Zinnias

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ZINNIAS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of Art

by

Carlyle Wolfe
B.F.A., University of Mississippi, 2000
May 2004
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS


Thank you Aunt Weety and Uncle Hugh for sharing your zinnias. Thank you Uncle Ron for building frames. Thank you Mama and Papa for your support.
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ABSTRACT


Begun with a coffee can full of flowers, this work is an exploration of art making, self, and nature.
ZINNIAS

Impermanence

ephemeral, transient, drifting, floating, passing, dying

a painterly thought—
one that enters the mind complete
that does not gain in its unraveling
but rather, in the unraveling moments, gives understanding
or succumbs to ration, intellect, or awe
that inspired by paint and brush and surface
can leave some evidence of itself
evidence in paint
that out of paint, too passes, a transitory glory

2000 Sketchbook, response to a conversation with Michael Crespo

The water is cold and clear in Michigan, and every summer that I visit my grandparents’ cottage I swim in it at least once. The top of the water is warmed by the sun, so floating is ideal. This summer I floated on a blue raft. I found the most enjoyable way was to paddle upriver to the next house and drift back in the current. The pace seemed as familiar as the easy passing of time.

He who binds to himself a joy
Doth the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in Eternity’s sun rise.
—William Blake “Eternity”

Quiet

still, subtle, sensitive, gradual, precise, muted, soft, faint, subdued, gentle, light

How do I see these tiny curves? The way that I see the surfaces of these cut flowers is closer to the way that I want to see everything. Everything that to me is only an afternoon or a glance or a season. each joy that I shall not bind.

August 11, 2003

With this coffee can full of flowers I brought a petal-shaped bug into my studio. He was welcomed company, walking down stems and across relatively enormous gaps from one extended petal to another of new color. His movement often caught my eye while I was drawing, but he was nearly impossible to find when he was still.

I walked with him vicariously, and I was sad to finally leave him outside atop a pile of wilting flowers but hopeful that he would find a new home.

August 12, 2003
Just awake, I pause before moving. The gentleness of morning engages me—brilliant light softened by haze pours onto the kitchen floor—new green sprouts suddenly from the fig tree’s arched branches—chill air touches the top of my arm not covered by my grandmother’s yo-yo quilt. Slowly, I move into the quiet house—hoping today to better practice the discipline of being.

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love for the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought;
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.
—T. S. Eliot from “East Coker”, Four Quartets

Words

linear, small, lyrical

In these flowers I also see pattern consistent with the whole of nature. Repeating a tiny curve is somewhat like reading a word in a book. A word that becomes a group of words, a page, an experience. So that if another were to mention a different page in the same book, I would listen with understanding.
August 12, 2003

The drawing is a word that is at once known and unknown to me. Discovering the flower’s form—as it emerges in line and paint and paper—is a dialogue balanced between self and nature.
My sight colored by earlier visions.
My touch considered in terms of prior sensations.
The more mechanical, rational processes mine—embroidering, arranging.
The more material, physical processes nature’s—dripping, bubbling, drying.

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.
—Psalm 19:1-4

Unfolding

veiled, ambiguous, growing, budding, opening, new
Knowing that a form is determined by its formation, I match ways of making with adjectives I recognize in the flowers. Unifying. Responding to the vision's unfolding.

I painted several surfaces white again. Pretending now that they are like the translucent silk tissue prints that I stack, one over the next. I anticipate building and rebuilding, veiling and unveiling.

November 10, 2003

One year’s worth of my daily gatherings are now folded somewhere inside of white envelopes. Stamped with dates and cities. Carried, given away. Composed of the substance that is new every morning—nourishment whose only price is harvest.

At Bates, he had taken Dr. Sudofsky’s class on Ulysses, and come away with a sense of irony and humor and the assurance that true knowledge was a spiritual process, a quest, not a storage of dry facts—a thing like freedom which you only fully experienced in practice.

—Richard Ford from “Under the Radar”, A Multitude of Sins

Specificity

particular, individual, unique, precise, distinct, intricate, detailed

I have been using Elizabeth Murray’s phrase to describe what I am doing. “I put paint on and take paint off until I start to get a sense of what the color will be, what the shapes will be.” until an image starts to emerge. “When I paint, I pull many parts together. I make them work together, or I let them not work together.”

In the beginning there are arbitrary marks. I made some with long-handled brushes made of my dogs’ hair, my hair. My hair was great for making circles. One curl. Degree of control is a variable.

Chris Johns encouraged my "adventurous" beginning. He named the process I have been describing "specifying". Beginning a specific painting. A blank canvas is all potential.

