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Cannibalism: A Failure to Be Satisfied

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Art and Design

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art

by

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May 2009

Travis Graves, Advisor, and Committee Chair

Professor Patricia Mink

Professor Catherine Murray

Professor Mira Gerard

Keywords: Painting, Cannibalism, Condensed Painting, Collage, Chance

ABSTRACT

Cannibalism: A Failure to Be Satisfied

by

Richard Brandon Pruett

This thesis supports the Master of Fine Arts exhibition at the Tipton Gallery, East Tennessee State University, from March 23rd through April 3rd, 2009. To comment on the title of my thesis, it describes an invented process created to re-contextualize failed paintings into works that critically comment on the discipline of painting itself. The paper describes and analyzes the conceptual moves created by a refusal to be satisfied with predictable outcomes in my work. At the end of this tumultuous quest to explore what painting is to me, the most rewarding works were a product of a reconfigured failure.

This paper also briefly discusses a period in the history of painting that is particularly relevant to my work, influential artists that I have continually returned in admiration, and collage techniques and materials used to create my work. An explanation of my current body of work is given at the end.

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CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	3
LIST OF FIGURES	5
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	6
2. HISTORICAL RELEVANCE.....	7
3. EARLY INFLUENCES.....	10
4. EARLY WORK.....	13
5. THE PLAY OF CHANCE.....	19
6. MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES.....	25
7. PAINTING WITH PAINTINGS.....	28
8. SUMMARY.....	32
WORKS CITED.....	33
APPENDIX: EXHIBITION IMAGES.....	35
VITA.....	49

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Untitled (Remainder).....	11
2. Early Painting Later to Become Condensed Painting #1.....	14
3. Condensed Painting #1.....	15
4. Thinking About Cannibalism.....	16
5. Beginning of Cannibalism# 1.....	17
6. Beginning of Cannibalism# 2.....	17
7. Detail of Five Paintings Coming Together.....	18
8. Floor Painting #1.....	21
9. Detail of a Suspended Floor Painting.....	22
10. Suspended Floor Painting #1(large version/side one).....	23
11. Roll of Failed Paintings... ..	24

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to articulate in writing the visual research I have executed in the arena of painting. “Painting” is a loaded and somewhat intimidating subject. It is a subject that endures, though its death has been heralded time and time again, holding on to a place in contemporary art dialogues. Painting is still relevant and is continually reinvented in works where artists, critics, and historians discuss what it is.

Spontaneity and intuition are important elements in my painting process. The physical and immediate approach to the process of painting is fundamental to my goal. In a sense my paintings are about painting as a practice. Taking this stance, being constantly bombarded by information concerning the viable role of art, I find that I am often unsatisfied with my painting.

The idea of failure in my work is not an argument about the ‘death of painting’ but about my paintings rejuvenating themselves. When considering a painting as being a failure, I am willing to use the painting in new ways. I begin to take greater steps toward re-contextualizing my paintings by giving them new form. By addressing the shortcomings of my paintings with critical, thoughtful, and physical measures, I demonstrate their enduring relevance and legitimacy.

By taking intuitive and risky paths, I have learned to embrace painting’s limitations as progressive steps toward a more critical understanding of what I am doing. I have found inspiration in the words of Albert Oehlen: “Because we now refuse to deny the direct dependence and responsibility of art vis-à-vis reality, and on the other hand see no chance for art as we know it to have an effect, there is only one possibility left: failure” (Ellis, 04/01/09).

My failures in painting are given new meaning by physical rearrangement and re-contextualization. I am cannibalizing my failed paintings, reconstructing them to gain new vision into their creative function and aesthetic. I want to challenge and question schemas and conventions in the arena of painting. I use abstraction as a metaphor for breakdown. This intuitive process will, I hope, lead to a new personal perspective on painting.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL RELEVANCE

Painting is a broad, somewhat intimidating subject when thought about in an historical context. However, specific periods of the history of painting have become particularly relevant to me and my work. The interesting periods in painting's history are when painting reaches a climax. Its limitations and failures are realized, and painters are forced to see differently in order to rejuvenate it. It can be said that painting is a product of its time. J.P. Hodin, author of *Modern Art and the Modern Mind*, supports the influence of a particular time period on the artist stating that during the last decades Art Informel, Tachism, Action Painting, Art Autre, Art Brut, Abstract Expressionism or Impressionism, Pop, Op, or Minimal Art have been direct expressions of the circumstances of the time (41). Wilhelm Pinder, an intellectual friend of Nietzsche, also stated in similar but more direct terms that "In the normal course of things artists are fixed in their time. In other words the time of their birth determines the unfolding of their being..." (Hodin 41).

Some artists, art critics, and historians have stated that everything has been done, and that painting, in a sense, has died. This makes me question why I am trying to make paintings. I will agree that the subject of art has been explored extensively. This statement has weight when arguing the progression or direction of art. Nevertheless, on an individual level, the subject of painting has not yet been personally explored by me. This statement allows me to digest the 'painting is dead' argument but not be hampered by its conceptions.

The Abstract Expressionist movement is the period when painting becomes particularly relevant to me. I like to think of the beginning of modern painting as the point when the painting achieves a sense of autonomy from having to function on the idea of representation. Of course, modernism goes beyond this idea even to the late Renaissance and onward to Courbet and Manet and countless others in between. However, the drastic change took place when attention increasingly shifted away from representational elements toward pure formal qualities. Shape, line, and color became accepted subject matter in themselves. New aesthetic values took precedence over older ones, and painting

gained a type of independence from having to appear as a facsimile of the natural world. Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Clifford Still, Wilhelm de Kooning, Phillip Guston, Mark Rothko, and others exemplified this era of painting.

The movement toward an unbridled mode of self-expression was needed for the progression of art. Individuals became more aware of themselves and the world of which they were a part. Abstract Expressionism was a necessary progression of modern art. It allowed a new sense of freedom and began to develop a new way of seeing. Without Abstract Expressionism, the movements of Pop Art, Minimalism, and Conceptual Art could not have come into existence. The delightful “death of painting” would not have happened, and artists would not have had the opportunity to revive it.

An idea of modernist painting that came out of the Abstract Expressionist movement is stated well by Clement Greenberg: “The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence” (qtd. in Risatti 43). This statement brings to my awareness some important issues concerning my work. My medium is painting. My materials are the materials that have been traditionally used to make paintings. Essentially these materials consist of pigments, binders, and canvas. It is important to me that I stay true to the idea that before a painting is anything else it is these materials. I do not work with figuration, narration, or illusion. My paintings deal with formal elements in the realm of abstraction. This is the part of my work that relates back to the Abstract Expressionist movement. The difference is in the methods that I use to criticize and challenge my work or as Greenberg calls it, “the discipline itself” (qtd. in Risatti).

Pop Art and post-modernism were in turn a revolt against the idea of the end result of painting being “very close to decoration” (Trachtenberg 57). Greenberg’s idea of painting focuses on eliminating all references to anything except for the painting itself, and as a result the paintings move closer to its “unique and irreducible” purity of form (qtd. in Trachtenberg 57). As artists such as Johns and Rauschenberg began to reunite art and life by using images of pop culture, post-modernist thought began to emerge. When Rauschenberg erases a deKooning drawing in 1953, it allowed a new spirit to release itself from the critical constraints of modernism.

It is in the time of Pop Art that painting is said to have died or come to a conclusive end. The essay, *Last Exit: Painting* by Thomas Lawson assesses the final ties to modernist painting, paying particular attention to the work of David Salle, Julian Schnabel, and Francesco Clemente. The beginning of the essay offers a particularly potent view point on the position of the death of painting and interestingly constructs the paths that can be followed.

It all boils down to a question of faith. Young artists concerned with pictures and picture making, rather than sculpture and the lively arts, are faced now with a bewildering choice. They can continue to believe in the traditional institutions of culture, most conveniently identified with easel painting, and in effect register blind contentment with the way things are. They can dabble in “pluralism,” that last holdout of an exhausted modernism, choosing from an assortment of attractive labels-Narrative Art, Pattern and Decoration, New Image, New Wave, Naïve Nouveau, Energism- the style most suited to their own self-referential purposes. Or, more frankly engage in exploiting the last manneristic twitches of modernism, they can resuscitate the idea of abstract painting. Or, taking a more critical stance, they can invest their faith in the subversive potential of those radical manifestations of modernist art labeled Minimalism and Conceptualism. But what if these, too, appear hopelessly compromised, mired in the predictability of their conventions, subject to an academicism or sentimentality every bit as regressive as that adhering to the idea of Fine Art? (Risatti 153).

It is apparent, even in the opening statement of this essay, that the popular consensus of this period, 1981, is that of why still make certain kinds of art? The heavy cloud of discourse concerning the continuation and relevance of art and painting should be evident in the former paragraph. Being an artist and a student, this information can be burdensome and hindering to studio work. I became dissatisfied with my attempts at making paintings. For me, there had to be a conceptual move that would allow me to gain the proper distance from my work in order to see it more clearly. Before I begin discussing what I consider my breakthrough work and its following areas of investigation, I would like to share early artistic influences and personal work.

