speak to me and to make itself heard, just as the nature of a chemical reaction will not be altered by my own desires for it to change. I cannot force water to dissolve oil, no matter how I impose myself onto it. How, then, can a piece of artwork be successful if I only listen to what I want it to say, and
not to what it wants to say. Within every blank canvas, lump of wet clay, or block of raw stone, I believe there lies an inherent personality or character waiting to be released. As the artist, my job is to listen to what is being said as well as saying what I want to be heard. I am to use my skills, techniques, and styles to bring out the personality of the piece. It is a collaborative process between me and the work itself, just as chemistry is a collaborative effort between the actions of the chemist and the inherent nature of the chemicals which he is using. The influence of chemistry on these final pieces becomes apparent as one reads the titles. I became intrigued with how well the terms I was learning in Chemistry class were suited to the works I was creating. I had managed to connect two areas which I had always deemed to be complete opposites.

The Pieces

Equilibrium (Figure 3)

Of the five works in the show, this was the fifth one completed. It was the most planned out of the pieces, and because of that, I feel it is the least successful. The idea for this piece was that the colors would change from red-orange (the warmest color) to blue-green (the coolest color) by way of a checkerboard. The colors would lie adjacent to their opposites in the top left and bottom right corners. As the viewer’s eye moves inward, the colors would gradually become more closely related until, at the center, both sets would reach violet, causing a blending or a state of rest....equilibrium. The complicated nature of this design left little room for adjustment or for the personality of the piece to show through. The unexpected result of the “veil” which appears to lie diagonally across the piece is interesting, however, the overall effect of this piece is not what I had hoped, probably because I had too much planned out before beginning.

Enthalpy (Figure 4)

This was the fourth work completed of five. The idea was to create a composition using only circles, but to mask off areas, so that the space is broken and, hopefully, allows for a push-pull effect. I chose to use predominately warm colors which would contrast with the
addition of a few deeper cool colors in the extremity sections. I began with a loose notion of how this piece would take shape, but I allowed for that idea to change if it seemed advantageous, which at several points it did. I mixed the colors as I went along, so that I could get exactly what was needed to gradually progress from the blues and violets to magentas, reds, oranges, and yellows. I used only one screen repetitively to produce this image. When viewing this piece, I get a sense of heat and pressure due to the intensity of the warm colors confined in such a tight space. Thus, I titled this work Enthalpy, which is a chemistry term for the measure of the internal energy of a system plus the product of the pressure and volume of that system. In one word, the title describes exactly what I feel when looking at the piece.

Synchrony (Figure 5)

This piece, third chronologically, is at once the unifying factor between them all and the odd member of the group. It is larger than the others (4’ x 5’ versus 3’ x 4’), and its subject matter seems a drastic departure from its fellow show pieces. This work is, in my mind, the key to the whole series. The title, Synchrony, describes a coincidence in time. For me, that coincidence in time was being in both art and chemistry simultaneously. The influence of science on my artwork is, to me, a coincidence in time. As for the image itself, there are many things occurring which do not necessarily relate to one another, yet they are all present at the same time in the same frame. There are straight lines and curves, crisp edges and rough ones, warm colors and cool colors, soft manipulated textures and hard edged printed textures. They all coexist without conflict, or perhaps with conflict, depending on the perspective of the viewer. Either way, they are all occurring at once with no particular reason as to why.

Flux (Figure 6)

This second piece is the result of a successful experiment. I thought it would be interesting to create a color reversal which blended in the center. I decided to use analogous colors, mostly cool, but including an intense yellow for contrast. I also decided that a cris-crossed
brushstroke would make a pleasing visual texture. I began with the center color, turquoise, printing it horizontally across the entire width of the canvas. Once that was dry, I masked off stripes and proceeded to print the remaining colors on gradation from top to bottom. When that part was completed, I removed the mask, replaced it to cover what was previously printed, and printed the colors again in the reverse direction. Again, this piece was created by using only one screen repeatedly. I had a very vague plan going into this, but allowed myself some freedom to make judgment calls all along.

**Entropy** (Figure 7)

I have saved the first piece for last, because I feel that this piece is the culmination of my work in Graduate School. I feel that it took me four years to get to this piece, and even the pieces which followed it chronologically were, in fact, stepping stones to achieving it in the first place. The reason is that this is the only piece in which I let completely go of all my preconceived ideas of what it should be. This is the only work that absolutely determined its own outcome. Only through completing the subsequent works did I realize what I had achieved with the first one. Learning to let go of one’s inhibitions and ideals, learning to trust one’s instincts, and simply keeping a piece from becoming precious before it is complete are the most difficult aspects of art creation. Entropy is defined as a measure of chaos or randomness, disorder. The process by which this piece was produced was absolutely random. There was no planning ahead, no preconceived idea of the end result. As I mentioned earlier, this piece was an excuse to “play.” I needed to get my creative juices flowing again, so I let go of all expectations. Unfortunately, it took four years, or perhaps my lifetime, to reach this piece. Who knows how long before I can let go like that again. The original title of the was Delusions, because of the illusionary quality which the sheer layer imposes onto the perception of the piece. As I was working on it, I was dealing with the realization that some aspects of my life were not as I had always believed them to be, therefore, the word “delusions” continued to enter my mind as I worked. I later changed the title
to *Entropy*, because it seemed to include the original idea while encompassing a broader definition.

**Conclusion**

I have spent four years in Graduate School, three of them studying Fabric Design. During that time, I have learned more than I ever thought about materials, techniques, and more importantly, myself. The education I have gained far surpasses the technical knowledge bestowed upon me by my loving and patient professors and colleagues, although that is, in itself, immense. I have found that I am most successful when I trust myself. I have learned that a great idea is worthless unless it comes to fruition. I have determined that the best parts of life are the discovery of the unknown and the appreciation of the unexpected. We can compare it all to Chemistry class. In life, we must perform a series of experiments. Sometimes, we may cause an explosion or get a weak fizzles, but once in a while, if we are lucky, we will make an unexpected discovery. After all, is that not the whole point?
Figure 1: M.C. Escher, *Horsemen*, study for the division of the plane no. 67; drawing, June 1946.

Figure 2: M.C. Escher, *Woodcut V*; 1957.
Figure 3: *Equilibrium*; textile ink screenprinted on cotton canvas, 2001.
Figure 4: *Enthalpy*; textile ink screenprinted on cotton canvas, 2001.
Figure 5: *Synchrony*; textile ink and acrylic painted and screenprinted on cotton canvas, 2001.
Figure 6: *Flux*; textile ink screenprinted on cotton canvas, 2001.
Figure 7: Entropy; textile ink and acrylic painted and screenprinted on cotton canvas and polyester organza, 2000.
Figure 8: View of works on display during the 2001 MFA Candidates Exhibition at the Georgia Museum of Art.
Bibliography