October 8, 2003

Miss Carlyle, 9/10/01

Today, the Tate Modern. Art from an era we didn’t live, yet recognize. Warhol. Pollock. I don’t particularly like these places. These museums. No doubt they play an important role in our society and should forever remain in existence. Just not for mine own viewing. For me, art belongs in evening bedrooms, or set upon the mantle. Strewn about a
studio within an old football stadium. Just as a book belongs upon a night table, on the porch swing, stuck inside a coat pocket. Within our lives. Yet I have never and will never offer an opinion on behalf of society. Only for this boy.
John T

With a searching vision, which often has to coin or re-mint words to express itself, Hopkins describes trees, breaking waves, the ribbed glacier, and the distant hill whose contour is like a ‘slow tune’; he eagerly observes the growth and disintegration of anything from a cloud to a bluebell. But he is mainly interested in all those aspects of a thing which make it distinctive and individual. He is always intent on examining that unified complex of characteristics which constitute ‘the outward reflection of the inner nature of a thing’—its individual essence. He was always looking for the law or principle which gave to any object or grouping of objects its delicate and surprising uniqueness. Very often this is, for Hopkins, the fundamental beauty which is the active principle of all true being, the source of all true knowledge and delight—even of religious ecstasy; for speaking of a bluebell he says: ‘I know the beauty of our Lord by it.’

Now this feeling for intrinsic quality, for the unified pattern of essential characteristics, is the special mark of the artist, whose business is to select these characteristics and organize them into what Clive Bell has called ‘significant form’. So too Hopkins must have felt that he had discovered a new aesthetic or metaphysical principle. As a name for that ‘individually-distinctive’ form (made up of various sense data) which constitutes the rich and revealing ‘oneness’ of the natural object, be coined the word inscape; and for that energy of being by which all things are upheld, for that natural (but ultimately supernatural) stress which determines an inscape and keeps it in being—for that he coined the name instress....

—W. H. Gardner from the Introduction to Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins

Abundance

generous, profuse, ample, bountiful, prolific, fine, exquisite, graceful, elegant

Now, mining these flower drawings for shapes, for lines, I reflect on an observation I made while making them—that the degree of detail in natural objects extends well beyond my sight—and the more that I focus my eyes and mind on what I do see, the more my vision expands. The lines and shapes I choose contain the nuance of specific curves and compositions.

February 2004
Aunt Weety once described to me how she evenly spaces the zinnia seeds as she plants them in the bed Uncle Hugh prepares each spring. The plants rise slowly to surprising height and stand all summer in the sun—offering blossom after blossom for Canton’s kitchen tables, bridesmaids’ luncheons, congratulations.

**Zinnia, Thumbelina—Resists Heat and Drought**
Bright 1-inch blossoms--big on beauty, just 6 inches high. Produces multicolored blossoms all summer long, no matter how hot the summer gets! Prefers full sun. Approximately 75 seeds per packet.

**Zinnia Seed, Cut & Come Again—Top Choice for Cutting**
A mix of semi-double to fully double flowers--inviting reds, yellows, oranges, golds, whites. Grows to 2 feet. Prefers full sun. Approximately 100 seeds per packet.

**Zinnia, State Fair—Big-Flowered Blend**
Double 5- to 6-inch flowers bloom June to frost--an explosion of red, orange, purple, yellow and pink on 2 1/2-foot stems. Approximately 60 seeds per packet.

**Zinnia, Peppermint Stick—Likes It Hot and Dry**
The best thing to happen to borders! Big color-swirled pink, yellow, white, purple and scarlet blooms on 2-foot stems. Full sun. Approximately 65 seeds per packet.

**Zinnia, Whirligig—Candy-Colored Petals**

**Zinnia Elegans Will Rogers—Big Blooms Up to 4 Inches Across!**
Large, flat, semi-double flowers on strong plants. Native to the American Southwest, plants are heat and drought tolerant and very easy to grow. Sturdy stems grow more than 3 feet tall. Lovely in cut flower arrangements. Approximately 100 seeds per packet.

**Zinnia, California Giant Mix—Heat-Tolerant Blend**
Explodes into bloom by early summer, even during unseasonable heat. Fully double flowers in rainbow hues, 30 inches tall. Approximately 65 seeds per packet.

—Gurney’s Seed and Nursery

You are a man, a retired railroad worker who makes replicas as a hobby. You decide to make a replica of one tree, the longleaf pine your great-grandfather planted—just a replica—it doesn’t have to work. How are you going to do it? How long do you think you might live, how good is your glue? For one thing, you are going to have to dig a hole and stick your replica trunk in the ground halfway to China if you want the thing to stand up. Because you will have to work fairly big; if your replica is too small, you’ll be unable to handle the slender, three-sided needles, affix them in clusters of three in
fascicles, and attach those laden fascicles to flexible twigs. The twigs themselves must be covered by ‘many silvery-white, fringed, long-spreading scales.’ Are your pine cones’ scales ‘thin, flat, rounded at the apex, the exposed portions (closed cone) reddish brown, often wrinkled, armed on the back with a small, relaxed prickle, which curves toward the base of the scale’? When you loose the lashed copper wire trussing the replica limbs to the trunk, the whole tree collapses like an umbrella.

