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Side By Side: An Exploration of the Artistic Process and the Painted Surface

Jessie F. Sorvaag

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

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SIDE BY SIDE:

AN EXPLORATION OF THE ARTISTIC PROCESS AND THE PAINTED SURFACE

AN HONORS THESIS

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for All College Honors

and Distinction

in the Department of Art

by

Jessie Sorvaag

April 2015

SIDE BY SIDE:

AN EXPLORATION OF THE ARTISTIC PROCESS AND THE PAINTED SURFACE

Approved by:

Associate Professor of Art

Associate Professor of Art

Professor of Art

Chair, Department of Art

Director, Honors Thesis Program

Side by Side: An Exploration of the Artistic Process and the Painted Surface

A written Honors Thesis in support of the creation and exhibition of a body of work; formed and explored over the course of my final year as an Art Major. On display at the Alice R. Rogers Gallery & Target Gallery at St. John's University from April 13 to May 10, 2015.

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Introduction

My thesis project investigates the personal artistic journey I have encountered as I have prepared meaningful work for my final exhibition. I used painting, accompanied by this written thesis, to create a body of work that encourages thought and discovery of tension and conflict, both within the work and within oneself. I hoped to use this project to create an environment of thoughtful creation, research, and investigation that will continue to influence me beyond the completion of this semester. This work was as much about the viewer and their reflection, as it was about my own internal investigation into juxtaposition, conflict, and tension. Not only was the subject matter thought provoking, but also the process that I found myself engaged in to create my work was full of challenge and complexity. This yearlong project and process helped me to grow as an artist and as a person. As I progressed through my ideas and my art making, I found that I needed to let the work speak for itself and allow myself to create work that was both honest and intentional in its content and approach.

Thesis Objective

The objective of this project was to lead me to dig deeper into the ideas and emotions behind my work and creations, the medium I work with, and the formal concerns related to making my best art. My proposal included investigating my personal relationship to my subjects, as well as the relationship that my subjects and my art have with an audience. My thesis includes my own body of work as well as research and reflection on that work. Research was intended to help me grow my

understanding of my own ideas and create accurate depictions of what I imagined. This work was intended to be a way for me, as an artist, to explore and grow in what it means to make meaningful work that brings new ideas to light.

My original goal was to investigate the relationship I hold with cattle as living animals and cattle as beef and commodity. Throughout research and creation I found myself exploring a path that was more related to the formal qualities of my work. The content shifted from visceral and physical to abstract and ethereal. Although this change no longer helped me to answer my initial questions about cattle and beef, I found myself more engaged in my own art making as well as creating work that was much more authentic and representative of who I am. My work transitioned to focus on the juxtaposition of life and death, the complexity and simplicity of nature, and the absolute beauty found in all of this tension. My research and exploration have helped me to fulfill many of the goals that I set for myself at the beginning of this project; it lead me to new questions and ideas that I had not previously considered.

Personal Influence

My entire life I was raised to be aware of the world around me and the sacrifices made by others to make my life possible. When I was young my family lived in South Dakota, and we were surrounded by the Lakota culture. The regard that the Lakota people hold for life was something that my family learned and taught. My parents instilled in me that respect for everyone and everything is essential for the world to go round. All of these influences have led me to have an

interest in the relationship between life and death, and the important role we all play in it. The sacrifice that I see from life to death is what makes further life possible. It is a circular process and a very important one. There are ideas that sacrifice must be intentional and specific, but when I think about sacrifice in relation to life and death, I think about it in a different way. Each life that is lived is supported by what was once alive and what is alive, and it will be the support for what will live in the future. Life must be sacrificed to death in order for more life to form. There is evidence of this all around us in nature. Many Native American cultures celebrate the sacrifice of the animals that sustained them, and this celebration was as important as the actual nourishment they gained. Although the animals did not perhaps give their life willingly, the Native Americans saw the sacrifice of a life in order that they themselves might continue to live. Death sustains life, and life sustains death.

This led me to explore my own relationship with life and death, which I have found easiest to explore using cattle as my subjects. The love I have for the living cow is as much a part of my life as my love of beef. This led to spiritual and emotional conflict. It also brought questions to the surface that I feel are important to consider. Am I allowed to love beef this much if I also have a deep love for living creatures? How can I best contribute to the culture surrounding this relationship? Why is this conflict so often ignored? How can we create an environment where it is encouraged to talk about animals and consumption, and where it is an important topic to consider and work towards a solution? As I explored this conflict, my conceptualization grew and shifted, and my technique for presenting my ideas

transformed into something that better suited my ideas and emotions. Most important to me throughout this process was my self-discovery and exploration as an artist. This was aided by the use of intentional painting techniques, practice of new mediums, research, and reflection on culture and my identity within it.