CHAPTER 3

EARLY INFLUENCES

It is somewhat strange to be singling out two artists who have had a strong influence on my work. In all sincerity there are countless artists and works of art that I have been influenced by. I have certainly taken forms, color schemes, compositions, lines, patterns, and other elements from numerous artists. These elements then go through a personal digestive phase and manifest themselves in my work, but the tint of the influence is still recognizable. The elements I love about their work I adopt. I realize that I view artwork on the same term that I use when I create it. My process is a cannibalization process. I take what I consider the most important traits and I use them. The remainder is left for later.

The work of Julian Schnabel has been labeled “a last, decadent flowering of the modernist spirit” (Wallis 156). Nevertheless, I find Schnabel’s work interesting and relevant through his apparent return to formalism that is based on exploring the unconscious to find, as Baudelaire states it, “faculties or notions of a special order, foreign to our world,” and “the language of the dream.” (qtd. in Kuspit 89). This notion of the validity of the “supernatural” as Baudelaire expresses it is not apparent in much of the contemporary art scene.

I find I share an affinity with Schnabel’s work when it comes to strange and dream-like images that appear in his paintings. In my early work, upon arrival at graduate school, I was painting strange forms that had evolved from unexpected errors and accidents. The surfaces were layered with past images and scenes. I was engrossed with caking on layers of paint and watching the surface grow organically. Instead of trying to force or control the materials, I decided to work with the paint and accept its limitations. The outcome yielded painterly forms that were abstractions of my personality, working process, and all the images and ideas that I had seen and studied as an art student. An example of this chapter in my studies would be *Untitled (Remainder)* (Figure 1) which draws inspiration from Schnabel’s work and is the only painting to remain in its original form from this period.

Schnabel works in a similar fashion. He collects references from a large assortment of cultures and histories and puts them through a blending system. The end result is something vaguely discernible, detached, and visceral that challenges the traditional conventions of composition. Donald Kuspit speaks about Schnabel's work, "His painterliness masticates not only modern materials but traditional images; they also help make the belly of his pictures hang out in pseudocytosis. His pictures have the look of Roman vomitoriums; they are bloated with the regurgitated remains of many meals of surfaces and images" (290). He uses or takes from modernists ideas on painting but he adds something new to those ideas. I find it interesting that Schnabel's paintings are difficult to recall as far as grasping a mental picture in my mind. The compositions are tremendously strange and unstable, hindering my ability to keep a lasting image of them mentally. This quality makes them fresh and mysterious each time I view them. I continue to revisit the compositions to try to understand how they work. I find that they barely work, and they work in unexpected ways.



Figure 1: "Untitled (remainder)." Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 65in.by65in. 2006

Schnabel's paintings of the late seventies and early eighties are not denying the validity of the figure or image nor are they denying the validity of real objects, color fields, abstraction, or two-dimensionality. Schnabel considered an unusual amount of stimuli and dealt with it effectively, producing paintings that challenge notions of modernism, conventions of painting, and composition. The result of synthesizing disparate information produces compositions that are outlandishly strange. At the same time, he speaks about his culture through image references and actual objects that point to a specific place and time, bringing the work to an aesthetic reality.

In my understanding, post-modernism has a desire to combine an undifferentiated past with that of modernism by appropriating styles and images from other culture and times. In response to the idea of painting being dead, Schnabel replies brilliantly, "I

thought that if painting is dead, then it's a nice time to start painting. People have been talking about the death of painting for so many years that most of these people are dead now" (qtd. in Hollein 159).

From Phillip Guston, an early Abstract Expressionist artist who later worked under the New Image Painters movement, I have taken some notes on color and form (the paintings executed in the 1970s); however, most importantly I have taken from his writings a confirmation that we share a kindred spirit in the way we view the painting process. Guston states it beautifully in this passage: "I imagine wanting to paint as a cave man would, when nothing existed before. But at the same time one knows a great deal about the culture of painting... I should like to paint like a man who has never seen a painting, but this man, myself, lives in a world museum" (qtd. in Storr 57). The point is that even though I am bombarded with information, knowledge, and ideas about painting, I continually strive to push myself to the extreme where the culture of painting does not completely dictate my response to new possibilities.

Another commonality that I share with Guston lies in the realm of being satisfied with my work and knowing the point when a painting is finished. I have always said that a painting is considered finished when I can live with it. Guston states it as, "The strongest feeling I have, and it's confirmed the next day or the following week, is that when I leave the studio, I have left there a 'person,' or something that is a thing, an organic thing that can lead its own life, that doesn't need me anymore"(qtd. in Storr 70). To live with a painting, I have to be able to live without thinking about additional moves that the painting could take that would eventually lead to a new completion. In my mind it is finished when I am satisfied in accepting it as an object, a thing in itself with a life of its own.

CHAPTER 4

EARLY WORK

As far back as memory allows me to go, I recall having the urge to create and to make marks. I continued to foster this natural ability and began making images to copy nature. This early period of my education (late elementary through middle school) in the visual arts was well supported by my family and the society or culture I was a part of, a Southern traditional culture. Looking back, I can see that my endeavors in art followed major movements in art history. I was not completely aware of this progression until now. In late elementary school and middle school I painted naturalistic still-life objects and pen and ink drawings of landscapes. This subject matter was nurtured by my father who taught me early on how to see things without distortion. In high school I made illustrations of the science fiction persuasion using a surrealist approach. Late in high school I began to abstract the figure and play with the idea that subject matter did not always have to carry a narrative. My paintings became faceted and broken much like the early paintings by Picasso in synthetic cubism.

As an undergraduate I continued in the area of abstraction, but the need for the image was still there. My goal was to try to avoid the figure as much as possible. If figurative imagery manifested itself, it would have to be on its own accord, unintentional. When this happened the figure was meant to be there and its presence was authentic and original but most importantly strange and mysterious. In a search to find a personal connection between my surroundings and my paintings, I began to use found objects from my great grandfather's junk houses. I found that I was enshrining these objects by using them in my paintings. The result was to invoke the meaning of "place" in the lives of people by exploring how this dynamic connects us across time and culture. Using relics from dissembled buildings once occupied by family members, I made what could be called "deep maps" of empathy and reverence. Individually and in ensembles and installations, the works were icons of memory, history, and belief.

Joseph Norman, a professor of mine at the University of Georgia, once told me that sometimes the memory of a particular place is more powerful once you are removed from that place. I remembered this statement upon arrival at East Tennessee State

University. I had no intention of continuing with the ideas that I had worked with as an undergraduate, but it seems that in some ways I tried to use that as a launching point. I found no truth in the words of Professor Norman.

My work in the early stages of my graduate career was filled with dissatisfaction. I was working very large with irregular shaped panels and canvases that were stacked and attached to each other. I used acrylic and oil paint. They were vaguely figurative and



Figure 2: Early Painting Later to Become "Condensed Painting #1." Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 93in. by 93in. variably. 2006

largely abstract. The palette was muted with tints and tones (Figure 2). I worked in the complimentary color scheme of violet and yellow with some isolated colors. For two semesters I painted and repainted these three large canvases. They became layered with a thick impasto texture. The surface was alive and evident with the struggle I was experiencing with painting.

Nevertheless, I became troubled with questions that were being asked, and that I was asking myself. What is my subject matter? What is the concept behind this work? As an undergraduate,

I knew these answers. It related to the objects I was using at that time, and those objects related to my family history and feelings of a sense of place. In graduate school these subjects seemed to be despairingly lost.

The composer John Cage said to Phillip Guston in the 1950s: "When you are working, everybody is in your studio-the past, your friends, the art world, and above all your own ideas-are all there. But as you continue painting, they start leaving, one by one, and you are left completely alone. Then if you are lucky, even you leave" (qtd. in Storr 64). I realized that I had too many people and ideas in my studio to be satisfied with my paintings. These paintings were heavily worked but gave off an aura of uncertainty. I have a problem with leaving unsuccessful work alone. I can't advance until I feel that I

have resolved the work. I had a choice between throwing the paintings in the dumpster or somehow re-contextualizing them. I chose the latter, and in a moment of desperation or inspiration, maybe these two feelings merged- I decided to hide the figurative imagery. I decided to un-paint the paintings.

The paintings were large and diluted. They were a personal failure. They were paintings that I wrestled with for two complete semesters trying to reconcile ideas and experiences from the past year in which I was not painting. I realized that they were unsuccessful, but failure is an integral part of making art. No one expresses the dilemma of failure more eloquently than Rauschenberg in reference to his 1963 print *Accident*. His lithograph stone broke in half. He decided to keep the diagonal white dash and snagged first prize at the prestigious Ljubljana Graphic Biennial that year (qtd. in Greben 172). Fred Tomaselli, “If you’re not failing, then you’re not pushing” (qtd. in Greben 172). I decided to work through it, but it had to change drastically so that I could live with it and move on. There was too much to work through in their present states. I decided to reorganize.

With severe dissatisfaction and desperation, I began to rip my paintings into strips. Paint chips fell off revealing underlying paintings of the past. I started to tear them into small equally dimensional rectangles approximately 3 in. by 5.25 in. long. I noticed some amazing compositions within these small rectangles that were not evident in the larger work, but still I wanted to start completely over. I began to stack the miniature found paintings on top of each other and glue them with an encaustic resin. New paintings arose from the sides. Nothing remained from the old painting, and yet nothing was new or taken away. It was fresh.



