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Exploring Contexts of Ubiquitous Structures

Heidi Marie Leuven

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EXPLORING CONTEXTS OF UBIQUITOUS STRUCTURES

by

HEIDI MARIE VAN LEUVEN

(Under the Direction of Patricia Walker)

ABSTRACT

The following is the written source of my ideas and the execution of their place in my work used for my MFA thesis exhibition. In this body of work, I have approached the same subject matter – social structures – through various techniques and media. I have chosen this subject matter after consistently observing and experiencing people base social decisions not on their own personal intuition, but on that which is dictated by any number of social pressures they are presented with. I represent these social structures metaphorically through arrangements of grids and lines. Artists and philosophers whose work has influenced me, whether contemporary or found in art history, will be cited throughout this thesis. These influences range from Abstract Expressionism and Modern art to Pop and Contemporary art. The methods I employ that come from these influences vary from drawing and painting on flat surfaces, collaging elements, and later into adding three dimensional objects. I will begin by discussing the ideology behind my work including various philosophical and aesthetic ideas, and give a general overview of the path my work has taken in my time at Georgia Southern University. I will then discuss influential figures from art history, and lastly my own work and techniques in-depth.

INDEX WORDS: MFA thesis, Betty Foy Sanders Department of Art, Abstract expressionism, Modern art, Structures, Mixed media, Acrylic paint, Combine paintings, Silk screen printing, Chaos, Intuitive, Grids, Social issues

EXPLORING CONTEXTS OF UBIQUITOUS STRUCTURES

by

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B.F.A, Marywood University, 2005

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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EXPLORING CONTEXTS OF UBIQUITOUS STRUCTURES

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my mother Janet Marie Van Leuven.

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Chapter 1

Intent

Since beginning the MFA program at Georgia Southern University, my techniques and methods, and thus the language of my medium, has evolved. Previous to coming to Georgia Southern, though I did paint with a fairly specific concept in mind, formal issues were more prominent in my work. The pieces were done in black and white paint with content that was both purposeful and random. The concept, which was about things that resulted from both randomness and purpose, was expressed much more through the process rather than the finished piece. This has carried through to my current work as I continue to develop this concept through a different and more refined artistic language resulting from my experimentation with various two and three dimensional media.

In this chapter, I will discuss the intent of my work, its relationship to myself and the viewer, and the philosophy behind my ideas, concluding with a brief summary of the progression of my work up until this point. The body of work I have created at Georgia Southern University has expressed one theme relating to several philosophies. These philosophies have proven relevant to both my art and life, and reflect the connection between the two.

The arrangements I create in paint reflect the nature of social connections created by society, some rigidly controlled and some intuitive, co-existing in the same plane. They share a common tension and chaos as control fluctuates between the two. In society, such arrangements, or social expectations, are often created as an attempt to manage the uncertainty associated with situations and people, but in reality, what is created is the illusion of control. John Dewey said it best when he said:

“Our magical safeguard against the uncertain character of the world is to deny the existence of chance, to mumble universal and necessary law, the ubiquity of cause and

effect, the uniformity of nature, universal progress, and the inherent rationality of the universe.....but when all is said and done, the fundamentally hazardous character of the world is not seriously modified, much less eliminated” (1958, pp 44).

My paintings reflect the questionable nature of the social norms in American society.

This set of ideals, or social norms, is disingenuous to us as individuals. We live in a throw-away society which is most commonly linked with consumerism and short-lived products, but it seems that we carry that same idea over into our concept of time and judgment. There is an abundance of carelessness in the way we as human beings make decisions, often without consideration for the impact it will have on anyone else.

The work in my thesis exhibition generates both questions and contemplation about the meaning of the components used. The viewer, without being given an obvious answer, can ask where they are located in the image and contemplate why. Question and contemplation go hand in hand and lead to experience. Experience, as mentioned by R.D. Laing in his book The Politics of Experience, is highly personal (1967, pp 4-6). My experience of a situation is my own, different from anyone else’s experience of the same situation. However, this does not mean that we cannot question and contemplate when using these experiences to make decisions. In any given particular experience, I find myself dissecting situations, trying to understand peoples’ motives, actions, and the outcomes of their interactions.

This analysis of question and contemplation of the social norms comprises a major influence on my work. I observe the environments in which I live, paying special attention to the social structure. The decisions made by individuals cause reactions with others in their surroundings. These reactions are sometimes constructive, but are often destructive for both the decision maker and those affected by the decisions made. Often decisions are a matter of rigid societal ideals rather than of a personal and intuitive nature. In other words, one would rather be

politically or socially accepted than live according to their own thoughts. Having been negatively affected by others' decisions to fit into social norms, I bring these attitudes to question in my work.

Experience, being gained through questions and contemplation, leads to knowledge. Nicholas Rescher stated in his book Cognitive Pragmatism, "The pursuit of knowledge aims at discovering the truth of things" (2001 pp 5). Things accepted as truth without adequate information, whether due to inexperience or ignorance, lack valid placement in the spectrum of fortified knowledge (Kant, 1970, pp 89). Through my artwork I aspire to generate the interrogation that will cultivate the realization of such knowledge.

Personal Relevance

While I explore the social norms of American society and the challenges they present, my work also takes on a personal, autobiographical existence. The struggles I work through on the canvas are reflective of the struggles dealt within my own life as I examine the relationship between my own decisions and the world around me. For my images to reference both what is deeply personal while also exploring vast universal and formal ideas is intrinsic to my collection as a whole.

My thoughts have always found their way into my artwork. By having a personal element, I connect with my art in a stronger way which, in turn, brings more thoughts, ideas, emotion, and energy into my images, thus creating more potent work. Wassily Kandinsky called "every deed, feeling, and thought raw but sure material from which work will arise, that he is free in art but not in life" (1977, pp 54). Whether it is intentional and/or visible, my thoughts add an additional, personal layer to my work that often I can only recognize myself. I am able to look back at older works and remember exactly what it was that I was thinking about. Though

the viewer doesn't know my narrative, it does influence my work in a subconscious way. Also, the color choices I make almost always begin based on my mood.

In order to reach a wider audience, despite the personal nature of my work, I abstract my paintings. Christine Herter, in her book Defense of Art, said:

“When we are unable to recognize form with our eyes we seek elucidation of the artist's intention in verbal expression; that is, we theorize about what we think he has tried to do, or what he himself says he has tried to do” (1938, pp 50).

In my abstractions, no answers or resolutions are set in stone. The possibilities for interpretation are bound only by the ideas brought into consideration by the viewer. In an interview, and reflective of this viewpoint, Jim Dine said:

“I am interested in the problem and not in solutions....I paint about the problems of how to make a picture work, the problems of seeing, of making people aware without handing it to them on a silver platter” (Swenson, 1963, pp 27).