My personal conflict was not resolved. However, my thinking and questions about it became clearer, and I am better able to talk about and reflect on the juxtapositions and tensions I found present in my work. The tension in my work was one of its most important and compelling qualities. My control has become far more internal and I aim to elicit reflection rather than reaction from my viewers. I have shifted from intellectual to more spiritual work. In this case I am speaking of spirituality in the same sense as Parker Palmer does, “spirituality is the eternal human yearning to be connected with something larger than our own egos.”

The new questions and ideas that came forward helped me develop a more personally profound mindset about the sacrifices that are made for the living and the relationship between life and death. How can I grow a strong personal relationship with the sacrifices made so I can live? What do other people see when they look at the cycle of life and death? How can I portray my observations and admirations of the efficiency and beauty of nature? I have also begun to view my work as something that can be both personal and universal. The research and artistic exploration I did helped me to view the content as universal and also guided me in the way that I created my work to share my ideas, which I will elaborate on further in the following sections.

Evolution of Work

Communicating through art promotes a very different process and outcome than many other form of communication. As the creator I have to be very conscious of the fact that I will not be able to completely control what the viewer thinks when they look at my work. Art can be effective and comprehensive for expressing ideas, but it can also be a challenging and distinct experience for each person who views it. A work's content and context are both important, and yet there is no way to know for sure what the viewer brings to the experience. All of this can be daunting while trying to create work that expresses an idea or conflict that is so personal. However, by choosing visual representation, I present my own questions and conflicts in a way that makes them available, and possibly more understandable, to people who are not familiar with my personal experiences.

My personal relationship with cows is very different from what many people have experienced in life. Cattle have been important and present in my life in many ways; thus, questions surrounding my relationship with them are neither odd nor unwelcome. For some of my friends and peers, these questions would not be as common because their relationship with cattle has been limited. Because they have not spent much time around cows, they may not consider how emotion is involved in our food. They may not ask themselves how they feel about eating a creature that was once alive, because they may not be blatantly presented with the fact that their meat was once living and breathing. I wanted to present my own questions to

people who might not live in an environment that would nurture the development of similar questions or conflict.

As I was studying other art and artists as well as examining my own emotions, I had to decide how to best portray my ideas. My work was initially aimed at fleshing out the struggle and bringing forth the tension of my personal conflict. I wanted to tap into the part of people that emotionally bonds to other creatures and still remind them that the food they eat often came at the expense of a life. Would painting meat, blood, slaughter, or death actually give a viewer an insight into my own conflict? Could I give that insight in a way that wouldn't offend or disgust people? Imagery of blood and meat might have brought the viewer to a conclusion very different from what I intended. Although I am interested in thinking about cattle as meat, it is not necessarily in a way that carcasses (as I am able to paint them) can best illustrate. I want the viewer to feel attracted to my paintings (not be immediately off put by the sight of blood or gore) and then be steered towards emotional conflict that might be attached to the way they interact with cattle and beef. The juxtaposition of life and death by painting live cows and skeletons was one way that I could promote inquiry without disgusting or offending viewers. By placing the imagery of life and death in the same proximity, the conflict of this love-love relationship was presented to the viewer.

I was very interested in the relationship between representation and expression. Painting with a palette knife on un-stretched canvas gave me a freedom and capability to create work that explored texture and light, while also exploring the conflict I felt in respect to my relationship to cows. The texture of palette knife

painting allowed me to create dimension and light in ways that were representational but not photorealistic. It also allowed me to work from a place of creativity, imagination, and concept rather than trying to exclusively learn and improve technique. The surface I painted on also became very important to the subject of my work. By working on canvas that was irregularly shaped and unstretched I was making formal connections to cowhide. The surface of the canvas then became another layer of the image and added to the dimensionality of the work. The canvases that I was painting on were about 4x6 feet. This size allowed me to create subjects that were close to life size. Now the subject matter was more realistic in terms of dimensions, and I hoped that this would help better create an emotional connection between the viewer and a seemingly real subject.

One of the aspects that I appreciated most about painting with the palette knife was the quickness with which the images began to appear. However, oil paint does not dry very quickly, and I wanted to find a medium that allowed me to respond to my ideas as they came to me. After working with the palette knife and oil paint, I became interested in working with acrylic paint, as well as other materials. Moving to acrylic and latex paint allowed me to produce work much more rapidly as well as work with layers in a much quicker succession. I was also interested in working on a very large scale. The lower cost of acrylic and latex paint allowed me to feel more freedom while working on large canvases, as well as the space to experiment much more spontaneously. As I began to investigate what was possible with layering imagery on large canvases I found that I enjoyed playing with the flatness and three-dimensionality of the subject matter. By layering line

paintings of cows over a more three-dimensional painting of a skeleton I was able to confuse reality and space in an interesting way. Some of the lines disappeared behind the skeleton, but the cow seemed to be lying in front of the skeleton. They seem to share a three-dimensional space but also exist on the same plane. Flatness and layering helped me to create images that walked the line between representation and abstraction, and the surface that I was working on helped me to find that line. This juxtaposition really interested me.

