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CONCRETE PAINTING

by

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B.F.A. University of Central Florida, 2010

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Art
in the Department of the School of Visual Art and Design
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the evolution of my artwork with synthetic materials through influences of the Minimalist and Process Artists of the 1960's and 1970's, inspiration from natural forms, and my exploration of concrete painting. Each work reveals discoveries of different processes and materials, accelerating the creation of new works. It is my hope this thesis will inform viewers about the process and concepts that my work embodies.

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INTRODUCTION

My art journey began in the midst of taking a three-dimensional design class in the fall of 2005; I was 23 years old. Previous endeavors in computer science were unsuccessful (my heart was not into it). My enthusiasm for coding and severe attention to detail dwindled quickly; I was looking for something inspiring and challenging. With the creation of my first non-representational sculpture carved out of plaster as seen in Figure 1, studies in three-dimensional design ignited my curiosity and became a turning point. I discovered what I wanted to do: make art. Working with my hands and creating pieces using various mediums such as wire, plaster, and cardboard sealed my fate of becoming a sculptor and installation artist.



Figure 1: *Beginning* (image by Stephanie Cafcules)

At the time, my knowledge of art and art history was non-existent; I was naïve yet I knew making art would now be now part of my identity. My first introduction to art history came from a class at the University of Central Florida (UCF) called *Art as Interface*. While many of my

classmates had been introduced to art history at a young age, this was my first introduction to it. I was in awe and soaked up as much information as possible. Soon, I was introduced to Jackson Pollock.

THE BEGINNING OF GRADUATE SCHOOL

“The modern artist... is working and expressing an inner world - in other words - expressing the energy, the motion, and other inner forces.”

-Jackson Pollock

I lived in the sculpture studio at UCF for the latter part of my undergraduate degree. Pouring, dripping, and splattering paint like that of my biggest influence, Pollock, I was trying to find my niche among processes and art that had been done long before I was born. I pursued welding, plaster, wire, paint, and a combination of materials to see where I might fit. I made a lot of bad art, and still do; however, all the bad art had to be to promote the evolution of my technique and concept for the evolution of my technique which can be seen in Figures 2 - 4. That finally came toward the end of my undergraduate degree when my *MicroDoodle* series was born.



Figure 2: *Make Me* (image by Stephanie Cafcules)



Figure 3: *Green and Yellow* (image by Stephanie Cafcules)



Figure 4: *MicroDoodles* (image by Stephanie Cafcules)

Taking a year off before entering into the Studio Art and the Computer MFA degree program, I was even more determined and enthusiastic about exploring processes and mediums.

It would be a rough first year of working through concepts, sharpening my knowledge base, and producing polished, architecturally sound work.

Early graduate school work included video and photography. Following where I left off with my *MicroDoodles*, I continued to explore paint as a sculptural element. I produced a video and installation based on my *MircoDoodles* concept that were unsuccessful. These two major failures, among others, marked a second turning point in my art making. I began exploring new materials and processes and focused on art history to inspire more pieces.

INFLUENCES

“What I have in mind is that art may be bad, good or indifferent, but, whatever adjective is used, we must call it art, and bad art is still art in the same way that a bad emotion is still an emotion.”

- Marcel Duchamp

Ever since I was introduced to Pollock’s action painting and the latex pours of Lynda Benglis, I felt passionate about the combination of process art and minimalism. Jackson Pollock was one of the first artists who really excited me. Enthralled with his action painting and his audacious move to take the canvas off the wall and onto the floor, I echoed his process. His use of paint in a sculptural way drew me into to his process. Most of my undergraduate work was based within the confines of his action paint style of throwing, splattering, and pouring. Still keeping the process of action painting in mind during the graduate program, I focused my work on reaching beyond action painting to create my own more original processes and style. Another artist who was very influential in my process development was Lynda Benglis. Her pigmented latex pours, as seen in figure 5, while still having “the action-photograph allusions to Pollock,” inspired utilizing paint as sculpture (Armstrong 16). Just as Benglis “proposed new configurations for mass that emphasized its fluidity,” I added volume and texture to surface properties of the material to transform paint further into the realm of sculpture (Armstrong 16). Pouring acrylic latex based paint onto a sleek surface making a flat painting first, picking it up, draping it onto things and places is the hybridization between painting, sculpture, and installation I was seeking. It also allows for compact, rollable, soft pieces that can be transported to sites and made site-specific once there—in galleries and in environments.