The abstract nature of my paintings requires me to use line, value, color proportion, and texture to create a language that communicates with the viewer. As Kandinsky said in his book Concerning the Spiritual in Art, “The artist must have something to say, for mastery over form is not his goal but rather the adapting of form to its inner meaning” (1977, pp 54).

Each image must have a cohesive and interesting appearance to be communicative. In Art as Experience, John Dewey discussed the use of different mediums as language:

“Because objects of art are expressive, they are a language. Rather they are many languages. For each art has its own medium and that medium is especially fitted for one kind of communication. Each medium says something that cannot be uttered as well or as completely in any other tongue. The needs of daily life have given superior practical importance to one mode of communication, that of speech” (1934, pp 106).

Since coming to Georgia Southern, I have not employed one specific method to complete work, but rather incorporated several different approaches, including altering the surface before any actual marks are made, making collages, working on a completely flat picture plane, and

working with making a three-dimensional, high-relief surface. By exploring a variety of techniques that range from two-dimensional to three-dimensional, I have learned to combine various elements into pieces that communicate my ideas in different visual ways. My use of materials in conjunction with formal elements has become more complex the further I venture into investigating these many ways of treating the surface and choosing materials. While the formal and intellectual qualities of the work are important, I should note that the process imposes a large influence as well. Much of the arranging and mark-making I do are completed in a way of creating and destroying and then re-creating and so on. Marks are added, and then edited according to the composition based on my knowledge of the formal elements. I will then add more marks and/or objects, and edit those as well. It is a part-conscious and part-random process.

I began my new methodology by employing playing cards as my surface. They created a strong visual element, especially in contrast with gestured marks of paint. After finishing this series of paintings, I explored similar ideas in a visually different manner. The regular grid created by the edges of the playing cards were prominent in the series of playing card paintings, so I chose to exploit line as the focal compositional element in my next series of pieces.

In the beginning, these pieces were largely neutral in color because I had not completed any in-depth studies in color. The neutral palette allowed the focus to remain on the lines, which held the most meaning to me. After the completion of many predominantly neutral-toned pieces, I began to work vigorously on color studies. Most of these exercises were not created with the purpose of becoming finished paintings, but rather as tools to better understand and use color. In addition to these paintings, creating a series of prints using a multi-layered screen printing technique also affected my method of using color. Because colors must be done one at a time in

a proper sequence, the screen printing process forced my thought process to slow down and forced me to think more consciously about my color choices.

Upon the completion of these images, I used the information I had gathered in conjunction with my previous idea of structures presented through linear elements. After completing a series of paintings that held line and color in equal value, I continued the next series in the same vein, only this time adding collage elements and candle wax to add depth, variety, and ambiguity similar to that of the playing cards in my first series. This eventually led to my working with objects, creating a very three-dimensional surface in my latest series.

Through working with these various techniques, I was able to broaden my range of mark-making language while creating a diverse body of work that reflects parallel ideas I have researched and worked to communicate. At the same time, I have created work that has personal meaning expressed through abstraction. In the next chapter, I will discuss the historical influences for my thesis exhibition paintings. The images that have influenced my work are found in both modern and contemporary art.

Chapter 2

Intuitive Painting Methods Developed as a Response to Art Historical Influence

In this chapter, I will discuss historical influence for the work in my MFA thesis exhibition. These include Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Modernism as well as contemporary art. My purpose when discussing these artistic influences is to convey how they relate to my own art making. I draw influence from many sources, though there are certain artists and works that have had a greater impact on me as an artist and my work. I am influenced by the spontaneous and yet ordered mark-making and exploration of spatial issues by Cy Twombly and Agnes Martin respectively. In addition to this, I gathered visual information from Robert Rauschenberg and Louise Nevelson pertaining to constructing unified and interesting works out of unrelated objects. Studying the work of Piet Mondrian gave me insight into portraying the essence and nature of the subject. Contemporary artists like Mark Bradford offer ideas about using the element of repetition throughout a work to add intensity to the shapes and create a dynamic motion throughout the picture plane. I have taken ideas from these various artists in order to create a language in my work that is my own.

Abstract Expressionism, I have found, is the movement from art history that is most connected to my work. According to Kandinsky, Abstract Expressionism is “the outward expression of inward need”. I identify with the emotional and experimental nature of the movement. It allows me to explore my own observations and questions about the subject I’m addressing in a raw way that is at least partially “gestural and autobiographical” (Gottlieb, 1976, pp 18). My images develop in such a way that my ideas become solidified through marks that are both planned and intuitive. As Tony Richardson wrote in his book Concepts of Modern Art,

"...the implicit suggestion here that formal and spontaneous procedures are not necessarily irreconcilable holds good for the Abstract Expressionists as a whole" (1974).

By alternating between working intuitively and with conscious decision-making, areas of lines and color can be exploited through editing that may not have been possible when working on a totally conscious level. If I were to construct my paintings of only fully-conscious mark-making, my creating would be limited by my awareness of the materials, elements, and color information. Through semi-random mark-making, there is more variety and spontaneity in my compositions. This working style also allows me to create marks using non-exact mark-making techniques, like splattering and dripping. I can then take these spontaneous marks and incorporate them into the work in a conscious manner.

Organized yet spontaneous mark-making is a strength of Cy Twombly, an Abstract Expressionist who has been central to my development. In his painting *The Italians* (Figure 1), Twombly is both harmonious and chaotic in execution and composition. There is a denseness to the black lines forming the intersecting and irregular shapes that gives them a very commanding presence, while at the same time the white and grey negative space surrounding them is equally important in creating atmosphere and contrast. This juxtaposition of characteristics makes for a very emotive yet knowledgeable piece. Twombly's piece captures Kandinsky's description of complicated harmony in art, "[a] lack of external cohesion being an internal harmony" (1977, pp 52). The painting *Untitled 2* (Figure 2) was an experiment in using spontaneous mark-making, like Twombly, to create a vague grid-shape in reference to my ideas about structure. I added a stronger element of motion to the line than Twombly did in his work in order to depict the structure moving through time and space. My thoughts when I created this piece were



Figure 1: *The Italians*, by Cy Twombly, 1961. Oil, pencil, and crayon on canvas.

reflective of the rapid passing of time and how, as the cliché goes, we don't realize we're out of it until it's too late. Whether or not we make the correct decisions, everything keeps moving. Deciphering correct decisions from mistakes is another struggle. These struggles to move between time, action, and reason create chaotic systems in life. Ultimately in *Untitled 2* (Figure 2), the lines disappear off the page into the unknown. Many elements in *Knotted Graphs/1* by Terry Winters at first appear random and spontaneous, but after careful inspection, it becomes clear that much of the mark-making was very well thought out and painted to look spontaneous.