As I was exploring the layering of paint, I also began to explore layering with other materials. I began to incorporate drawing, paper, yarn, glue, and many other materials. This new process of layering, covering, erasing, and removing helped me to further explore my subject matter. It also gave me a freedom in my creative process. By viewing layering and erasing as an important tool in my arsenal I was able to move past the preciousness of each image I made and imbue meaning in the process of layering rather than just the imagery itself. These new layers were exciting to me and I continued to work with them with intention. Working on a large scale was exciting and informative. I definitely learned a great deal about the way that I make art, as well as what I was making art about. Although I enjoyed working on the large scale, I still felt as if my work was missing something.

One struggle that I faced when working with oil and acrylic paint was my inability to portray images with the detail and realism that I envisioned. I felt I had very compelling ideas to work with, but when I went to place the paint on the canvas I created images that I felt showed my lack of skill and were incomplete. I was restricted by my lack of technique and my work ended up seeming very flat and

lacking in dimension, both physically and emotionally. While I wanted to talk about the relationship that humans have with their food, I found myself lacking the ability to paint food in an appealing and beautiful way. My work became disjointed and unexciting. I was limited to using imagery that I felt competent to paint: cows, skulls, and skeletons. By restricting myself to painting things that I had the skills to paint (which I felt was important in order to make the best art I could), I was making art that did not fully encompass the scope of the conflict I wanted to make art about.

I began to be disappointed with the work I was producing and with my own growth as an artist. In order to give myself some time to think and reflect I decided to try watercolor. I thought that it would be a good way for me to sketch out ideas quickly, and it would also give me some time away from my large pieces to let them breathe and let my ideas grow and change. However, once I started to work with watercolor I fell in love. I found that I wanted to spend all my time painting, which was a feeling that I had been lacking for a while. This emotional reconnection to my painting was something that made for a mental environment of enthusiasm and an eagerness about my own ideas and work. It created a situation of art making that had dwindled in the recent past. I became fascinated by the way that the paint and water interacted with one another, as well as how the paper and the paint were related. I realized that my work could be about my personal conflict and also about formal properties of the painting and the medium. I began to explore all of the possibilities that watercolor offered, and I learned quickly what tools and techniques I could use to my advantage to create even more powerful work.

As I worked with the watercolor my imagery began to change. I started to create more abstract work. The images still implied the idea of a cow or a skull, but the work that I found the most compelling was the work that was about the subject as well as the color and shape that compose it, equally. I found myself being drawn to the white space between the colors. The pattern that these spaces created interested me. My work transitioned from being about a very specific and physical subject to being about abstraction and reflection. I was able to explore spiritual and ethereal concepts while portraying the beauty I find in the natural sacrifices of life and death.

Watercolor gave me the ability to look at and for beauty and consider how I could paint it. Now I am more focused on the idea that finding and sharing beauty as a spiritual experience is one way I can share my inner self with the world and become involved beyond just my internal thoughts. Gaining more skill and technique will help me to better think about how to portray the beauty I see in the world, and this semester I have been able to connect to a medium in a way that makes me want to gain and practice those skills.

Form and Content

Although I am still using similar content, my form and context have shifted greatly throughout my exploration. Layering was an effective tool when I was working with other materials, but when I begin to layer too much with watercolor the colors lose some of their impact and the way that the paint acts changes dramatically. The subjects lose the intensity that I feel is present when the color and

white space interact. One way that I have found to incorporate layering in my watercolor work is by making line drawings over the watercolor image. This technique is interesting and creates some of the same flatness and dimensionality that I had been previously exploring. To be successful however, it takes much more intention on my part. The line drawings over the watercolor feel illustrative and do not balance well with my content in the way that some of my other work does.

Composition is one way that I can better assure that the viewer can understand my concepts and intention. The cattle in my early paintings are looking out at the viewer in a direct and unavoidable way. By forcing the viewer to look the cows in the eye I was emphasizing the innocence and docile nature of cows, and created a relationship between the image and the viewer. To emphasize vulnerability and power dynamics I used imagery that steers the viewer towards thinking about cattle as a product to be consumed. My work was not intended to make people feel disgust or to encourage people to stop eating beef, but to give the viewer a way to consider their own relationship with beef. The imagery I used in my earlier work was intended to lead viewers to consider cattle as more than something over which we have power, and create an environment where conflict exists and questioning assumptions was encouraged.

I still use both cows and skeleton imagery in my work, but it has become about more than just the juxtaposition of life and death. The work is now more about the forms in and of themselves. The content is no longer my personal conflict, but the relationship between life and death, the paint, and the process. My work has taken on more spiritual components, and the physical subject matter is often the

least important feature that portrays meaning. I am now using the image of a skull to represent things that are hard to describe with words. The skull is no longer a representative of death but a symbol of the beauty of life and the spiritual connection and gratitude I feel for the sacrifice between life and death. Georgia O'Keeffe once said, "I found I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn't say any other way... things I had no words for," which is how I look at my work with the skulls. I am using the skulls to evoke ideas in a beautiful and intriguing way.