Figure 5: untitled (blue concrete painting) (image by Stephanie Caicules)

Discoveries that are revealed to me about different processes and materials lead to the making of new works. Looking back at the process and minimalist artists from the 60's and 70's continues to inspire me. Minimalist artist Donald Judd struck a chord in my work. His sleek, repetitive, and saturated colors coupled with his treatment of surface and shape attracted me. I began making pieces with direct reference to artists such as Judd, as seen in Figure 5, playing off his use of geometric shapes, his smooth, sleek surface treatment, and combining that with the action of pouring and the utilization of paint as sculpture. These “combines” (similar but not equal to Robert Rauschenberg’s definition) bridge painting and sculpture into what I like to call “concrete paintings”.

While continuing my work with paint pours, new process and materials were discovered. In an effort to add texture to the pour series, I started exploring the possibilities of disintegrating polystyrene; this discovery led to the development of large scale site specific installations. The quest for texture in one series started the process and possibilities of another using spray-painted, disintegrated, and melted recycled polystyrene. Once I began working in installation I was

introduced to Tara Donovan. She became my new Pollock. Her work is exciting, monumental, beautiful, minimalistic, repetitious; in all, incredibly inspiring. Donovan uses vast numbers of ordinary objects in extraordinary ways to create gorgeous installations that transform a space. Her process is akin to mine, “spend(ing) hours experimenting with materials until she happens on something that works” (Kino New York Times). The major difference between her work and process and mine is that her “one cardinal rule is never to alter the nature of the material or disguise it. She selects a material, determines its specific properties and peculiarities, its density, texture and measurements, looking for fugitive effects: color, light, optical illusion, [and] pattern” while I specifically seek out ways to alter the material physically and chemically (Wei).

MATERIALS

“That’s what fascinates me – to make something I can never be sure of, and no one else can either. I will never know, and no one else will ever know... That’s the way art is.”

– Willem de Kooning, 1972

A few of the materials I work with are latex-based acrylic paint, expandable polyurethane foam, wire mesh, and polystyrene. These materials are used in industrial applications, for housing insulation, concrete reinforcement, product packaging, interior design, and more. Inverting their manufactured, industrial synthetic reality, my goal is to create a sense of curiosity, uncertainty, and surprise which approaches and evokes nature.

Lynda Benglis created her *Totem* series using expanding polystyrene foam over 40 years ago when it was still a new space age-borne material. To this day, Benglis considers herself a painter, primarily because she does not use glue but also because she was interested in painterly materials, form and space and where the gesture could take the material (“Boundaries”). I consider myself an artist, focused on what materials and physical/chemical processes will aid in the creation of the forms I wonder about. Tara Donovan states in an interview speaking about her creation and installation process, “it’s a conversation between me and the thing,”—this is in turn an appropriate way to describe how I look at installation, process and different materials. It is a conversation or exchange between me and the material or space; a conversation that is constant and ever-evolving. I find it important to be more aware of my surroundings because the sensory quest for texture and stability may lead to the introduction of another material. This progression is what led to my polystyrene installations.

Sometimes people overlook materials that compose the world in which we live. Paint on the walls, fake rocks lining a pathway, polystyrene pillars that flank a doorway; these ignored yet important synthetic entities that comprise many of the structures in our environment are part of what makes them appealing to me. Humankind is constantly evolving and interested in advancements to make life easier through developments of man-made or enduring materials. The discovery of chemically created materials in the 30's such as polystyrene, PVC, acrylic, polyurethane, epoxy and others became popular in the 60's because of their accessibility, cost, and potency of fitting every purpose. These attributes are also motivating factors in this choice of my materials. These revolutionary materials intrigued artists like Lynda Benglis, Eva Hesse, Robert Morris, and Richard Serra. Today, synthetic materials encompass our environment. The realization that the environment I grew up in was and still is comprised of synthetic materials is fascinating to me. I seek to use them in unexpected ways. In 1966, art critic Lucy Lippard organized an exhibition titled *Eccentric Abstraction*. The artists she included were, "devoted to opening up new areas of materials, shape, color, and sensuous experience" (Lippard 54). The synthetic industrial materials I work with also serve that purpose of 'opening up new areas' coupled with evoking nature and also a sense of wonder.

Another important aspect of my work is that I recycle synthetic materials such as latex-based acrylic paint and polystyrene. These materials are deemed as environmentally un-friendly because they take hundreds of years to decompose. These resilient materials are attractive to use because they are durable, cheap, and easily manipulated. The concept of using synthetic materials to create organic forms based in nature has a sense of poetry and irony. The fabrication

of man-made materials mimicking or invoking the textures and patterns in nature inspires their use in my sculptures.