Figure 3: “Condensed Painting #1.” Oil, Acrylic, and Canvas stacked and glued, 3in.by 5.25in by 11in. 2007

It was a successful failure. In the end, I had condensed an eight ft. by seven ft. painting into a rectangle with proportions of 3in by 5.25in by 11in tall.

The *Condensed Painting #1* (Figure 3) was a breakthrough piece for me for two reasons. First, it allowed me to conceptualize what I had done. Before, I was not aware of what exactly I was doing, but now it was clear to me that my subject was the act and processes of painting. Part of my concept was to challenge the conventions and perceptions of what is called a painting. Secondly, the *Condensed Painting #1* allowed me to see that the failure in some degree permitted me to further investigate the possibilities of critically commenting on a discipline, such as painting, with methods or processes from within painting itself.

The *Condensed Painting #1*, even though it was a paramount piece, set up new dilemmas. I have always tried to surpass myself with the next painting. In my mind the next piece should be better than the last. I still wanted to challenge and comment on painting by using the traditional conventions of painting, so after the condensed painting I returned to working with rectangle and square formatted canvases.

I began painting and searching for forms that I could discuss literally with some type of narration; however, I did not want to tell stories as much as show the stages or evolution of a painting. I was drawn to painterly surfaces that showed layers of a painting's history.

I completed two paintings at this time. They are the only paintings that survived this period. I began to become dissatisfied and uninterested with much of my resulting paintings and

would deconstruct them. I saw these works as a type of self-portrait (referring to *Untitled*

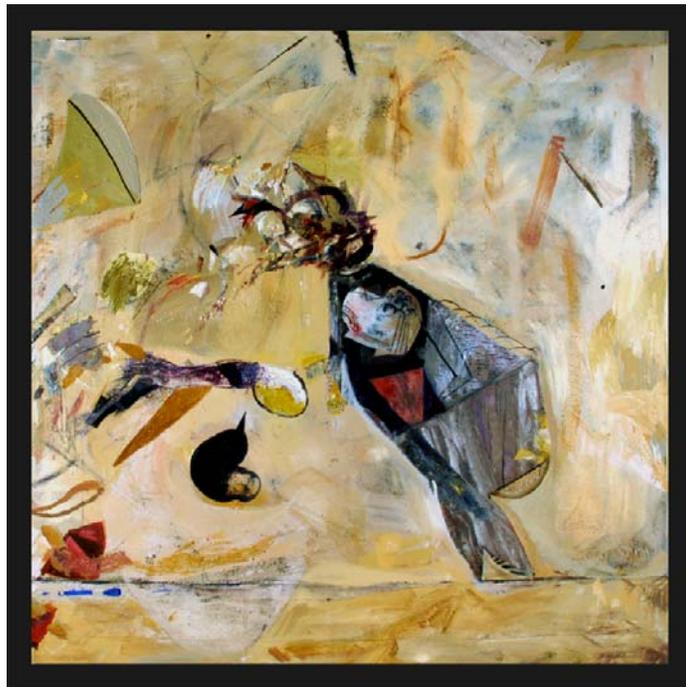


Figure 4: "Thinking About Cannibalism." Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 72in. by 72in. 2007

(*remainder*), and *Thinking about Cannibalism*) (Figure 4). This interpretation comes from the paintings clear distinction between figure and ground. In retrospect these two paintings foreshadowed the next vital phase in my works development and in fact were portraits of my personal painting process.

At anytime during the painting process that I was not completely satisfied with the painting's progression, I would cut away those parts of the painting that I was satisfied with and place them to the side. The rest were deconstructed and labeled "leftovers." This continued throughout my second year. I was working with sincerity and intensity still searching for reasons and understanding into what I was doing. I continued to cut away the successful areas of my paintings littering my studio with painting remains.

My seemingly debilitating actions toward my paintings became more evident and needed to be addressed or defended. I described my process with the word "cannibalization". Webster's Dictionary defines this as, "to take salvageable parts from (as a disabled machine [or in my case painting]) for use in building or repairing another machine [or painting]: to make use of (a part taken from one thing) in building, repairing, or creating something else" (166). This defines what I was doing with those paintings and what I am continuing to do. I began to use the cannibalized paintings as starting points to build



Figure 5: "Beginning of Cannibalism #1." Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 54in. by 54in. 2007



Figure 6: "Beginning of Cannibalism #2." Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 54in. by 54in. 2007

other paintings. The two paintings that deal with this process are, *Beginning of Cannibalism #1* (Figure 5) and *Beginning of Cannibalism #2* (Figure 6).

As my piles of painting fragments grew, I saw in each of them inherent qualities of beauty. These pieces were leftovers from failed attempts at painting, but they still had value to me. I thought about ways to join this material and then use the material to make paintings. The answer was the sewing machine. The sewing machine provided me with a fast and efficient way to build parts that would later become paintings. The delicate line that the sewing machine made also began complimenting the formal elements in my paintings (Figure 7). Painting with paintings was different from painting directly with paint onto a prepared canvas. It allowed more freedom. I was able to move parts around in a composition before adhering them to the surface. I began to collage the parts



Figure 7: Detail of “Five Paintings Coming Together” showing sewing methods of attaching paintings.

together. One painting survived this chapter of my work, and it’s titled *Five Paintings Coming Together* because it contained parts from five different cannibalized paintings.

The idea that I was using pieces of failed paintings to make paintings interested me, as did the question of why I could not be satisfied with most of my paintings. I felt the compositions were too forced and predictable. By predictable, I mean that they were too ordered. There was also no feeling of completion in much of my early work, and without a resolution I could not be satisfied with the outcome. Maybe I wanted the work to be a continuation or transformation into a new unpredictable form of painting that remained fresh in my mind. Nevertheless, I continued with the cannibalization, but begin to think about ways to make complete compositions that were fresh and surprising and could not be questioned with regard to being finished.

CHAPTER 5

THE PLAY OF CHANCE

As I was questioning the concerns of composition, I found the work of Robert Ryman. It was in his work that I found something that I could use to guide my thoughts in creating compositions that used a degree of chance to render outcomes less predictable and less forced. The paintings of Robert Ryman forced me to think about the idea of process in my artwork. Distancing myself from the anticipated final product allowed me to take advantage of the happenings along the journey. Ryman states:

We have been trained to see painting as “pictures,” with storytelling connotations, abstract or literal, in a space usually limited and enclosed by a frame which isolates the image. It has been shown that there are possibilities other than this manner of “seeing” painting. An image could be said to be “real” if it is not an optical reproduction, if it does not symbolize or describe so as to call up a mental picture. This “real” or “absolute” image is only confined by our limited perception (qtd. in Ratcliff 16).

I feel construction coupled with craftsmanship is a substantial part of Ryman’s holistic view of the painting process. Every detail matters. It is Ryman’s goal to be certain and meaningful in every part of the painting process. A painting’s progression is sometimes the most beautiful and meaningful part of the creation process. The visceral struggles, the realness, the immediacy, the moments of desperation are lost as the painting is fine tuned and caressed into an acceptable composition.

When is a painting finished? In my opinion, a painting is never “finished” but some understanding has been reached and the painting can be lived with. That is to say, I could live with the painting without becoming overwhelmed with the need to paint further. In short, what has been said by the painting is certain and without doubt. Are Ryman’s paintings finished because they are hanging on a wall? Ryman has saved the beauty of process in his work. He states that a painting cannot be determined as finished or unfinished based on “weight”, but that a painting needs only to be clear about itself (qtd. in Ratcliff 55). I don’t believe a painting can be forced to be something that it is not. There is a point when a painting has reached its potential. Ryman bypasses portraying

information or figurative images in his paintings. Instead, he looks to give meaning through process.

Ryman's sensitivity to the methods of painting is what makes the work intensely interesting and engaging. His materials then become vitally important and must be exact and consistent. The simple act of painting and trying to paint the same image over and over again still offers innumerable variables that tend to lead to new ways of painting. Ryman said it himself: "There is never any question of what to paint, but how to paint" (qtd. in Ratcliff 43). Robert Ryman provoked me to ask myself that same question concerning not *what* to paint but *how* to paint.

A story that the composer John Cage told of his walk with the artist Mark Tobey is a beautiful prelude in the discussion of my series of work titled *Floor Paintings (a study in chance compositions)*. Cage writes:

One day [John Cage recalled of himself and Mark Tobey] we were taking a walk together, from Cornish School to the Japanese restaurant where we were going to dine together-which meant we crossed through most of the city. Well, we couldn't really walk. He would continually stop to notice something surprising everywhere- on the side of a shack or in an open space. That walk was a revelation for me. It was the first time someone else had given me a lesson in looking without prejudice, someone who didn't compare what he was seeing with something before, who was sensitive to the finest nuances of light. Tobey would stop on the sidewalks which we normally didn't notice when we were walking, and his gaze would turn them into a work of art (qtd. in Patterson 135).

Cage is speaking about seeing beauty and completion in places or things that usually escapes attention. I recognized a moment like the one shared above while sweeping my studio floor. I sweep it obsessively. Naturally, I do this because it is littered with pieces of discarded paintings, bits of paper, and the usual by-products. In a moment of sensitive awareness, I noticed a composition or completion had been created. It was compositionally sound. I squatted low to observe, and for the first time I saw what chance had led me to. Previously discarded paintings, papers, paint chips, and studio trash were now a painting on the floor. I had arrived at something meaningful, interesting, and with a certain undeniable aesthetic. I questioned myself on how I could fix this moment in

time. I could not bring the floor painting to the canvas, so I had to bring the canvas to the floor.