In my watercolor painting, I am able to use form and content in very different ways from my earlier work. Watercolor has given me the tools and freedom to be able to incorporate the form and content into one another in meaningful ways. I still am creating work that portrays cows' faces and cow skulls, but now I am using this imagery in a way that is advancing my work. I am no longer trying to create work about a specific topic using general imagery, but using specific imagery to raise questions about an extensive topic. Using specific imagery allows me to lead a viewer towards a concept that might seem overwhelming in its entirety, but is manageable and motivating to contemplate in pieces.

By using watercolor and abstraction I am better able to use form and color to my advantage. Using red in my images implies the presence of blood, but with the watercolor it does not feel out of place. The red in these new images is more about the way the pigment is brushed on the paper and the way that it interacts with the white space and other color around it. I am able to subtly imply death and blood, but in a way that does not feel repulsive or unsightly. In some images I combine an image of a skull with coloring and form that resemble a flower. This allows me to

talk about life and death-a harmonious relationship-in a beautiful and intriguing way. The use of watercolor and abstraction allowed me to expand my use of color and incorporate color into the content more powerfully.

Another way that I have begun to use color to enhance my content is through the use of negative space. The juxtaposition of color against the stark white is interesting to me. Not only do I find it visually appealing, but it also seems to speak to the juxtaposition of life and death. The patterns are complex and simple at the same time. The white space between the colors is intricate, and yet it is also fairly unassuming. This pairing is often evident in nature and is one of the things that I find most beautiful about nature. The skills and techniques I use with watercolor allow me to be very precise and also force me to relinquish some control. I had to allow the paint to act the way that it naturally does, and try to use that to my advantage without cover or erasing the evidence of it. This balance during the art making process also reflects many of the ideas I am pondering in my work, especially the juxtaposition of complexity and simplicity.

The size of my work has changed throughout my entire process, but it is still as important as ever. Most of my images are painted on a small scale. This creates a feeling of preciousness and intimacy that is important to me. By creating work that a viewer needs to get close to in order to see, I am creating a personal space for that viewer. The preciousness of these smaller images will hopefully help the viewer think about spiritual and ethereal ideas in relation to themselves. Most of my work is also safely confined in the center of the paper, often surrounded by white space as a frame. I think that this helps the image feel important and also delicate. The

subject is cushioned by the negative space around it, and nothing else is allowed to touch it.

As I prepared for the opening of the final exhibition I had to carefully consider how to display my work so that it would have the impact that I intended. I wanted to be sure that none of my pieces got overlooked, but I also wanted to show the importance of my work as an entirety. One possibility I considered when designing the layout for the show was to display each piece individually. I felt that this would require the viewer to look closely at the smaller pieces, and the larger ones would not overshadow them. However, this limited the number of pieces that I could display for the show and I felt that my body of work needed to be represented more fully. The second option I considered for displaying the paintings was to group them in small collections or pairs. This still gave importance to the individual pieces, but brought more pieces into the show. The struggle with this method was creating groups that seemed to be related or that looked cohesive.

Eventually I decided to show my work in two groups. One group consists of just two images that I find very compelling on their own, and the other group is a collection of a variety of sizes, styles, and subjects that I feel encompass my body of work as a whole. I was a little concerned about this layout because I felt that the smaller images would become background noise and not get the attention they deserve. Some of the smaller pieces are the most interesting to look at, and I did not want them to get swallowed up in the display. However, after trying a few layouts, I was able to see how significant the group was as a whole and how it actually brought more attention to the impact and individuality of each of the pieces. The

large group is very eye catching and looks almost like a field of flowers (which is some imagery that I incorporated to speak about life and death). Incorporating flowers, as a symbol of life, with imagery that is so frequently associated with death will hopefully help my viewer understand the deep connection that I feel between life and death and that they are not always opposite one another. By grouping my work together I hope to draw the viewer in and have them look at each piece individually but additionally as a part of a whole.

Influences for Previous Work

As I became more aware of the personal conflict I have about my relationship with cows I was exploring in my earlier work, I used the work of Dr. Temple Grandin as a stepping-stone from which to ask questions and create images. Temple Grandin has done fabulous work in the meat production industry to reduce the suffering and improve the conditions of the cattle as they are transported and slaughtered. Dr. Grandin views cattle and the beef industry with an honest frankness, and yet offers and demands humane treatment of animals. Not only has she brought about a way of working that treats the animals with as much respect as possible, but she has also radically influenced the way that our country requires slaughterhouses to be run. Temple Grandin and all of her work allowed me to explore my own feelings in a more educated way and made me realize that other people feel a conflict surrounding their relationship with beef as well.