POUR PROCESS

“You can't start with point zero every time you make a work, you start from the point you left off through the last work, on the whole...and you may, in fact, start at another point that goes back a few works earlier. But generally you use the information you've gleaned out of recent sculpture making activities, and transfer it into the new works, so there's a sort of 'stepping forward' going on as well. It is a bit like following a thread, almost like a melody in the form, so that sculptures not only have some highly synthetic quality, but they would also become more synchronic.”

–Tony Cragg

I have developed a method over the years that centers upon the notions: control and the uncontrolled. Chance, probability, and natural occurrences consistently inform decisions in the continuum of my process. Among several such processes, pouring paint has become an experience of engaging with controlled unpredictability. Gravity and the laws of fluid dynamics (compressible vs. incompressible, viscous vs. inviscid, and steady vs. unsteady flow), are the forces I leave largely to chance. Extracting ideas for techniques from the Minimalist and Process artists of the 1960's and 1970's is an important component of my work; however, textures and patterns in nature and the dream world of my own imagining are my muses. The undulating sensual curves of an unusual tree root system, calcified cave formations, and mountain top textures are just a minute sampling that arouses my awe and curiosity. It is this sense of wonder that I strive to transfer into my work through happenstance and control. Each process, material, color, texture, and pattern go through the same four-part method of variance: extraction, inspiration, musing, and execution.

Pollock's gestural action painting is mesmerizing to me. His “action painting”, in which his arms become an organic extension of the brush-motivated pour techniques adapted into my

process. Using my entire body to paint, pour, and sculpt becomes a dance with rhythm which conforms with my subconscious decisions. In the same way Pollock's gestural action painting motivates my pours, Lynda Benglis' forms and use of liquid as a sculptural element also encourages the materials and techniques of my pour process. Using paint in an unconventional manner is intriguing. I am curious about how I can transform a material that is typically used with a brush of some kind to put color onto a two dimensional surface and use it in more concrete means. Altering their process, I pour paint onto a sleek surface and wait for it to dry. Then like a sticker, peeling the paint up, I gather and fold the pour over an armature. I use a liquid painterly material in an unconventional manner creating forms and texture through a gestural and subconscious process.

POURS

Continuing to work with paint as a sculptural material into graduate school made sense. I had a successful Bachelor of Fine Art exhibition with my *MicroDoodles*, so to continue that thought and material process was a natural starting point. I produced a video and images of paint pours, drips and splatters that was not successful. Production quality was low and I was lost still trying to continue what I had left off with in undergraduate studies. It was not until my second year of grad school that I discovered my pours. Action-driven like Pollock and obscuring the distinction between paint and sculpture like Benglis, I began using high-gloss paint as a sculptural material. Pouring gallons at a time and waiting until they were dry throughout made them pliable and almost fabric-like. This material is next used to cover an armature or drape from a wall; the paint folds and creases creating sensual curves and texture. The armature, wall, or pedestals take on a new form and identity creating wonder.

Working with rejected paint from the local home improvement store provided a very limited selection of color and finish. After exploring the different brands, finishes and working with color theory, I was drawn to high-gloss saturated colors. The glossy finish is almost reflective becoming interactive and alluring. Saturated colors are vivid and intense: combining those qualities of interactivity with vivid colors became important to playing up the synthetic attribute of paint.



Figure 6: untitled (image by Stephanie Cafcules)

In the example seen in Figure 6, I chose a cool color pallet. The saturated, glossy colors are intense and reflective contrasting with calming effects of a cool color pallet. The strong directional force of the piece creates movement taking on a creature-like quality. Ambiguity, texture, color, reflectiveness, and opposing forces both synthetic and natural create a new identity for this amorphic form.

POLYSTYRENE

Polystyrene has become a staple for my large scale sculptures and models; it is used widely throughout the world in construction industry due these attributes; however, I discovered that this material could be of use to me in my ongoing quest for texture. I tend to work on several pieces and with different processes simultaneously; this keeps my mind busy and my work progressing positively even if I find myself at a stand-still with a single idea or material. In response to my effort to add texture to my pour series, I noticed a large piece of discarded polystyrene in the studio. I knew spray paint melts this material and therefore, it would be my chosen method to create the texture I was looking for. After briefly working with this material, I knew I had discovered another process to explore: the black spray paint had nibbled at the polystyrene but not to my satisfaction. I threw some acetone on it and soon got a violent and beautiful reaction. This chemical easily disintegrates polystyrene while the black spray paint acts like glue creating a spider web of black tar--almost as if holding the white foam together even as it melted away. This reaction resulted in the beautiful texture seen in Figures 7 and 8.