Figure 2: *Untitled 2*, by Heidi Van Leuven, 2008. Acrylic and oil pastel on paper.



Figure 3: *Knotted Graphs/1*, by Terry Winters 2008 oil on linen

This is often the case with the work of many artists, including myself. In my work, I often do plan out compositions but then apply the paint in an intuitive manner according to what I have planned and what I know about spatial and color relationships, so it is never actually as random as it appears.

Progression from Mixed-Media into Using Three Dimensional Objects

In Robert Rauschenberg's *Rebus* (Figure 3), he utilizes images and raw paint simultaneously in an expressive yet structured way. This image creates an organic grid of photographs, paper, and marks of many sizes and colors. The painting is comprised of many small images that construct a horizontal band that is central in the composition at the golden mean, while also telling a story without “handing it to them on a silver platter” (Dine, 1963, pp 27). They add an element of interest that is visually stimulating and yet conceptually vague, leaving the viewer to interpret the meaning themselves. The marks of paint are varied. Some have very decided edges, while other marks are dripping or applied in a very expressive manner. Entire sections of the marks drip and meld together, while others are lone and solid. All of these

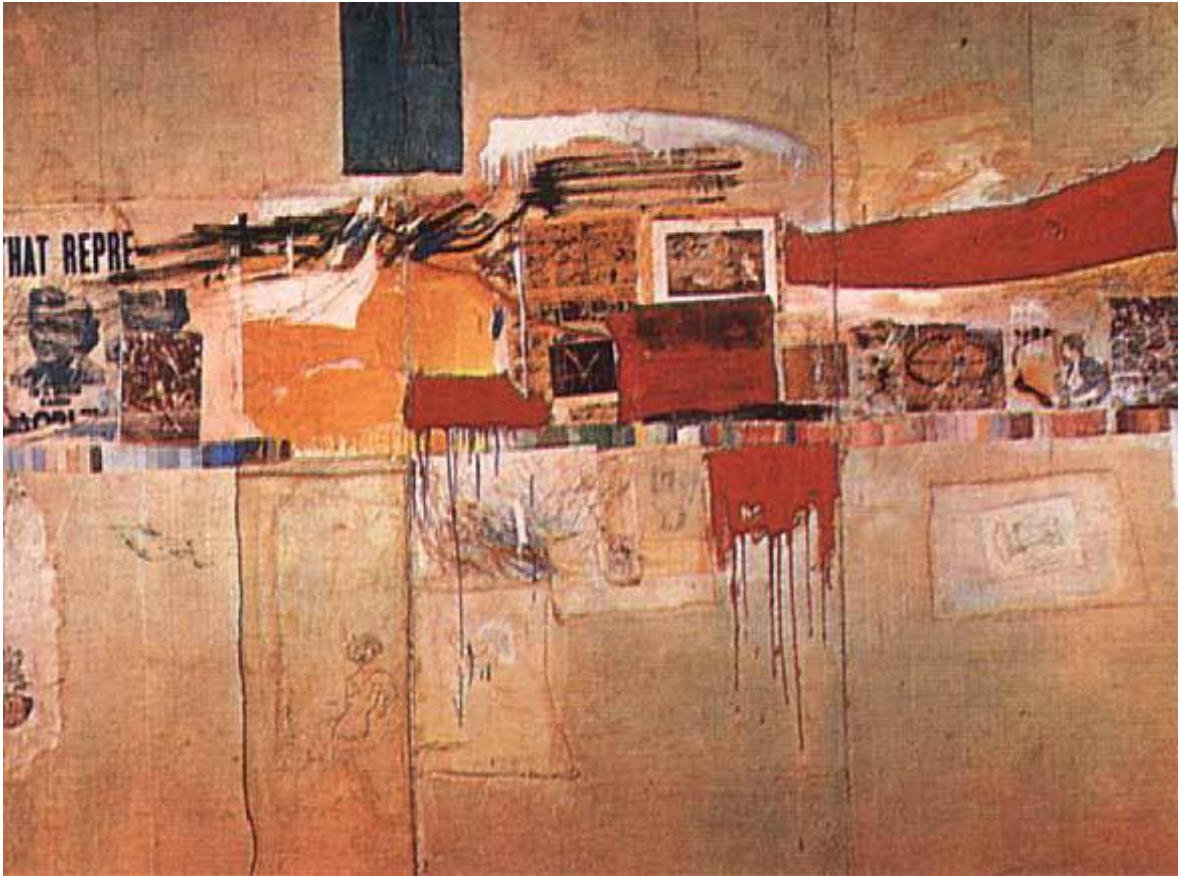


Figure 4: *Rebus*, Rob Rauschenberg, 1955. Oil, pencil, paper, and fabric on canvas.

elements together build an image that forces the viewer to stop and think about possible meanings.

I look to Rauschenberg for visual strategies that help me meld together various collaged elements with paint in such a way that individual pieces can be recognized, while at the same time creating a work that is unified as a whole. Rauschenberg also teaches me how paper and other objects can tell a story, but not the whole story, in an organized yet open-ended way. I have always found Rauschenberg's artwork to have the ability to question the viewer's interpretation. His combine paintings, which incorporate three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional surface, do not offer any concrete answer, leaving the viewer to realize an answer for themselves based on the set of references they bring to their viewing. This idea is one that I

also strive for in my work when I mix objects and paint on a surface. His combine paintings, which incorporate three-dimensional objects along with a two-dimensional surface, were influential on my later work.

As I moved into using more three-dimensional objects, Louise Nevelson became an important influence. I studied her work to better understand creating three-dimensional compositions from found objects. In *Dawn's Wedding Chapel IV* (Figure 5), Nevelson arranged dozens of unrelated found objects and united them through means of a gridded surface. Nevelson covered these objects with a uniform color of paint as a unifying factor, a technique I have learned from her and utilized in my later three-dimensional paintings. It is not possible to tell exactly how planned out the arrangement of shapes was in Nevelson's piece. Though most artists utilized grids in some form or another for various reasons, in my work as well as Nevelson's, it is a visually dominant and conceptually important element. While I do flesh out my working space with found objects in a less gridded manner, by looking at Nevelson's shape arrangements, both within sections of the piece individually and as a whole, I have gained a better spatial sense to construct my own work. An example of this would be my piece *Weathered* (Figure 18), which is discussed in Chapter Three.

Capturing the Essence with Spatial Relationships

Piet Mondrian is another artist I look to for help capturing the essence of the subject while carefully considering how I use the elements of design to convey that essence. I identify strongly with his formalism, though that accounts for only a portion of my interest in his work. Mondrian goes beyond simply trying to depict objects; his pieces show a deeper spirituality through his simplification of the subjects.