I think that our culture has become too disconnected from where all our food comes from. In very recent history, meat was a luxury for many people, and now

most Americans see it as an integral part of their daily intake and a basic commodity. My work aims to highlight the opposition we face when our culture does not always consider the deep relationship of life and death. However, with my work, I want the viewer to reflect on the spiritual nature of this relationship as well as the tension sometimes found within this connection. One challenge that I have encountered when thinking about, talking about, and making my art is the fact that I may not come to a conclusion or answer when my paintings are finished. This work is intended to raise questions, and that has made it difficult to express the complexity of the relationship in a way that invites the viewer to deepen their perspective.

By viewing and exploring a variety of art I have been able to better understand the ways that art can be used to communicate ideas, technique and method can influence emotion, and color and content can interact with the viewer. This has made me consider how to best use a medium to produce specific images and ideas. Each step has shifted my technique and subject matter. It has created work that is more interesting and better explores my sentiments and the ideas I want to portray.

Kathy Sigle's work encouraged me to think about how I place my subjects in the picture plane and how that can effect the emotions and reaction of the viewer. Her work portrays cattle realistically, often in a ranch setting. She explores the relationship between cattle and people, focusing on a relationship that is centered around cattle as commodity. The colors she uses create a realistic image of the warm and dry conditions that are often present on cattle ranches, and yet her work is still lush and seems almost touchable. There is something beautiful and motivating

about the way that she realistically portrays the cattle, and yet still fills the frame with emotion and atmosphere. She creates work that is more nostalgic than the work I had originally been creating; yet I found myself drawn to her images. My work was most impacted by the gesture and texture that Sigle uses in her images. This style has inspired me throughout the entire process, even when my medium was different from hers. I think that the wistfulness that I was originally drawn to in Sigle's work inspired me and has helped me to shift my own work away from obvious in its intent, to abstract and reflective. Although my watercolor work does not share many formal qualities with Sigle's work, I do think that my shift toward reminiscence and reflectiveness was inspired by her work.

A couple of other artists who have inspired me are Karen Tarlton and Claire Kayser. Both of these women use paint in such emotive ways. They create motion and character just in the way the paint is placed on the canvas. Their use of color is also so incredible. The images that they create are definitely recognizable as cattle, yet they use texture and color to create an image that is not just about the cow but also about their personality and character. This has been important to me throughout my entire process. I always hope to portray the complexities of these seemingly simple creatures in a way that does justice to their beauty and strength. The work by Tarlton and Kayser showed me a way to portray that in a fun and colorful way that makes it easy for the viewer to connect to the subject. My work with oil paint was greatly impacted by these two artists, however I do think that my attraction to color has brought their influence into my watercolor work as well.

I have also looked at the way that Soutine worked with animal carcasses and the way that he treated the flesh and blood. When I saw the work that Soutine created I was able to see that there is absolutely a way to portray meat, beef, and blood in a way that is intriguing to view and is not disgusting. The use of color seems important when painting images that include blood and meat. The overall form is also important. The shapes and colors must be appealing to view since the subject matter is not inherently something that many people would choose to view. Although I see that there are beautiful ways to show the bloodier side of the beef industry, I have not been able to authentically incorporate that kind of imagery into my work. I believe that this has something to do with the fact that although I was initially exploring the personal conflict of loving cows and loving beef, I was always trying to find a way to talk about the spiritual conflict and connection of life and death. My inability to integrate blood and meat into my work in a meaningful way helped me to see that my work is about something other than the physical juxtaposition of life and death.

I have also been greatly influenced by the artists that I am fortunate enough to have as my classmates. Working along side other painters and artists each week has allowed me to grow and learn. I have been lucky enough to watch other artists create their work and watch how they create, how their work changed over time, and how they incorporate new ideas. I was also able to regularly receive critique and feedback about my own work from my classmates. This allowed me to grow at a much more accelerated pace than I would have if I had been trying to create my work all on my own. My work has changed much more quickly and freely because of

the artists I have been working around. I was able to move past issues and questions better because of their influences and critiques. I was also able to move past imagery or ideas that are not important to my work because other people were there to talk about it. When I was looking at the art being made around me I was also able to see what was most important in their art and incorporate that into my work. When I would comment on the use of color in a classmates painting I was then better able to see where it was lacking in my work or where it could be used more effectively. Instant critique made the art making process meaningful as well as much more interesting. My work was more gratifying to make because I was not getting stuck on ideas that would end up being unimportant or just background noise to my work. Working with and around my classmates quickened my development, made it more interesting, and flooded my process with new ideas and techniques in a way that would not have happened without these artists.

Influences for Current Work

Monet's use of color to create light and depth absolutely amazes me. His work is remarkable, and I can spend hours looking at it even when the subject matter may seem insignificant or unexciting. Even though his paintings are not often full of intricate details, the most important details are present, and the way in which they are highlighted is incredible to me. This is present in many of his paintings that portray the changing light conditions and the way that light and shadow shift throughout the day(Figures 2,3,4). The interaction of color has been one of the most important qualities of watercolor that I have tried to use in my

work. I have been intentional about how I lay the colors on the paper and how the colors interact. Monet has influenced the way in which I use color to create light and depth. Monet has also impacted my work in the way that I take a single subject or image and create a variety of complex works about it.