Figure 7: untitled (detail of polystyrene) (image by Stephanie Cafcules)



Figure 8: untitled (detail of polystyrene) (image by Stephanie Cafcules)

With this new found process and material, I was easily able to create a large scale installation. I collected packaging and discarded polystyrene to apply the same treatment of spray paint and acetone. I installed each piece onto a forty foot wall; I took form, depth, negative and positive space into careful consideration as I worked. The forms were skewered onto metal rods inserted into the wall. Pablo Picasso once said, “I paint objects as I think them, not as I see them” which is also how my installation took form, piece by piece, as I became more aware of how it needed to be formed. In Figure 9, the pieces are visible as a fusion of geometric packaging material and amorphic forms created through the melting process. Conflicting elements throughout the piece lend to its deconstructive nature. Each viewer provides a different interpretation, which continually brings different meanings to the work. By manipulating the surface of the polystyrene with paint and acetone, I distort and fragment the material. Its geometric shapes lose and gain clarity because of the deliberate disintegration of the material. Recessed areas are white while highlighted areas are black, which contradicts what we expect of light and our vision. The limited color palette of black and white and a varying texture make

polystyrene look like concrete. Charred remains and faux space rocks contribute to a cascading series of viewer responses.



Figure 9: untitled (site specific installation) (image by Stephanie Cafcules)

My use of unconscious thought, automatic gesture, and controlled decisions causes the elements of line, form, texture, balance, and harmony to be the main focus of the process. Spray painting the polystyrene black, pouring acetone and further shaping the pieces with heat are toxic activities that yields beautifully varying texture and form. By altering polystyrene with this process, I balance geometric and organic elements as well as, light and dark throughout the piece. I employ process art, minimalist composition, working on a large scale, and site-specific installation to engage the characteristics of Postmodernism. Process and Minimalist artists of the late 1960's such as Eva Hesse relied on process and materials to insinuate gesture in sculpture. This same process and concept can be seen in this installation.

The highly aesthetic function of the installation brings forth a phenomenology focusing the viewer on the various features of the piece. Like a Rorschach test, the reality, interpretation, and experience of the piece are based on each individual's perception. The non-representational nature of the installation hinges on basic elements of line, texture, value, deception of depth, shape, and balance creating its own system of meaning. Debris, charred remains, and suggestions of war, are all different interpretations that have been proposed as a result of the individual experience of viewers. These varying interpretations develop secondary meaning in the piece which reaches beyond process, materials, and minimalist interpretations alone.

CONCRETE PAINTINGS

“There is sometimes added to the abstract forms something particular, even without the use of figuration; through the color or through the execution, a particular idea or sentiment is expressed... All the world knows that even a single line can arouse emotion.”

– Piet Mondrian, 1937

I consider myself a formalist, process, and minimalist artist. The primal elements and principles of art are significant aspects of my work with clear emphasis on process and material. Formalist thought as applied to art can be traced back as far as Aristotle who, “understood art as a shaping process analogous to the processes of nature” (Williams “Formalism”). Fast forwarding to the twentieth century, the influential art critic Clement Greenberg believed art was composed of elements and their visual impact on the viewer.

“Greenberg believed that the subjects of the visual arts should be their respective media. Painting should be about paint, and sculpture about the materials of sculpture... Formalists evaluate art according to physical qualities such as color, size, shape, line, texture, and so on, and treat the ideational content of works as irrelevant” (Tekiner 31).

Greenberg reveals that visual impact and a sense of wonder is the ultimate goal of each piece; curiosity arouses thought and learning; the unrecognizable triggers our brains to recall what is known based on memory and experience. Focusing my work on the non-representational hybridization of sculpture, painting and installation aids me in the pursuit to figure out what the work is made of, how it is configured and installed, and what links can be made to what is known and familiar. These ideas have lead me to what I call concrete paintings; concrete being the physical existence of materials, and painting speaking to color and result of the action of

installation. A “concrete painting” is the term I use for this painting/sculpture hybridization. Any surface is a canvas; wall, floor, pedestal, ceiling, creating ground for the concrete materials.

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