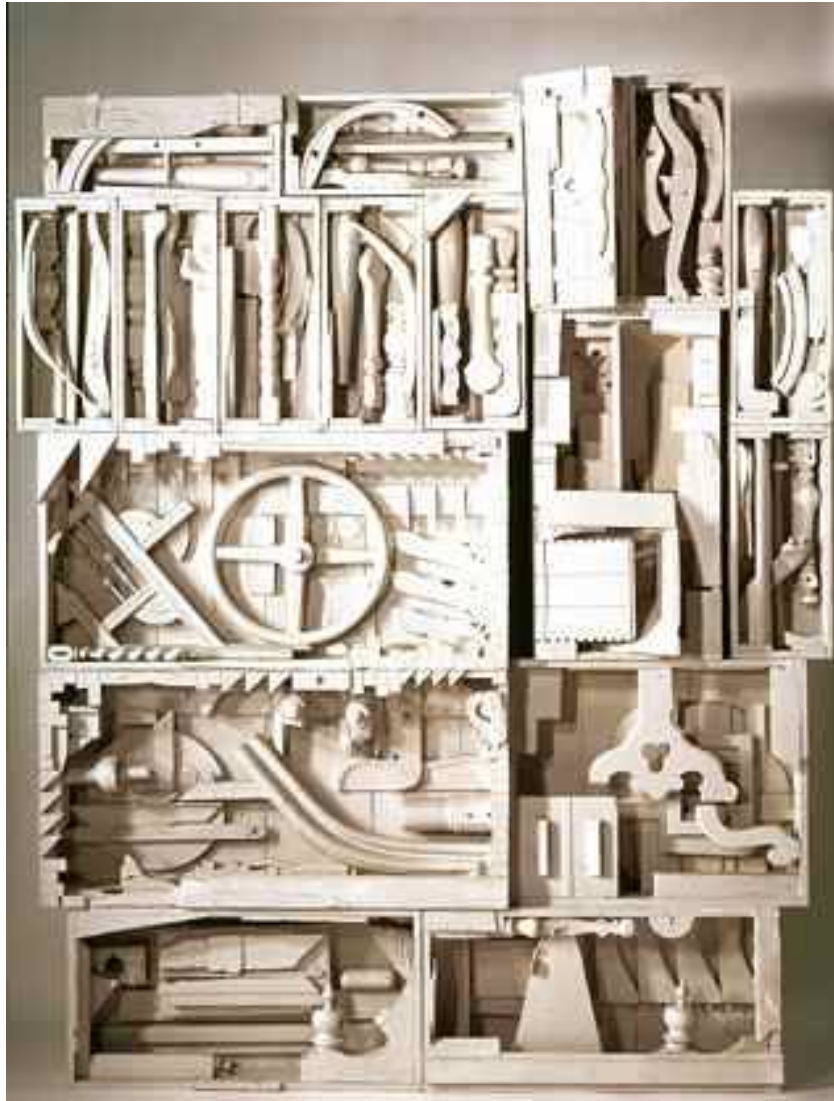


Figure 5: *Dawn's Wedding Chapel IV*, by Louise Nevelson, 1959. Painted wood.

Mondrian's intellectual and artistic progression can be seen when exploring his early work, where his subjects are depicted in a more objective fashion. As his interest in capturing the essence of the objects grew, his paintings changed, becoming much more abstract and expressive. Mondrian's *The Red Tree* (Figure 6) shows a tree which is, in comparison to his later works, depicted in a fairly realistic manner. The trunk and branches are easily identifiable, and the blue of the sky and orange-brown of the tree, while veering from exact local colors, are not completely arbitrary. The brushstrokes are visible and are probably, along with the

brightness of some of the colors, the most expressive element of the painting. In *The Gray Tree* (Figure 7), Mondrian's efforts toward finding the deeper knowledge he sought through abstraction can be seen in the shapes and lines that make up the form of a tree. It is recognizable as a tree, but with much more emphasis on the expressive brushwork between the branches, which are reduced to black lines against a gray background. In a final tree painting, *Tree* (Figure 8), the image is abstracted to the point that there is only slight recognition of the original subject.

This progression towards abstraction brings to mind a quote by Ernest Gombrich:

All artistic discoveries are discoveries not of likenesses but of equivalencies which enable us to see reality in terms of an image and an image in terms of reality. (2002, p 190)

What remains, instead, are shapes that construct the essence of the tree. This progression visually shows a shift in thought and meaning within the pieces. Mondrian's use of shapes and color depicts the nature of the subject rather than relying on the actual, recognizable shapes to tell the viewer what it is. When the subject is broken down into abstract forms, it can be read intuitively in a way that utilizes the experiences and feelings of the viewer. Viewing this transition of ideas helped me think about breaking down the composition within my own work until the essence of idea was displayed, without using too many or too few marks and/or shapes.

As a result of completing several neutral, line-based paintings and also many studies in color, I then completed a series of paintings that combined both line and color as equally prominent elements. *According* (Figure 9) is from this series. In *According*, I relied heavily on the use of line to portray the essence of my thoughts: the strange, often fluctuating balance that exists between structure and intuition. *According* reflects this dichotomy while not aiming to portray anything more specific than the essence. Many of the lines and larger shapes were applied in a