One of the ways in which Monet most inspired me was his work with colors, and his work with flowers (Figure 1). The incredible vibrancy with which he worked encouraged me to work with colors that might not be natural to the subject that I was working with, but that gave the subject light and life. "Untitled, Side by Side" (Figure 8) is an example of how I was inspired to work with color and flowers. This work also gave new meaning to my exploration of life and death and my images become more powerful when I used the color to my advantage. By combining the skull imagery with flower-like colors, I was able to infuse life into my image without directly painting life itself. This combination freed my subject matter from being the only theme of the painting. Now I am able to create images that hold many themes and ideas that are distinct from one another, and yet they form a cohesive picture.

Another way that Monet's work influenced mine was in the way that he took advantage of the properties of the paint to create images that seem to be an image of something specific, and also about the way that the paint was applied to the canvas (Figure 2 and 3). Figure 4 and Figure 7 reflect my attempts to allow the paint to act on its own, and take advantage of the properties of watercolor. Not only am I using color in different ways, but now I am also using the paint to my advantage. When Monet worked with paint he often painted in varying colors and shades, which he combined directly on the canvas. When looking at paintings by Monet you are able

to see many of the colors separately, and yet they form a realistic and dimensional image. It is obvious that oil paint and watercolor act differently, but I took advantage of the natural properties of watercolor to the best of my ability. I let the colors interact with one another without too much interference from me. I tested the way that the color would react to different paper, amounts of water, and other colors. All of these different situations helped me to create compelling work.

Monet was not the only Impressionist to have inspired me. My work was also greatly influenced by Van Gogh, yet in different ways than it was by Monet. Van Gogh has also been an inspiration as I have been working with flowers and abstraction. Although both Van Gogh and Monet were working in shades of realism, they were also abstracting images from reality into imagery about the interactions between color and light. Van Gogh's flowers were of specific inspiration to me (Figure 6). His work is so vibrant and alive, and yet there is a painted quality about it. The brush strokes can be seen, reminding the viewer of the process by which the image was created. And yet, when viewed, the irises seem to be blossoming before the viewer's eyes.

With my work, I was aiming to create abstractions of skulls and cows that still felt full of life in a similar fashion as Van Gogh. In my work "Beauty in Sacrifice" (Figure 8) I feel that I was successful in creating images that feel somewhat real, and yet have a breath of life within them. I also specifically tried to pay attention to the paint and take advantage of the interesting qualities it holds. This was similar to the way that I was inspired by Monet, but Van Gogh seemed to worry even less about blending the paint together. As I progressed through my process of working with

watercolor I realized that the work always turned out better when I let the paint speak for itself, even if that meant that I was not blending or masking the strokes I had made.

More recent artists have influenced me just as much as those in earlier art history. Georgia O'Keeffe was one of the first artists I remember being in awe of as a child. The way that she used shape, color, line, and light all amazed me. Even when depicting something simple, drama and emotion are so apparent. Her work is one of the reasons that I am so attracted to the way that color works when painting with watercolor. The way that Georgia O'Keeffe painted cattle skulls has certainly impacted the way that I paint and the way that I choose my subject matter. She was able to take something that others might find gruesome and create an image that is beautiful, real, soft, and yet somehow about death. I think that the images that I produce using watercolor are absolutely influenced by Georgia O'Keeffe.

The flower images by O'Keeffe are some of the first images that I can remember being inspired by. When comparing my own work to Georgia O'Keeffe's I can see directly how her work as influenced my work, and also see how the ideologies and themes in her work have inspired my thinking and making process. Some of these themes include nature, life, and abstraction. O'Keeffe once said, "Nothing is less real than realism. Details are confusing. It is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasis, that we get at the real meaning of things," which I feel is an interesting idea. By understanding that details can actually create a less meaningful image, I can search for the most important parts of a subject and make the most compelling image possible by using those specifics.

Many times, O’Keeffe’s flower paintings are seen as feminine images with sexual tones. She neither confirmed nor denied this interpretation, but when she spoke about her flower work she spoke of something different (ArtsNet). When talking about why she painted flowers O’Keeffe said, “Nobody sees a flower - really - it is so small it takes time - we haven't time - and to see takes time”. She painted flowers as she saw them, in hopes that she would be able to share this small part of the world with others. The thing that draws me to her flowers is the incredible detail with which they are painted, and yet they hold a magical quality that somehow makes them seem both more powerful and more precious at the same time. I think that this ability to take something so small and seemingly insignificant and make it into something so intoxicatingly beautiful was what I hoped to incorporate into my work. This meant painting images that draw the viewer into the details while also making them want to step back to take the whole piece in at once. I tried to do this by creating images that hold elements of both realism and abstraction; incorporating a specific subject but not muddying the image with too many irrelevant details. I used the basic shapes of my subject to create a realistic image of a cow or skull, and yet I played with color in order to abstract the image and make it about something more than the subject itself.