The reversed side of the painting was what was being seen, and I knew the outcome could not be observed. This fact made the process intriguing. I decided to coat a stretched canvas with flexible acrylic modeling paste and place it on top of the swept pile. What would adhere would be the composition. The outcome was *Floor Painting #1* (Figure 8). The painting was successful in that it satisfied the need to make an instant composition, had been created by chance, and was not forced by manipulation. The pieces were products of past failures. I followed an intuitive process that used

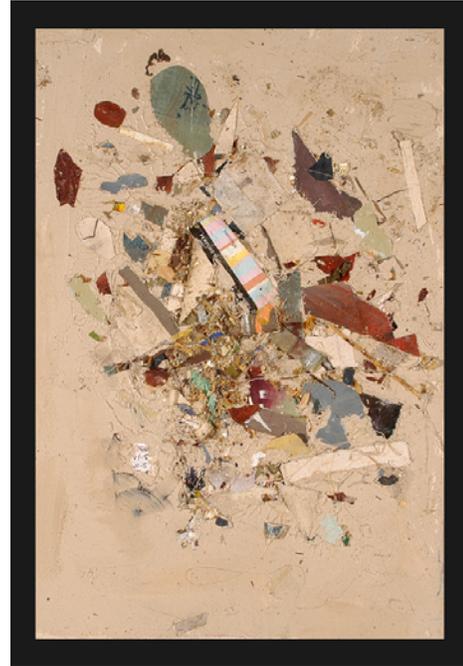


Figure 8: “Floor Painting #1.” Oil, Acrylic, and painting by-products on floor, on canvas by way of flexible modeling paste, 20in. by 30in. 2007

these failures as a method on how to paint rather than what to paint. Thinking back, I realize that the remnants of paintings that became the *Floor Painting Series* had been labored upon and at one point in time had been manipulated for certain purposes. These pieces now had been re-contextualized by way of an intuitive painting process and given new meaning. John Cage’s words bring clarity to the finished floor painting: “It all goes together and doesn’t require that we try to improve it or feel our inferiority or superiority to it. Progress is out of the question. But inactivity is not what happens. There is always activity but it is free from compulsion, done from disinterest” (qtd. in Patterson 186).

Now that I was making completed chance compositions from heavily manipulated pieces of paintings, I began to feel the need to challenge the idea of what makes a painting. Does a painting need to be two-dimensional and displayed on a wall? The *Condensed Painting* had answered that question. At this stage, I wanted to make paintings that relied more on chance for their compositions and related to the wall but were not necessarily hung on the wall. I was contemplating the idea to strip away the traits commonly associated with painting in order to see what would remain. Nevertheless, I

was still earnestly trying to continue painting in the traditional manner, but I continued to be dissatisfied with the results, which led to more cannibalized paintings.

Upon taking a fiber construction class taught by Professor Pat Mink, I learned about a soluble material used in embroidery. I made pockets with this material and randomly swept up remnants of paintings into the bags and sewed the material together to make compositions. I ended up with small paintings rich in various textures, painting fragments, and by-products (broken needles, pins, staples, and other materials discarded on the floor) (Figure 9). I varied the sizes of them by piecing them together which created additional surprising compositions. A trait that would lead to how these paintings were to be displayed was that there was a painting on both sides due to the fact that there was no support.

The painting was quilted and sewn together not adhered to an additional supporting surface.

I wanted the paintings to have a distant relationship with the wall, as if to reference their past dependence on the wall and now their independence from it. I found it significant that the paintings' origin or evolution came first from being a part of another painting, then going through the cannibalization process, being cast aside as leftovers or remains, and finally being rejuvenated into a new type of painting. The solution was to manufacture steel hooks ranging in size from six inches to seven feet long. The steel was heated and bent on one end to form a looped opening, which allowed it to be screwed to the wall. The opposite end was heated and hammered out to a point and then curved to form a small hook from which the paintings were then hung. Upon installation, the paintings are suspended on these hooks at random distances from the wall.

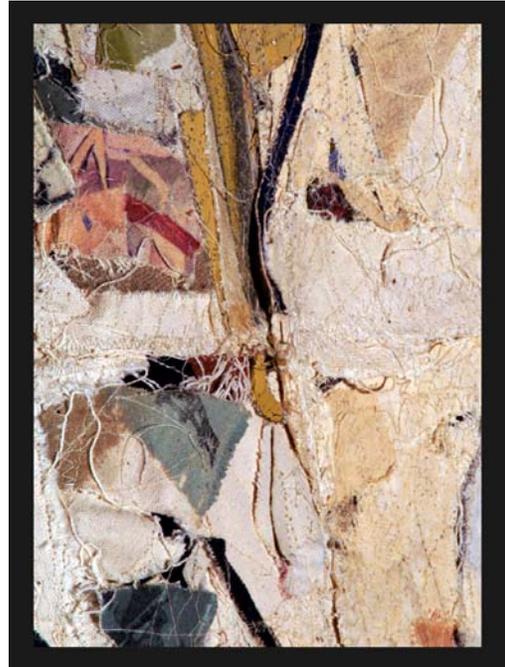


Figure 9: Detail of a “Suspended Floor Painting.” 2007



Figure 10: “Suspended Floor Painting #1(large version/side one).” Oil and acrylic painting shards and other painting by-products sewn together, approximately 15in by 65in. 2007

The installed *Suspended Floor Paintings* (Figure 10) are reminiscent of Alexander Calder’s *mobiles* which were moving sculptures. I recognize this commonality upon installation and must say that Calder’s work was not an influence in the birth of the *Suspended Floor Paintings*. I realize that the nature of these paintings is very sculptural. However, what I believe this body of work most strongly expresses is the idea of what a painting can become when stripped of a stretcher, of two-dimensionality and the support of the wall. I now understand that paintings can be made from other things besides paint.

I continued to work on stretched canvases, and I continued to recognize my dissatisfaction. It gives me a sense of freedom and control to dismantle paintings

on the premises of seeing what will happen. Canvas tears in straight lines. If I was unhappy with a painting, instead of continuing to toil, I would un-stretch the painting and tear it into strips. The strips gave the same surprising effect as the *Condensed Painting*. It reorganized the compositions and added an element of surprise. These painting strips were heavily worked. Tearing them, which changed them, allowed me to become attracted to them again as a new material to work with in a different way. I had so many piles of stripped paintings on the floor; I began to think about how I could re-contextualize the painted materials back into a painting.

I mixed the piles together and began to sew the painting strips end to end and roll them. Colors and lines presented themselves around the edges. I continued to recycle paintings in this manner blindly, not knowing what the composition would look like

installed. The end product was satisfying as a painting object, and the painting could be installed line by line unbroken and uninterrupted on a gallery wall. The *Roll of Failed Paintings* (Figure 11) re-contextualized unsuccessful attempts at painting on canvas into a dense sculptural painting that, when unrolled and installed on a gallery wall, was surprisingly interesting in concept and aesthetic.



Figure 11: "Roll of Failed Paintings."
Oil and Acrylic on Canvas rolled, 20 in. in diameter. 2007

CHAPTER 6

MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

The variety of materials and techniques that can be used in the painting process is numerous and only limited by the imagination. Images, ideas, and processes are difficult to hold on to unless they can be given some form of semi permanence through a material medium. I am enchanted with the physical materials involved in painting and how they can be used to criticize and discuss it as a discipline. I am also interested in using the paint because of its extensive history and the numerous connotations it carries concerning how it was used in the past. I am very attracted to using other materials along with paint in a collage orientation such as old drawings, sand, metal filings, dyed fabrics, and prints among other unconventional materials. I realize that the sensitivity to materials is important and that paintings can be created with anything.

Acrylic paint is the primary medium that I use at this time because of its flexibility and adherence to various surfaces. I am attracted to the possibilities of deriving various textures and effects from acrylic paint and acrylic mediums. Mark David Gottsegen writes in *The Painter's Handbook*, "To express your ideas clearly, you must be in control of your medium" (Gottsegen 10). Knowing the materials and techniques of painting enables me to push the materials in what Elliot Eisner, the great art educator, would call the "constraints and affordances" of a material (Eisner 71). This concept is a valuable tool that can be used to push and expand my ideas concerning what a painting is.

I question what the medium of painting includes or excludes in terms of materials. In questioning materials and techniques, I ask myself not what to paint but the more important question, how to paint. Setting up this question allows me to distance myself from images or narrations and become more involved with the materials themselves. As I became more acquainted with my materials, working in a cannibalistic fashion, the technique of collage has become inseparable from my process. I had worked with paper and collage techniques as an undergraduate, but I did not fully realize the possibilities until I began cannibalizing my paintings and then sewing pieces together. I then saw the canvas and paintings not as precious objects but as something that could be destroyed and

reworked to find more satisfying solutions. Robert Motherwell speaks beautifully on the subject of collage:

The sensation of physically operating on the world is very strong in the medium of the papier colle or collage, in which various kinds of paper are pasted to the canvas. One cuts and chooses and shifts and pastes, and sometimes tears off and begins again. In any case, shaping and arranging such a relational structure obliterates the need, and often the awareness of representation. Without reference to likeness, it possesses feeling because all the decisions in regard to it are ultimately made on grounds of feeling (qtd. in Ashton 55).