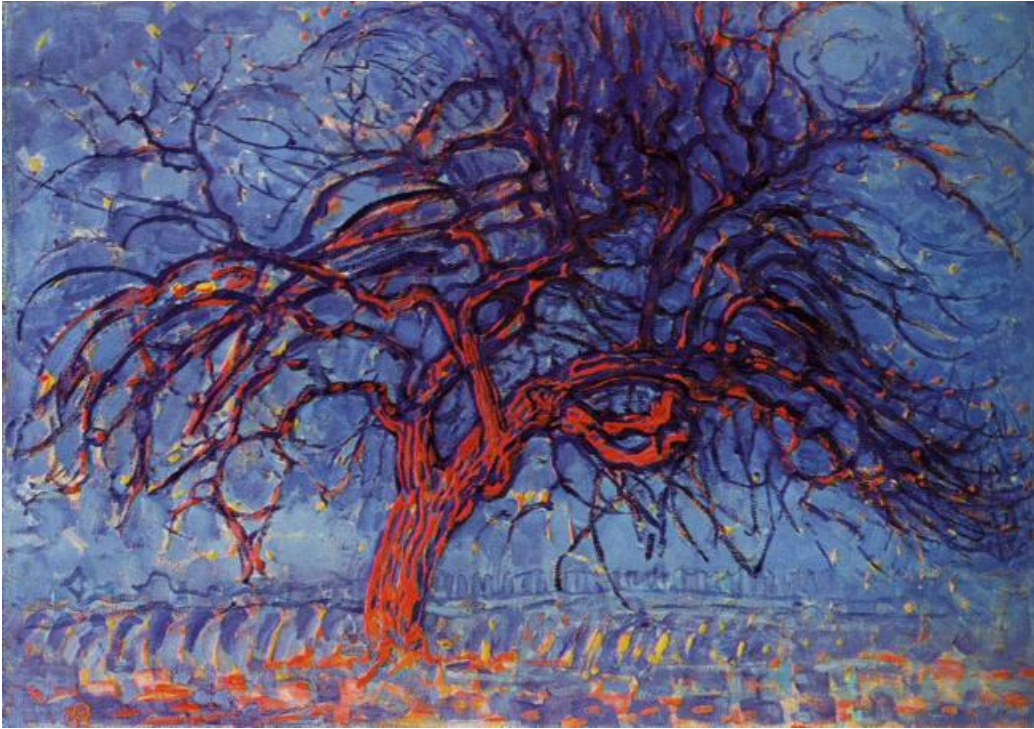


Figure 6: *The Red Tree*, by Piet Mondrian, 1909. Oil on canvas.



Figure 7: *The Gray Tree*, by Piet Mondrian, 1911. Oil on canvas.

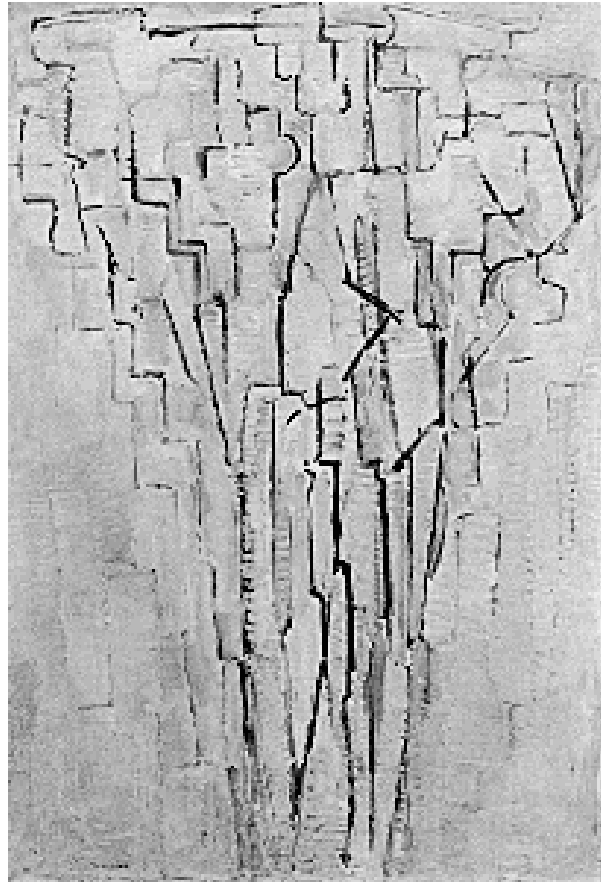


Figure 8: *Tree*, by Piet Mondrian, 1912. Oil on canvas.

relatively planned way, whereas the areas of brushstrokes that break up those planes were an intuitive reaction to the planned marks, mainly the large orange mark. Another artist I look at for her sense of form and space is Agnes Martin. Though her work, which is composed of square grids, is often considered minimalist for its appearance, she considered her work to be abstract expressionist. Her interest in the spiritual nature of her work is what led her to categorize her work as abstract expressionist. The straightforwardness and simplicity of the design echo the spiritual nature that Martin seeks to exemplify in her work. I identify with her use of space and her emphasis on the importance of composition, which she talked about the book Agnes Martin: Writings:



Figure 9: *According*, by Heidi Van Leuven. 2008. Charcoal and acrylic on paper

"You have to hold your mind still in order to hear inspiration clearly. Even now you can hear it saying "Yes" and "No". You look at a painting and say "Is this it", and your mind answers and says: "Yes or "No""This work is what is possible for your according to your awareness of life" (2005, 137).

It is this awareness of life that I aim to convey in my works; an awareness of space, relationships, and textures that exist both in life and my art. It is something that is personal yet universal, and thus it is something I think about and express on both of these levels. Looking at the minimalist quality of Martin's work has caused me to pause and evaluate just how many

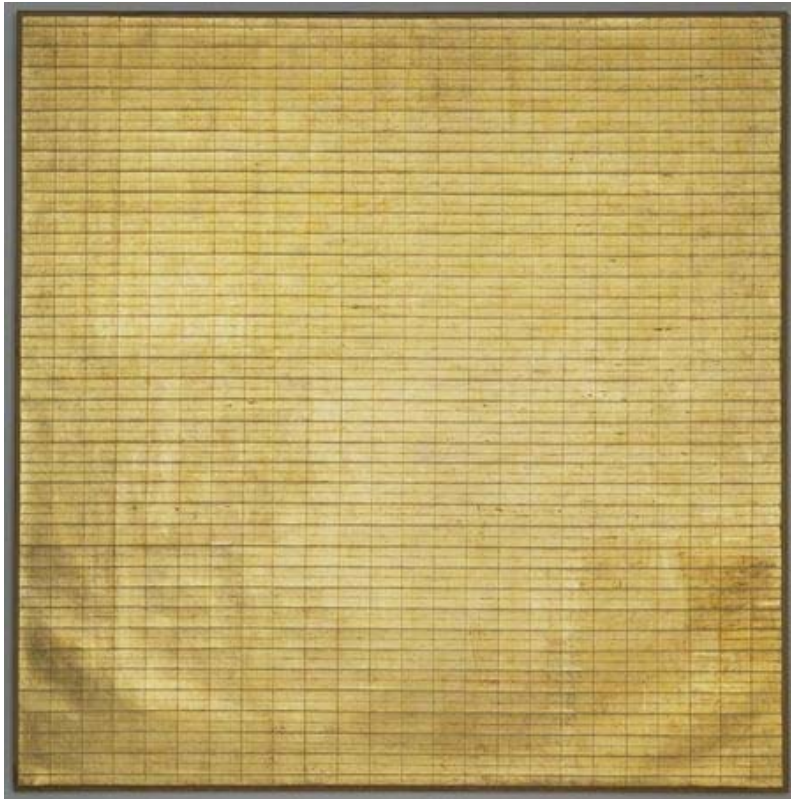


Figure 10: *Friendship*, by Agnes Martin, 1963. Incised gold leaf and gesso on canvas.

marks and/or objects I need to get my idea across, and how excessive use of these elements is detrimental to my work.