I use a few of my own pieces to compare to the works of Georgia O’Keeffe in order to genuinely discern how her work has influenced mine. Three watercolors (Figure 9, Figure 10, Figure 11) are good examples of what I was inspired to do by O’Keeffe’s flowers. The blue skull (Figure 9) is probably the most realistic, but the color gives it a jewel-like quality. The green skull (Figure 10) and the purple skull

(Figure 11) are also somewhat realistic when it comes to the general shape, but the colors indicate living things. This combination of flora and fauna, as well as life and death, was directly inspired by the works of Georgia O'Keeffe. I feel that some of the strongest images I have are ones that contain fairly obvious representations of life in combination with the skull. The realistic skulls are interesting, but the skull made of leaves (Figure 10) and many of the skulls made to look like flowers are very convincing. One of the concerns I have with using such literal imagery is that the subtle ideas of life and death, sacrifice, and beauty will get lost in the translation of the imagery verbatim. Most of the work that I made has this combination of imagery that I feel is present in many of my inspirations.

The skull paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe (Figure 15, Figure 16) are fairly obvious inspirations to my work. What might not be obvious is exactly to what level I have been inspired by her work. The Metropolitan Museum of Art describes that "she used a weathered cow's skull to represent the enduring spirit," which speaks to me deeply. This enduring spirit seems to communicate an idea of eternity and strength that include sacrifice and death, but are also full of life and growth. Although these skulls are remnants of what was once alive, they still hold their own beauty and meaning. O'Keeffe did not paint these skulls as morbid images of death, but instead she painted them as representations of something enduring. Her paintings seem to be about "transience of life" and the largeness and inability to grasp life fully (Georgia O'Keeffe: Cow's Skull: Red, White, and Blue).

When I created my work, I was similarly aiming to make work that talks about the perpetual cycle of life and death, and the beauty that is present in that

cycle. I wanted to use the cow skull as a symbol for the continual sacrifice from life to death in order for life to continue onward. Georgia O’Keeffe was saying something about the ancient beauty and endurance of the earth when she said, “that Blue that will always be there as it is now after all man’s destruction is finished” when she was speaking of painting the color of the New Mexico sky against the color of bones (Heijnsbroek). I want my work to talk about something eternal as well.

A few of my pieces feel explicitly related to the work of Georgia O’Keeffe, and I will use them to talk about her exact influence on my art making. My largest skull painting (Figure 17) is both soft and sharp at the same time. I was aiming to create an image that was beautiful in color and was a gentle representation of something that is so often associated with death. I wanted to portray the sloping contours as well as the jagged edges that are found on a skull, which is something that I feel Georgia O’Keeffe does exceptionally well. I tried to create a painting that showed how it feels to touch the skull. When I would hold the skull or position it for painting I would often feel wonder at the complexity as well as the simplicity of life. Holding the bones of a creature that was once alive helped me to contemplate further the connections and beauty in nature, and I was aiming to share those experiences in a painted form.

In my other larger skull painting (Figure 18) I was working specifically with color to try and portray the connection to life that these skulls still hold. I wanted to create a beautiful combination of shapes that would help me to explore the form of a skull while using a color that is often used symbolically to represent life. Red and pink remind the viewer that this skull was once covered in flesh, but also create a

delicate, almost feminine view of the skull. In the same way that O'Keeffe was talking about the permanence of life and death, I hope to convey ideas about the beauty in the circle of life and death.

All the influences, as well as my own paintings and process, have helped me to realize that something that I consider very personal is often something that many other people think about as well. Juxtapositions and conflict can be challenging to talk about. I am not willing to stop asking questions of myself or others. In fact, this work has inspired me to keep pushing, thinking, creating, and sharing my personal conflicts and emotions.

Conclusion

What has most interested me in my journey has been the circular nature of my work. Initially I wanted to create a thesis that used photography to show the often unnoticed or ignored beauty in nature. As I was developing this idea, I was also working on developing projects for my painting course. I wanted to create illustrations for a short story that my dad had written about the delicate balances in nature. While considering this option I realized that the reason that I wanted to pursue these illustrations was because I love animals immensely and I wanted to create art that I love. My first image that I created as a part of my painting class was of a calf. While discussing this work with my classmates I rediscovered the personal conflict I feel about cows and beef, and I recognized that I now had the means to comment on this conflict in a meaningful way. All of this led me to focus my thesis on the personal conflict I have about loving cows and loving beef.