The technique of collage allows immediate action in the process of painting. Mistakes are covered, cut, and moved. There is no dead time. If I am not satisfied with what I have made, I look to find what it needs on my studio floor and I paste the piece there. The collage process allows immediate gratification and freedom. For me collage is liberation of the creative impulse.

Craftsmanship is especially important when working in the collage technique. When good craftsmanship is present in the work, decisions concerning the way elements are brought together are not questioned by the viewer. Every move I make in the painting process is treated with a degree of definition. I am sensitive to the moment and believe that every decision I make while working could be the final move that finishes the work of art. In this respect everything, from building the stretchers, to gluing, sewing, or cutting the final piece, is paramount to the finished work. However, the creative process must be unrestrained, so there is a constant tension between doing something immediately and resolving craftsmanship issues.

I am also interested in materials and techniques that are gathered from materials that are not necessarily physical in nature. These materials involve rituals and the intuitive aspect or the play of chance. Hans Hoffman comments concerning creativity or the creative process, "Creation is dominated by three absolutely different factors: first, nature, which affects us by its laws; second, the artist who creates a spiritual contact with nature and his materials; and third, the medium of expression through which the artist translates his inner world" (qtd. in Seitz 15). I notice only one of these three factors is

materialistic. Non-material materials such as my belief system, and the activity of seeing and acting, are materials that produce imaginative and thoughtful work.

Nature becomes an influence and is different from natural material. It does not matter how often my artistic scope turns inward through introspection, nature as the physical world plays an important part as a material. Nature involves the essence of things and seeing those things. I sense inherent qualities of things in nature. I find myself pulling visual forms from nature that have qualities that appeal to my senses. These are visual sources that I resolve to synthesize with other materials both physical and non physical. As a result, the sheer process of seeing, choosing, and using can be thought of as a material process. Hofmann stated, “Nature is always the source of his [the artists’] creative impulses” (qtd. in Seitz 11).

Concerning painting and the techniques employed, I try to leave my personal finger prints behind as reminders of my process and origin of thought. Each phase is a work of art. I must stay aware and attentive to the smallest detail. As Tolstoy would say, it is this “wee bit” that defines art (qtd. in Eisner 6). It is in this way that I can appreciate the little things, the minute details that make things what they are. The awareness of these subtle relationships between me, the environment, and the materials, both physical and metaphysical, affect the creative process.

Personal interaction with the paint and the objects become vitally important to me. I paint using intuition and I am aware and comfortable with chance. This manner of working allows me to see visual forms and relationships that were not intended as I adhere to instinctive actions in painting. For me it is better to have progress in a painting led by feeling instead of knowing. In this way of working, I create a situation in which I and the material can be truthful in our actions.

CHAPTER 7

PAINTING WITH PAINTINGS

Throughout my graduate career exploration and experimentation have always been an important part in my painting process. I find that I am most engaged with my work when I do not know the exact outcome of my painting methods and there is an aura of uncertainty that hovers over the end result. At the end, I have many questions remaining and many areas of interest and possibilities to explore. Nevertheless, I have created works that have capitalized on past failures and transformed these failures into a body of paintings that offer critical and contemporary discourse concerning the subject of painting. I could not have made the paintings without the failures.

Robert Motherwell wrote in 1947:

I begin a painting with a series of mistakes. The painting comes out of the correction of mistakes by feeling. I begin with shapes and colors which are not related internally nor to the external world; I work without images. Ultimate unifications come about through modulations of the surface by innumerable trials and errors. The final picture is the process arrested at the moment when what I was looking for flashes into view (57).

This statement shows the legitimacy of trial and error and the advantage that failures have the potential when they are understood and used to lead to a surprising end. Surprising endings always leave something more to be considered.

There was one point in the semester of my final year when I thought I knew the process that would give me a conclusive body of work. I should have realized that my methods of creating could not be configured into a formula. The monotony of routine would surely breed dissatisfaction. The process only developed into another beginning. Before the start of the fall semester, I had been working on four large paintings. My studio floor was already covered in painting parts that had been taken from previous paintings. Not concerned with time, but only with my dissatisfactions, I decided to deconstruct and reconfigure the four paintings that I was working on. I viciously stripped the paintings of the parts that I liked and wanted to use in beginning other paintings, and all else was cast aside.

I decided in desperation to return to the method used in creating the Floor Painting Series. I used a grander scale of six feet by six feet. The modeling paste, which adhered the painting to the canvas, became more saturated. I created six of these. The first one was satisfying because the outcome was surprising and the process yielded an immediate painting. I began to use this invented formula and slowly began to manipulate what I would allow to be on the floor at the time the pasted canvas was dropped. I took chance away from the scenario and eliminated much of the painting by-products such as trash, pins, staples and other surprising elements from the compositions.

The compositions were all over the canvas and incredibly busy with most of the formal elements emanating from the center with some parts of the painting breaking the picture plane. It took making six paintings for me to realize why the smaller version worked and these did not. The small versions encompassed spontaneity and disinterest to the point that what happened was surprising and revealed things that I had not seen before that. They were small and brought the viewer in for a closer inspection. Only the first large version was left to remain. The rest I began to reintroduce back into the cycle.

By this time, late fall semester, I began to notice what was happening to these painting pieces. They were beginning to show their history. They were layered thick with paint, threads of canvas, and paper drawings. Many pieces were three and four canvas layers thick where they had been pasted, cut, and pasted over by three years of reworking. On the back of these pieces there was another unintentional painting forming from being pasted onto other painting and then ripped off. These remnants appeared viscerally worked, chewed, digested, and regurgitated into a new state. They had all the characteristics and aesthetic sensitivities that I enjoyed in a painting. The problem was how to place them in a composition so that those qualities and history could be seen.

Whereas before I had always stretched canvases and then started to paint, this time I worked on the floor using only fragments to construct the painting. I knew I had a large amount of material, so I worked very large covering the entirety of my studio floor. I was not interested in thinking about borders or where the compositions would end when and if I did stretch the painting. I used certain pieces of paintings that I wanted to be the focal points and let the work grow organically from those areas. Much of my work in the past had revolved around using chance and intuition. Now, I had all this rich material that

was a history of my painting method that showed what I had done and where I had failed. Through the cannibalization process these remnants gained a type of certainty about them. I chose to rationally and formally compose the painting's composition so that it supported the idea of a painting evolving from a series of mistakes or failures. I was still working from feeling but also allowed formal decisions to organize all the spontaneous materials I had accumulated from past methods of painting.

The color of raw canvas became the cushion and background that supported the more colorful and historical areas of interest. The different types of canvas and their age and use provided a variety of subtle changes in temperature and texture. The first painting that I constructed in this manner became very quilt-like in that it was made from pieces of old paintings. The edges were less predictable because its completion was not determined until the end. The painting continued around the edges after it was stretched, measuring 96 inches by 108 inches which was the largest painting that I created of the series.

I was satisfied with the outcome of working in this manner. I was paying more attention to the rich shards of paintings and how to place them in a whole environment that supported them. I continued working in this direction, sewing and pasting together old paintings to make new ones. There was something very satisfying about having all the elements already created and ready for use. I was painting in a process that felt right, more truthful, and less forced. The surfaces rippled with tension from sewn seams and frayed threads embedded with multicolored paint chips that fell lightly on the canvas façade.

Many of the compositions that I create use a horizontal movement. However, the balance is always interrupted by a change in direction of the surface. This provides moments of tension. I am drawn to the square format for its ability to embody and support this wanted tension. These paintings have become flat landscapes textured and littered with painting shrapnel, full of movement. I found myself resolving two years of unresolved paintings with an unexpected ease. I had limited myself on what to paint and what materials to use, and I stopped painting with paint and started painting with paintings.

My palette of paintings began to finally dwindle as I found my work pleasing. In working this way, something unexpected happened. I began to appreciate some of these

cannibalized painting pieces as complete paintings in themselves that did not need to be placed in a composition and stretched. I envisioned these groupings of ‘piece paintings’ installed in the gallery on a white wall. The shapes of the paintings would break up the negative space of the wall, making an interesting dialogue with the paintings that are more traditionally displayed. I felt to place them in to a rationally composed composition would be to take the life away from them.

This is a new body of work that appeared unexpectedly. They look quite the opposite of the paintings that are stretched but they share a common origin that ties them together. There is a relationship between the ‘piece paintings’ and the stretched paintings. One is a whole painting and the other is a part of a painting. The ‘piece paintings’ are the true remainders; the paintings did not need to be remedied by my attempts at placing them in a square composition. I want to try to use the ‘piece paintings,’ as I believe they have completeness to them when grouped among other remnants and installed in the gallery. I do not know for sure how they will work in the gallery space with the stretched paintings, but I want to try. It is in my nature and a part of my painting procedure to take risks. In any case, if the paintings installed fail, it is acceptable, but if the paintings succeed, it will be in a strange and exciting way. It would be in my best interest, or in validating the written thesis, to take the risk.