Contemporary Influences

A 21st century artist whose use of space is of interest to me is Goncalo Ivo. His work uses brightly colored lines to build up grids of squares using implied lines as outlines. There is no negative space, the surface is covered entirely with bands of bright color. At first glance, the lines all meld together to create various vertical and horizontal lines, mostly of the same weight, but upon closer inspection, the somewhat haphazard rectangles and squares within these lines can be seen. They appear to be both random and purposeful, which is an attribute I find in the dialogue between shapes in my own work. The bright colors draw the eye along, with breaks in color throughout the bands creating subtle variations of shape. *Rio Zaire* (Figure 12) is an image

that uses dense lines and bright colors to convey a sense of structure that can easily be seen while also including more sophisticated elements, such as the shapes created by the subtle color changes within the piece. What interests me about this piece is the use of lines that contrast in their colors, values, and sizes that at the same time unifies them through the subtle, larger shapes that emerge when viewing the piece overall.



Figure 11: *Checker*, by Cordy Ryman, 2008. Acrylic and velcro on wood.

Works using grids but in a very different way than Ivo is Cordy Ryman. Ryman, whose work is very geometric, breaks up the uniformity of the squares within his piece *Checkers*

(Figure 11) with splatters and drips of paint. This technique is reminiscent of the method I used to create my work *Unsettlements*, breaking up a grid of playing cards attached to the surface using various more spontaneous marks of paint. This idea of a grid with contrasting mark-making is very much in relation to my idea of grids as metaphors for social structures and their balances and imbalances.



Figure 12: *Goncalo Ivo*, by Rio Zaire, 2007. Tempera and collage on canvas.

Mark Bradford is a contemporary artist who uses found papers and materials to build up a rich, textured surface that utilizes the grid while also injecting shapes to create movement and chaos throughout the picture plane. The ideas in this work that I apply in my paintings are the use of repetitive shapes with contrasting more random-looking marks. My painting

Unsettlements is an example of where I use this idea. In *Kryptonite* (Figure 13), dense areas of uniform squares reside among marks and lines that resembling those of Twombly. Behind the shapes is a uniform white background that allows for shapes to be created from negative space between the clusters of various marks. This balance of paint densities that arises from the variety of shapes and marks is something I incorporated into my thesis exhibition works. Another contemporary artist I identify with is Matthew Ritchie. His work deals with visible and underlying structure in the universe, how chaos and order coexist and are constantly fluctuating. I identify with this idea on a smaller scale that deals with peoples actions and interactions and the tensions they create. Ritchie talks about dealing with issues according to our own circumstances as individuals:

“So in a way each of us is in our own prison. You bring it with you—the prison of your biology, your social structure, your life.” (Art 21, 2003)

The works *Untitled 2* (Figure 2) and *Untitled 3* (Figure 17) are examples that strongly show my use of intuitive mark making combined with structure in a way that is chaotic yet unified.

In this chapter, I talked about artists and paintings that have influenced the way I express ideas in my own work, which is also impacted by the philosophies discussed in Chapter One. Visual and intellectual ideas from the Abstract Expressionist, Modernist, Pop Art, and Contemporary areas have all had varied influence on my work. I look for ways to capture the essence of my ideas through works that don't directly indicate their meaning. The previously mentioned artists are those to whom I look for direction. In my next chapter, I will discuss in detail my work process and how it has changed and evolved during my time at Georgia Southern University.

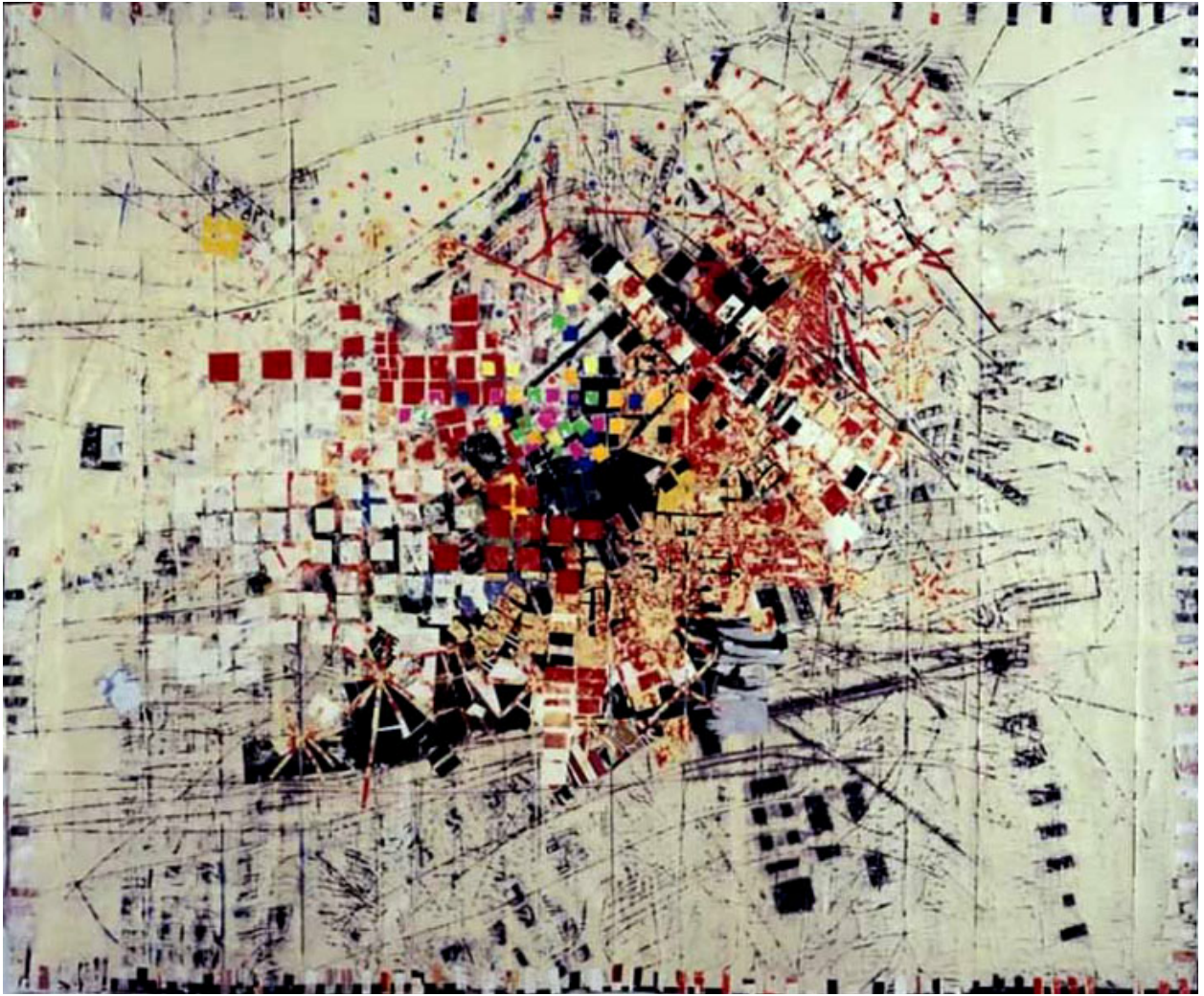


Figure 13: *Kryptonite*, by Mark Bradford, 2007. Mixed media on wood.