As I worked through this idea all semester I found myself excited about the work I was making, the questions I was asking, and the ideas I was talking about. However, by the end of the semester I felt restricted by my process and ideas, and I was unable to make anything meaningful at the beginning of the spring semester. Once I finally got working again, I began to realize that my work was no longer about that personal and interesting conflict I had decided to work on. My new paintings and the work I was able to make using watercolors guided me to the realization that my work was about the beauty, complexity, simplicity, and spirituality of nature. I am now using different tools, but I am back to exploring a similar idea as I had started the year thinking about. I am now able to recognize the fact that I was using my conflict about cows and beef to try and talk about the beauty of nature in a more concrete way. The reason that I was unable to keep making meaningful work about that topic was because I was trying to make something ethereal into something tangible. I was trying to elicit a reaction from my viewers, but I now realize that reflection is more important to me. I do not need to make work that causes my viewers to think like me, but I do need to make work that makes my viewer reflect on their own thoughts and questions. I want my viewer to take something away from looking at my art, but I now realize that I do not need to prescribe exactly what that is for each viewer.

My own questions have not been completely answered yet. I am still working to master the medium and process my thoughts and ideas. My work will continue to grow, even once the exhibition has concluded. The exploration of complexity, simplicity, beauty, and juxtapositions has been enlightening as an artist. I have

become more comfortable with the fact that the viewer will not always see what I intended to portray. I have found joy in the fact that watercolor has certain qualities that are out of my control, and I have embraced that as an important quality of my art. Working through ideas and questions has led me to realize that I will always circle back to the things that are most important to me as well as my art. All of these things are important lessons I have learned as a part of this thesis process.

I have gained skills and technique, as well as a greater appreciation for my own artistic process. I am delighted with the work I have produced as a part of this thesis project, and I know that it will inform my future work in important ways. Writing about my work and my process has also given me valuable information and insights that I would not have found just by painting. This thesis has shown me how important it is to reflect on, question, talk about, and think about my own work.

Acknowledgements

There are many important people who I would like to thank for their unending support as I have pursued art these past three years.

First, my parents. Without their unending love, acceptance, and appreciation for who I am, I would not be making such honest art as I have been making this year.

My brother. He has challenged me and encouraged me all of my life. Without his friendship I would be lost.

My fiancé. I cannot thank him enough for his love, laughter, and support. Even when he was not near, his presence in my life was undeniable.

Finally I would like to extend a special thank you to the professors who encouraged and supported me throughout this thesis journey, Sam Johnson, Elaine Rutherford, and Brother David Paul Lange. With their help, as well as the rest of the art department and my incredible classmates, I was able to embark on this journey and come out the other side a better and more honest artist.

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Appendix



Figure 1.
Water Lilies
Claude Monet



Figure 2.
Rouen Cathedral, West Façade, Sunlight
Claude Monet



Figure 3.
Rouen Cathedral, red, Sunlight
Claude Monet



Figure 4.
Untitled, Side by Side
Jessie Sorvaag



Figure 5.
Houses of Parliament, London, Sun Breaking
Through
Claude Monet



Figure 6.
Irises
Vincent Van Gogh



Figure 7.
Untitled, Side by Side
Jessie Sorvaag



Figure 8.
Beauty in Sacrifice
Jessie Sorvaag



Figure 9.
Untitled, Side by Side
Jessie Sorvaag



Figure 10.
Untitled, Side by Side,
Jessie Sorvaag



Figure 11.
Untitled, Side by Side
Jessie Sorvaag



Figure 12.
White Iris No. 7
Georgia O'Keeffe

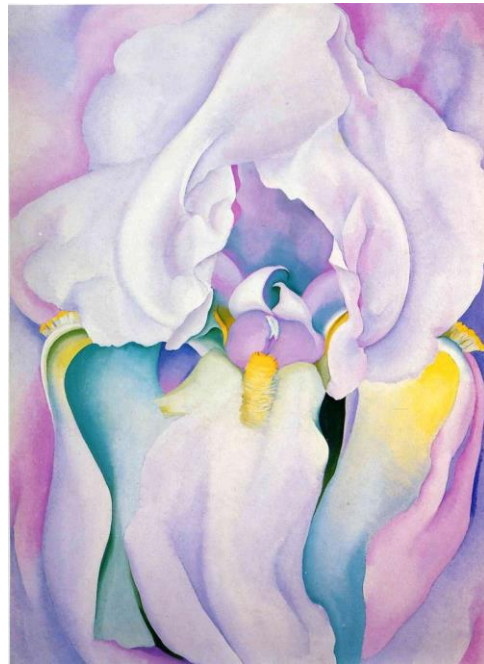


Figure 13.
Light of Iris
Georgia O'Keeffe



Figure 14.
Detail of "Beauty in Sacrifice"
Jessie Sorvaag



Figure 16.
Cow's Skull with Calico Roses
Georgia O'Keeffe



Figure 15.
Cow's Skull: Red, White, and Blue
Georgia O'Keeffe



Figure 17.
Untitled, Side by Side
Jessie Sorvaag



Figure 18.
Untitled, Side by Side
Jessie Sorvaag