CHAPTER 8

SUMMARY

In conclusion, I ask myself two difficult questions. What is the meaning behind this body of work, and why did I do it? Travis Graves asked me a question about my work: why is this art? The question took me by surprise and stumped me for a few moments. It wasn't because I doubted that it was but because I didn't know how it could not be art. I answered simply that it is art because I say it is. So many actions or decisions in life require a rational answer or a literal reason. The meaning behind the work is the work; the act of painting as practice. It is an exploration of what painting is to me at this time in my life. This answer should not belittle or negate any other interpretations found by the viewer. That is the beauty of art appreciation; meaning in relationship to visual evidence is only limited by the imagination.

Why did I do it? I did all of this because I could. I had the freedom to. Looking back, I realize that I am drawn to work in a certain aesthetic dealing with sensibilities that appeal to me. Instead of trying to work in ways that feel unnatural to me, I choose to embrace what I am attracted to and critically challenge it. I always strive to stay true to the things that I enjoy.

For me, there is an undeniable urge to break the rules in art, to question and challenge traditions and conventions. In my work, I can take advantage of this freedom. I started down this particular and less traveled path for this reason. It all started with one question, one thought surfacing in my mind; why don't you tear it up? Immediately after that question arose, another thought bubbled up; you can't do that. I wondered where this response came from and then asked myself, why can't I? From the thought of something telling me I can't, I began a body of work that has led me to this point in painting.

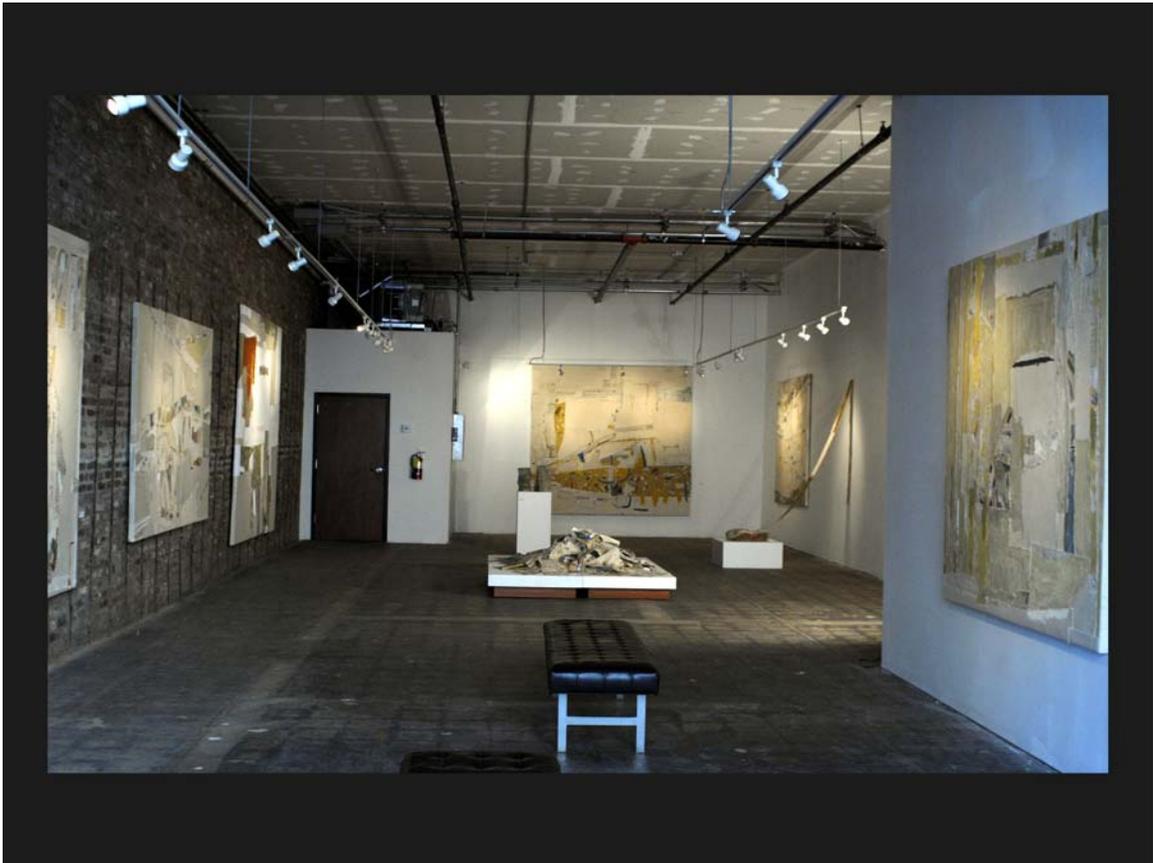
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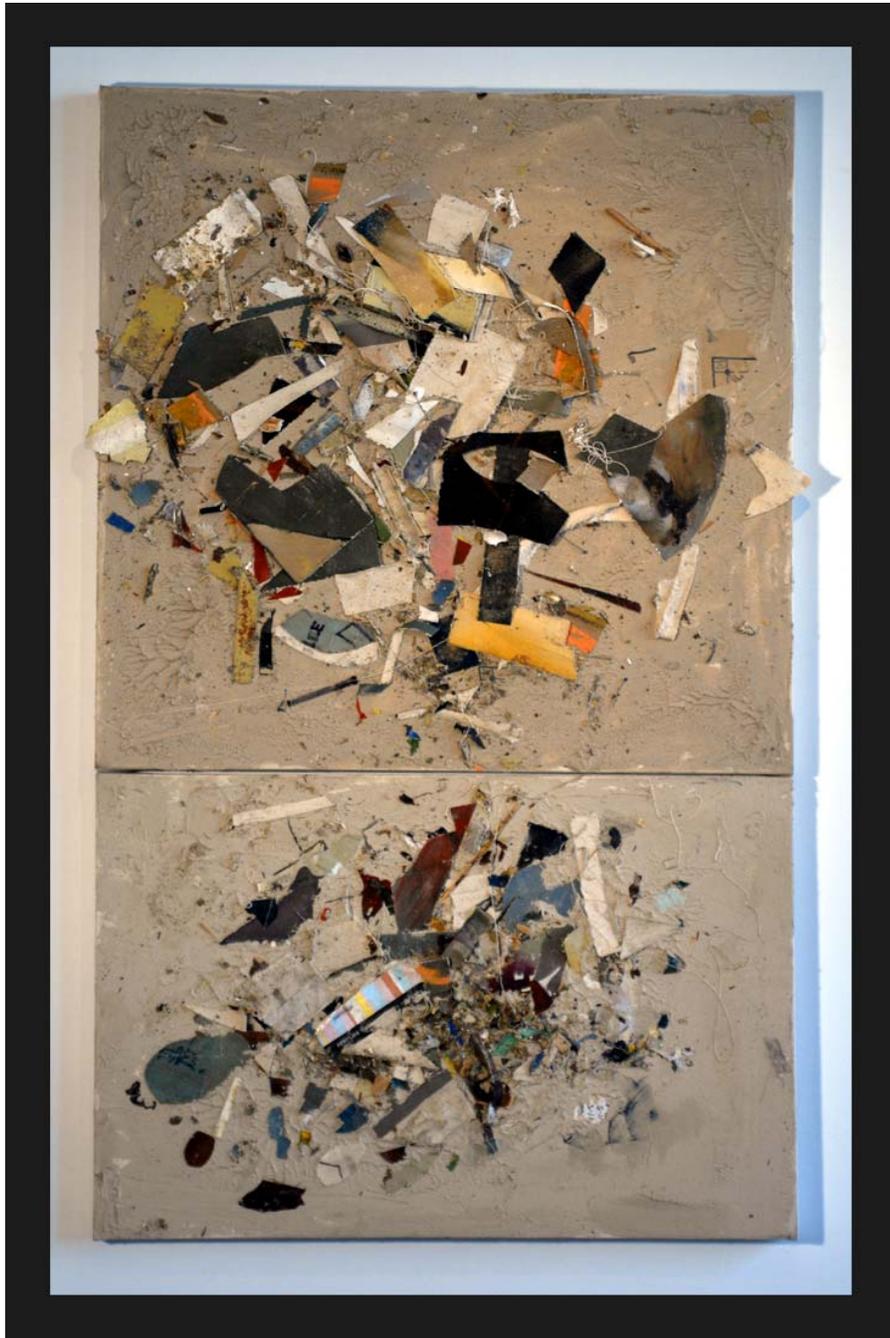
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APPENDIX