Chapter 3 Methodology Overview

In this chapter, I will discuss my methodologies and how they have progressed and changed while still reflecting the same themes discussed in chapter one. I've experimented with various approaches and created several individual series that, at the same time, all relate to form a cohesive body of work. In the beginning, attaching playing cards before adding any paint allowed me a way to experiment with the surface before adding any paint in addition to contributing to my conceptual idea. I later carried on this idea through paintings that used line as a pivotal element; first using neutral color and then later bright, vivid color. In the learning process, I incorporated silk screen printing which helped me develop knowledge of color proportion that I quickly began applying to paintings. Finally, I began using a collaging technique that eventually led to using three-dimensional objects in my paintings.

When I begin working on a new image, a composition made of various grids and structures serves as the base for the metaphorical structures. While paying close attention to the angles of the lines, I will add to the image, building it gradually. I will almost always use neutral colored marks before adding any color. If I cannot get the pieces of the compositional structure working cohesively early on, adding color and more elements results in confusion and disarray. The use of both actual and implied line is most important for me, both aesthetically and in order to represent my concept of structures. Though color is an important element, it cannot stand alone in representing objects the way lines can. In most cases, I will use the composition to develop: sections of solid shapes, lines of various thicknesses, and/or large shapes contrasting small ones. Color proportion, value, and contrast will shape out the mood and character of the painting. The colors I choose are most often subconscious and a personal choice, and are often experimental. By working with color according to the initial decisions made, arrays of gestures

and marks are built up in paint on the surface. These marks are then edited, and more marks are added according to how the image progresses. In most cases when I begin a painting, I have the knowledge of how I will create the work, but not exactly what the final product will look like. My process is based on my accumulated knowledge of both the formal elements and the physical properties of my materials. Painting for me is both an additive and subtractive process.

Card Paintings

The series of works I completed during my first semester of the MFA program at Georgia Southern began with experiments that changed the initial surface on which I began a painting. By gluing playing cards to the surface of canvas, as shown in my painting *Unsettlements* (Figure 14), I created a grid on which to begin painting. These cards functioned on many levels for me. They represented the idea of chance and randomness, something I was very interested in and had referenced in work completed prior to graduate school. This was the beginning of my use of a theme that continues in my work today: the idea of random systems versus rigidly structured ones. The cards created a visible structure that had a commanding presence within the image. The paint was applied in a largely intuitive manner that contrasted the harsh grid of cards below it. Various marks were then created with different sized brushes to form drips and splatters. At this point in my graduate school career, I had not yet studied color usage with any depth. For these paintings, my color choices were initially intuitive, mood-based, and largely experimental. While expressing conflict, the general nature of each image remains somewhat ambiguous, intentionally leaving parts to be interpreted by the viewer. Part of the ambiguity expressed in the pieces comes from taking commonly known, everyday objects, such as playing cards, and placing them in a piece of art outside of their intended context. This aspect of using objects in art rather than in their normal context, creates an outlet for a questioning of their meaning, which



Figure 14: *Unsettlements*, by Heidi Van Leuven, 2007. Playing cards and acrylic on canvas.

is important to me. I consider my works to be pieces for contemplation, areas of space where upon the viewer is invited to project their own frame of references. Generally speaking, most people know what playing cards are normally used for. In order to understand why they are in a painting requires the viewer to stop and think.

After finishing the card painting series, I began to consider ways in which to proceed exploring similar ideas while also exploring new visual reference points. My next series of works began to exploit line as the focal compositional element. Lines were very prominent in my card paintings because the card edges created a strong, visually rigid structure.

Line as Focus

In the series following the card paintings, painted and drawn lines defined the composition and became the pivotal visual element. The lines and shapes created from the negative space between the lines make up the focus on a formal level, they create movement and The lines and spaces also create harmonious and rigid structures that coexist. The first image of this line series, *Direction I* (Figure 15), began as a series of thin charcoal lines on a piece of

white paper. Gradually, the lines were built-up in various weights to create a sense of atmosphere. Then white paint was added to edit some of the lines out. Once the paint was semi-dry, I created a griddled pattern of lines by using a fork. Continuing to draw lines in charcoal and paint, I reworked the image until the composition was sound. The color for this image was kept neutral as I had not yet embarked on my study of color. The neutral color allowed my focus to remain on the lines and the shapes.



Figure 15: *Direction I*, by Heidi Van Leuven, 2008. Acrylic, charcoal, pencil, and playing cards on paper.

After completing a number of predominantly neutral-toned pieces, I began vigorous work on a series of color studies. Most of these color exercises were not created with the purpose of producing finished paintings, rather they were tools for me to learn how to better understand and

use color. The color studies led to new works where color is used in conjunction with my previous ideas, to symbolically portray social structures through metaphor. These structures are also represented in my images as linear elements.

Direction II (Figure 16) is my first image that uses color along with linear structure. In addition to working with charcoal and color, here I also used collage elements in order to add more variety to my surface. Color is incorporated here as a stronger element than it has ever been in my work. Vertical lines of varying thicknesses are still utilized to run throughout the image in order to create depth and represent the idea of structure. These lines are also used to depict divisions that create visual and metaphorical structures. Other shapes throughout the image were assigned their placement based on compositional need. Though there is a sense of rigid structure in this piece, there are also elements present that contrast that rigidity by conveying a sense of movement.

My painting *Untitled 3* (Figure 17) once again began with a basic composition of lines that were later built up through mark-making and color. As usual, my color choices began subconsciously, based on my knowledge of color proportion, color temperature, and value. Gradually, I began to consciously add more colors, over time allowing that element to become more prevalent in the image. As my understanding of color grew more sophisticated, I was able to incorporate it more thoroughly. A variety of drawn marks and brush strokes are used in *Untitled 3* (Figure 17) in order to create visual interest and to convey a sense of fluidity. Patches of dense marks contrast with larger open spaces that create areas of rest for the eye. Various lines move across the surface in order to guide the eye throughout the image. This painting begins to combine the ideas used in my previous work while also incorporating color as a major element for the first time.



Figure 16: *Direction II*, by Heidi Van Leuven, 2008. Acrylic, charcoal, oil pastel, pencil, and paper on paper.