EXHIBITION IMAGES



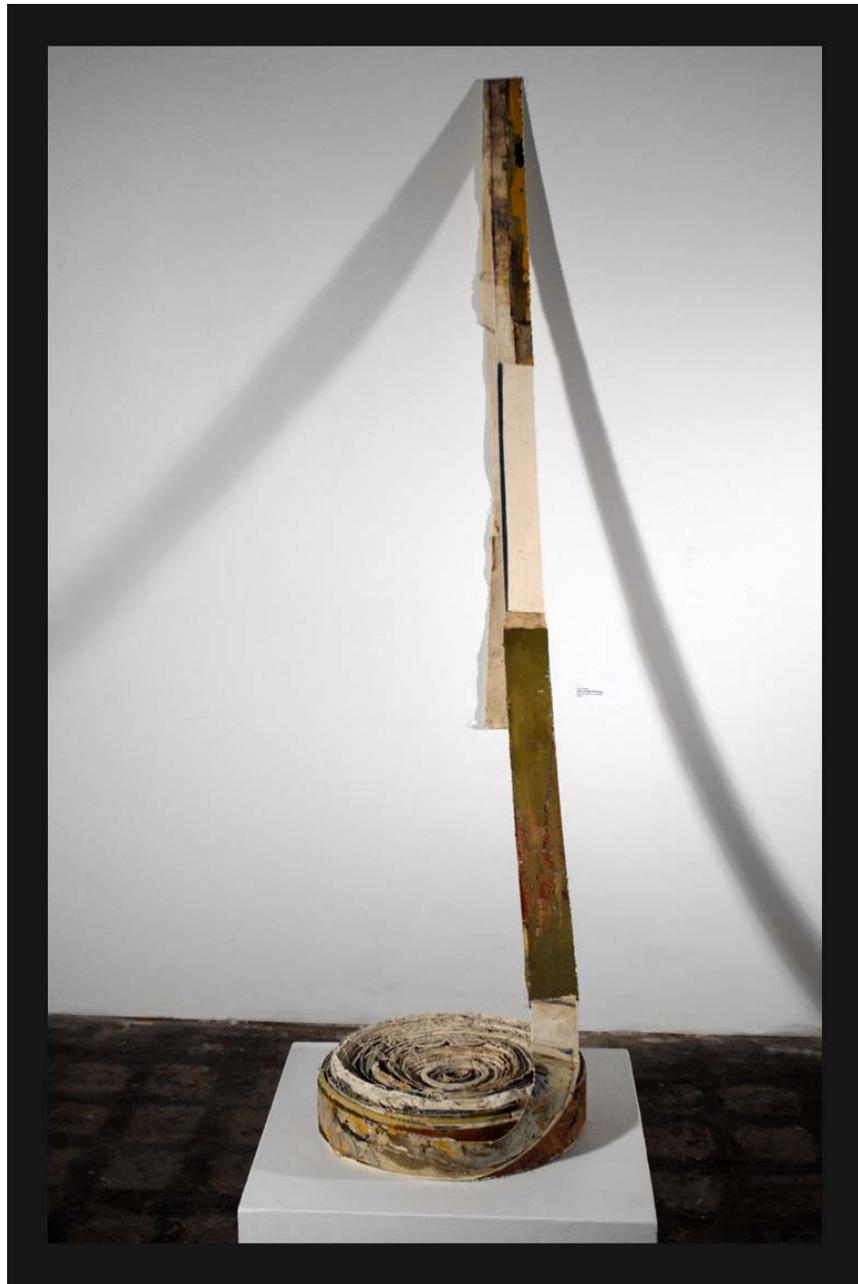


Top: "Floor Painting #2." Oil, acrylic, and painting by-products on floor, on canvas by way of flexible modeling paste, 30in. by 30in.
2007

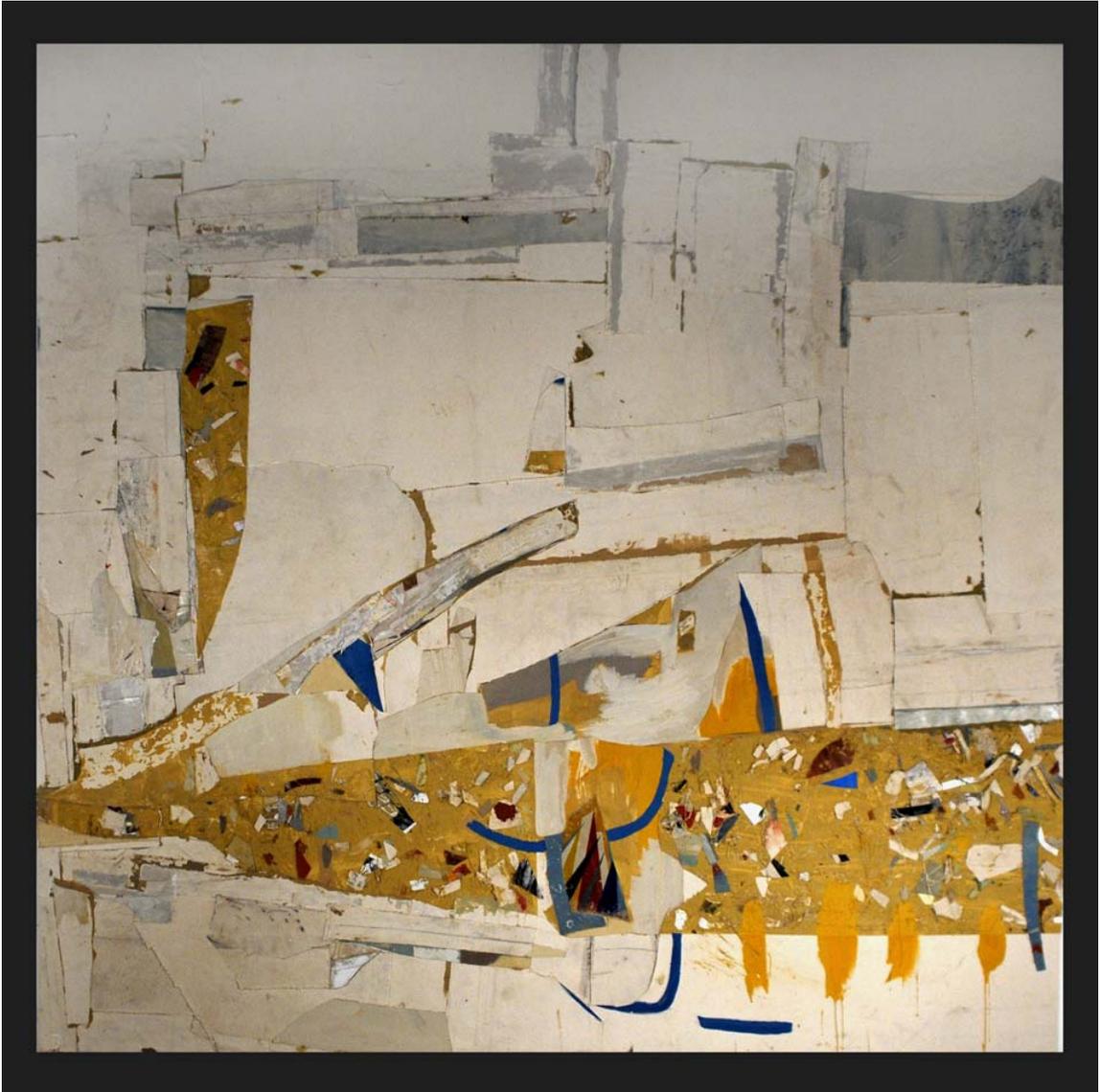
Bottom: "Floor Painting #1." Oil, acrylic, and painting by-products on floor, on canvas by way of flexible modeling paste,
20in. by 30in.
2007



“Processed Painting #8.”
Failed Paintings
2009



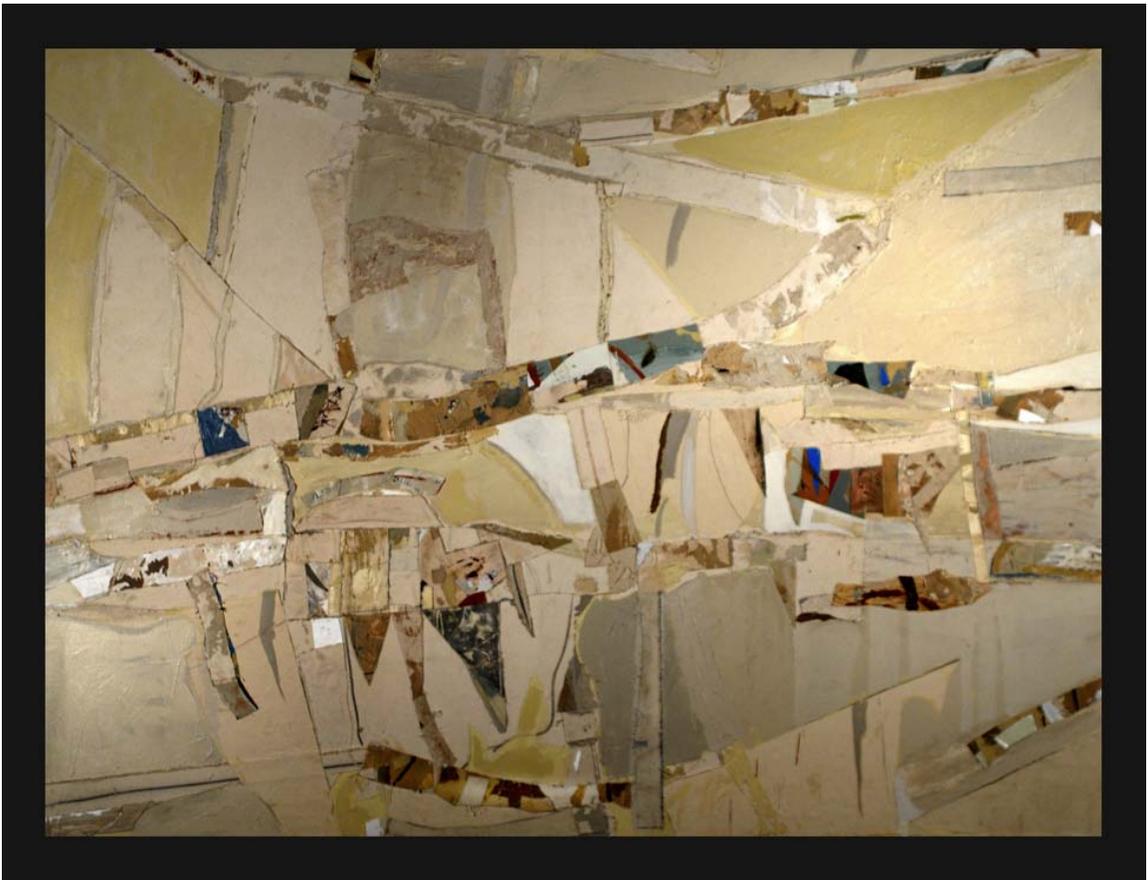
"Roll of Failed Paintings." Oil and acrylic on canvas rolled,
20 in. in diameter, 2007-



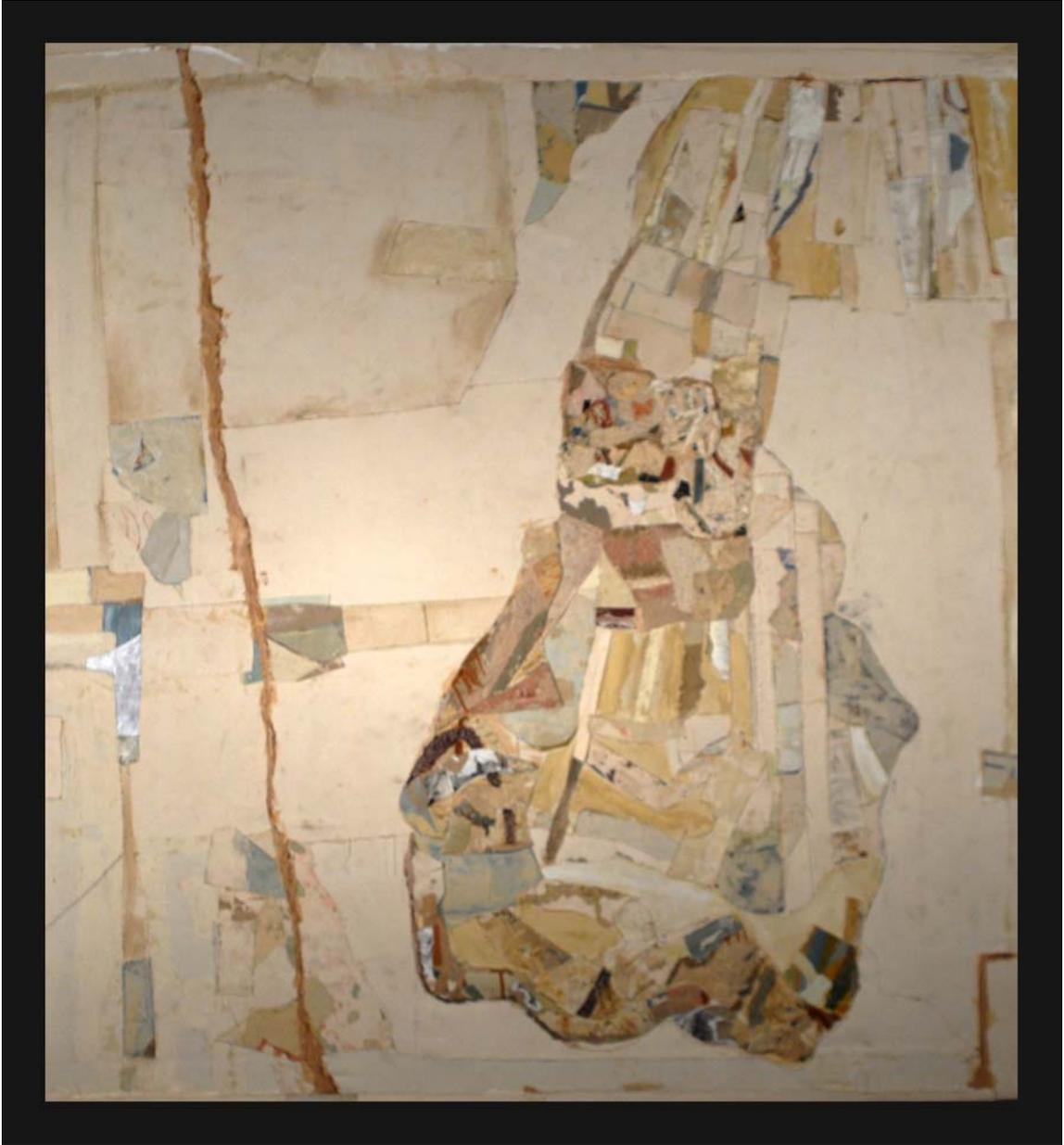
"Processed Painting #2."
Failed Paintings, 96 in. by 96in.
2009



"Processed Painting #5."
Failed Paintings
2009



“Processed Paintings #6.”
Failed Paintings
2009



“Processed Painting #7.”
Failed Paintings
2009



“Processed Painting #4.”
Failed Paintings
2009



From right to left:

“Condensed Painting #1.” Oil and acrylic on canvas. 2007

“Condensed Painting #2.” Oil and acrylic on canvas. 2007

“Condensed Painting #3.” Oil and acrylic on canvas. 2007

“Condensed Painting #4.” Oil and acrylic on canvas. 2007



“Processed Painting #3.”
Failed Paintings
2009



“Processed Painting #1.”
Failed Paintings
2008



“Five Paintings Coming
Together.”
Oil and acrylic on canvas
2007



“Left-Overs.”
Remaining Failed Paintings
2009-

VITA

RICHARD B. PRUETT

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EDUCATION:

MFA in Studio Art, East Tennessee State University, May 2009
BFA in Art Education, University of Georgia, May 2006
BFA in Painting/Drawing, University of Georgia, December, 2005
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CERTIFICATIONS:

T-4 Certification/Visual Arts (K-12)
Certificate number: 708891

ACADEMIC TEACHING EXPERIENCE:

Teaching Assistant (Instructor of Record)

Course: ARTA 1201: Drawing Fundamentals, 2009

Adjunct Instructor

East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee

Course: ARTA 1204: Color Theory, Summer of 2008

Teaching Assistant (Instructor of Record)

East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee

Course: ARTA 1204: Color Theory, 2006-2008

Student Teacher

Clarke Central High School, Athens, Georgia

Full time teaching grades 9-12

Bridged gap between Realism and Abstraction

Provoked creative thought through D.B.A.E.

Created projects to promote students' personal expression

Spring Semester, 2006

Student Teacher

Timothy Road Elementary, Spring 2006

AWARDS AND HONORS:

Graduate Assistantship, 2007-2008

Tuition Scholarship, East Tennessee State University, 2006-2009

Windgate Fellowship Competition (nomination) The Center for Craft, Creativity and Design, 2005

CURO (Center for Undergraduate Research Opportunities) Symposium participant, 2005

Mary Rosenblatt Scholarship, 2004

Dean's List, 2001-2004

Presidential Scholar, 2003

Governor's Honors Program, 2000
Nominated To Design Human Rights Logo, 1999
Who's Who in American High Schools, 1999

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITS:

The Carrol Reece Museum, *Look at the Mess You Made*, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2009
Slocumb Gallery at ETSU, *The Postcard Show*, Johnson City, Tennessee 2009
Nelson's Fine Art Gallery, *ETSU Student Exhibit*, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2008
Tipton Street Art Gallery, *Look Out Below*, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2008
Millennium Centre, *Honors Symposium Art Exhibit*, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2008
Nelson's Fine Art Gallery, *Nothing In Common*, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2008
Tipton Street Art Gallery, *ETSU Fibers Show*, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2008
The Carrol Reece Museum, *Marks*, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2008
Slocumb Gallery at ETSU, *Adjunxtaposition*, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2007
The Carrol Reece Museum, *New Work*, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2007
Slocumb Gallery at ETSU, *The Postcard Show*, Johnson City, Tennessee 2007
Lamar Dodd School of Art, BFA Exit Show, *Public Space/ Dynamic*, Athens, Georgia, 2005
Tate Center Art Gallery, *CURO Show*, Athens, Georgia, 2005
Tate Center Art Gallery, *Absolute Value*, Athens, Georgia, 2004
Lamar Dodd School of Art, *Figure Painting Show*, Athens, Georgia, 2004
Lamar Dodd School of Art, *Art, Actually*, Athens Georgia, 2003
Lamar Dodd School of Art, *Figure Drawing Show*, Athens, Georgia, 2003
Valdosta State University, *2000 Governor's Honors Visual Arts Show*, 2000
Blue Sky, *Human Rights Art Show*, 1999
Clayton Street Art Gallery, *Art Month*, 1999

MEMBERSHIPS:

National Association of Educators
Georgia Education Association
Golden Key Honor Society Member
CAA Member

PUBLICATIONS:

Johnson City Press, *Artists have more in common than suggested*, 2008
Flagpole, Write up about artwork from BFA Exit Show, 2005
CURO Symposium, Biography and Artist Statement, 2005
Flagpole, Artwork displayed for Human Rights Festival, 1999