Printmaking

While working out my technical and conceptual problems, I did a series of prints. Through the printmaking process, many lessons in color proportion that I had previously struggled with in my paintings started to be understood and absorbed. In printmaking, the application and order of colors is an exact, planned process which forced me to be aware and make conscious decisions about color in terms of the layering process. I was able to retain the



Figure 17: *Untitled 3*, by Heidi Van Leuven, 2008. Acrylic and oil pastel on paper.

element of randomness in the marks and textures I created on the screen within the pre-planned shapes, while becoming much more effective at distributing color proportion throughout my image. The print *Or So I Thought* (Figure 18) is composed of eleven different layers of ink, using the playing card motif to reference the same ideas I had sought to illustrate through my playing card paintings. The shapes that collide on the surface of the card image are consciously chosen. By using a power washer, which sprays pressurized water, on a screen covered with masking fluid, the ensuing edges and textures appear random and spontaneous.



Figure 18: *Or So I Thought*, by Heidi Van Leuven, 2008. Silk screen print on paper.

Once I finished the printmaking images and paintings that were primarily vehicles for learning about color, I thought back to the paintings where I had begun to collage elements. Like Rauschenberg and Nevelson, I decided to concentrate now on adhering three-dimensional materials to the surface of my paintings. With this method, I could express my original ideas through the use of gridded systems and structures while simultaneously creating a surface with much more depth, both visually and intellectually. By adding fragments of paper and other light-weight materials to the work, two additional ideas could be accomplished. One, I could take

objects out of context, arousing a sense of questioning in the mind of the viewer. And two, I could add objects that have a personal reference or meaning.

In *Untitled 1* (Figure 19), I began the compositional arrangement by laying down strips of an old painting in horizontal lines that gradually grew diagonal as they moved downward. This is not unlike the lines I would draw to set up a composition in my earlier thesis work. After attaching the initial painted strips, I then added other scraps of paper to the piece including other painted elements, constellation charts, a fragment of poem, and other scraps. The items are a combination of things that have personal meaning for me along with some randomly found objects. Once I had these arranged in an interesting composition, I poured melted wax over a large section of the painting, creating opaque areas, thus editing the structure below it through use of one color, as Louise Nevelson, referenced in Chapter Two, would do. The use of just one color created unity between many unrelated objects. My final step was to draw and paint over this wax coat in order to begin adding more lines and color. The wax and attached fragments made this piece much more three-dimensional than my previous work. This is the direction I decided to take further in future work. By arranging these seemingly random elements in a semi-griddled and slightly more three-dimensional way, the piece is reflective of both the concepts discussed earlier and my new-found urge to experiment with different media while still staying true to my concept. My reasoning behind using the specific three-dimensional items that I used is not clear to the viewer, as is true for Rauschenberg's work as well, and as such they will have to examine the image more thoroughly to draw their own conclusions about the meaning behind this work.



Figure 19: *Untitled 1*, by Heidi Van Leuven, 2008. Paper, acrylic, oil pastel, plastic, string, and wax on wood.

Incorporating Three-Dimensional Objects

In my latest series of paintings, my methods have drawn on and substantially advanced my previous use of material. These new images are created on wood and address using three-dimensional objects as major compositional components while working to retain my original

ideas. To create these works, I first sought various three-dimensional objects to attach to the board. This step altered my process greatly because until the objects I use are found, my final image cannot be predicted. The objects I used were sometimes chosen for their compositional value and sometimes for their personal meaning. In constructing the pieces, I arranged and rearranged the objects with temporary fasteners until I was satisfied with the composition. *Weathered* (Figure 20) began differently than any previous image. It is textured with more three-dimensional elements used for the viewer to consider. When I decided to work in this more three-dimensional way, I was trying to get rid of a tennis racket that had come to represent conflict-turned-animosity. I was going to take it to the thrift store when I had the sudden inclination to put it in a painting. I did so carefully, in order to not let it take over the entire work. I attached it, along with several pieces of wood, to the surface as well as scraps of paper and several plastic six-pack rings. With so many found objects collaged onto the surface, a gallon of white paint was poured over the entire structure to unify the shapes. What was visible after this layer dried were many indistinguishable shapes, including a bit of the tennis racket, and a distinct repetition of the distorted circular shapes from the six-pack rings. In this image, repetition of shapes are used as a three-dimensional variation of my usual grid form, in addition to painted lines. From here, I began adding color, at first intuitively, and then through conscious, selective color choices. Though the personal meaning is evident to me, the final image remains ambiguous enough for the viewer to contemplate and create their own evaluation of the elements used.

Through experimentation my methods used to create paintings have changed and grown. Beginning my studies at Georgia Southern with rudimentary use of three-dimensional found objects, I have grown through advanced color-studies as well as art history. I have created a

body of work that is visually diverse and conceptually consistent. Each painting has its own character, yet at the same time they are connected visually and ideologically.



Figure 12: *Weathered*, by Heidi Van Leuven, 2008. Wood, tennis racket, paper, six-pack rings, oil pastel, and acrylic on wood.

Chapter 4 Conclusion

In the previous chapters, I have discussed my ideas, influences, and the methods I have developed in the exploration and research of both. I have expressed my idea of social structures and their questionable nature that often leads people to make their decisions based on expectations rather than their own beliefs. Through the use of various grids, systems of lines and shapes, I have tried to use my ideas as the context forming the underlying structure for my images. With these elements I have worked to give my image both balance and imbalance, not unlike the social constructs previously discussed.

Through the examination of artists and work from various movements in art history to the present day, my techniques and methods, and thus the language of my medium, has evolved. Artists such as Twombly and Winters have influenced my mark-making within the work, while Mondrian and Martin have contributed to my understanding of using space to convey an essence of the subject matter. Their works show how crucial space and line are to expressing the feeling and gist of their subjects. Finally, in moving to three-dimensional objects, Rauschenberg and Nevelson assisted in my study of using three dimensional and unrelated objects to create a unified piece, whether the unification be from the arrangement of the objects or using one color to pull them together. These influences combined to create a system by which I visually express my ideas.

In contemporary art, I am influenced by various artists, each for different reasons. The work in my thesis exhibition displays these multiple influences in both aesthetic and conceptual areas. The pluralistic nature of the art world today has lead to a variety of different ideas to consider when creating my own work. With Bradford and Winters, I am interested in their combination of repetition and their use of random-seeming marks. Ivo and Ryman use

geometric shapes that create different visual effects through the use of grids which is something that has also been an important factor in my thesis exhibition work. I view this body work as a progression of the same theme embodied through different materials. In the future, I plan to expand on the theme of social structures and their effects in a more personal manner using meaningful text. While I still hope to retain some of ambiguity I have achieved in this body of work, in future work I plan to be more confrontational and direct in through use of text and imagery as well as abstraction. Through my research, observation, and experimentation in the creation of my work, I find my thesis work best described as contemporary pluralism with an emphasis on formal elements and philosophical ideas as they apply in society today.

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