You are a starling. I’ve seen you fly through a longleaf pine without missing a beat.
—Annie Dillard from Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

**Pattern**

organic, inherent, interconnected, physical, repetitive, rhythmic

Bohemian green earth and earth green are tubed grass stains and slime from beneath rocks, from the mossy edge of land and water, from the sunken boundary between plant and dirt.  
The more I paint, the more I come to recognize the separation between paint and color. Perhaps, a pigment’s color, much like a zinnia’s color, dramatically overshadows its more subtle, secondary characteristics.  
My gesso is made of chalk from Bologna.  
My paints are dirt from Italy, rock from Afghanistan.  
Color is transferable. Paint is not transferable.  
September 25, 2003

Rhythm of light falling through trees  
Bouncing shadows softly across my summer cabin’s screen night windows  
Pattern of newly bare branches woven overhead  
Illumined by failing light of evening  
Harmony of concentric stains, spreading fungi on dappled marble  
Warmed by winter sun  
Repetition of clover, grass, dollar weed, dandelion  
Dawn of green, dense growth

I am in Madrid, visiting Real Jardin Botanica, close to the Prado Museum….I like this kind of garden because of its height. I am within it, rather than looking down at it. It is not overabundant in color, but infinite in type of branch and leaf….This garden is like a grand symphony—not of color but instead different types of plants—like living marks in space. When the light falls over this trunk, it is like the entrance to a painting: light over shadow over light, and finally, the profound space of the sky.  
—Emily Ritchey from Facing Nature, Facing Paint
Leslie and I met to look at my cutouts in the grad show. We talked about the context of the gallery wall and the arrangement of pieces, and I recalled a dream I dreamed maybe six months ago. I dreamed that I saw an artist’s work that was so much like what I wanted to do that I was thrilled and disappointed simultaneously. Her paper flowers were strewn through actual bushes and dry trees and photographed in black and white. I recalled Amy Hinton’s work. Specifically a hierarchical map of bees that she used to structure an installation of embroidered bees cut out of Napoleonic fabric.

Later, I took a flat box full of paper silhouettes into the woods to look at them in nature. The flower shapes were very much like the leaves of a certain fungus, frilly and stacked around the base of a tree, so I chose that tree to be their support and pushed pins into its bark. Then, a few weeks ago, in the last hours of morning, I dreamed this dream. He left me with several small brown objects. They looked like nuts or seeds. I thought that one seemed to be a spider, so I carefully picked it up off of my bathroom sink and flushed it in the toilet. Then, the house was filled with butterflies, and I knew that the objects were cocoons. The butterflies were all over me. They were very similar to the paper cutouts I’ve made in shapes of flowers. They were each unique like drawings of butterflies. I knew that they had only short lifetimes and that it was not necessary to take them outside, but I walked out of my back door and threw my arms up to let some fly up into the sky. Surprisingly, I was not terribly distracted by the mistake I made by destroying one cocoon. There was a great abundance of beauty and delicacy and flight.

It is important that the work let me in for long periods of time yet retain a sense of spontaneity and directness.
November 10, 2003
Yesterday, after accidentally tearing a silk tissue print, I was thrilled by the idea of mending it. The tear intersected several rows of lines waiting to be stitched, so the repair was natural.
The incident gave me cause to think again about restoration, the cyclical nature of creation, and about the tenderness in my relationship with my work.

March 12, 2004
I do not sew without remembering my Aunt Polly and the dresses that she made for me when I was a child, without re-entering the room where she worked, without again being blessed by her hands, her time, serving me, gifting me.
lace inserts at hemlines circling my legs
ribbons dangling from puff sleeves cinched around my arms
embroidered flowers, clustered, colored, knots, balls adorning my collar
“Consider the lilies, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”
Luke 12:27

Vulnerability
wilting, eroding, threatened, fragile, soft, breakable, frail, tender, flimsy, refined

Sanding. Away white paint and across sharp edges of dark shapes. I recall the deteriorating surface of Leonardo’s Last Supper detailed in a book I was referencing when John Alexander was here.
erosion. abrasion. refining. aging. mysterious the coexistence of violence and gentleness in nature.

November 4, 2003
Nana has lung cancer. Papa called to tell me. I was at Square Books.
The temperature had dropped dramatically, and when I walked to my car, the air was bitter. I cried out loud.
I sat and thought about Nana as every age between birth and eighty.
I thought of how beautiful she is, how beautiful and delicate her age is, how lightly she claps her hands and lowers her big eyes.

December 11, 2000
Nana had a hard day. When I came home, I got in bed with her. She held my hand. I could see through her skin. I could see the bones and the skinny veins in her hands. Her earlobes were even curled up.
We talked a little while about nothing and then she fell asleep. I cried silently but also felt so comfortable and safe, there in my grandmother’s bed, holding her hand. And she held my hand so firmly.
I miss her already. I am tempted to spend today missing her next Christmas or at my wedding, but today I really do love her the way she is today and the way she always was.
January 26, 2001
She asked Mama if I rolled out the rolls yet. I haven’t. I haven’t had time or courage. I cried the entire time I was making the dough.
The worst is that until 5:30 I want the day to fly. How could I want days to pass so quickly and to stand still all at once?

January 30, 2001
Nana died.
One of the last things that I told her was that she was pretty. She told me that I was crazy but accepted the compliment.
Her body was like a beautiful shell. A descriptive shape.

February 1, 2001
No, no, there is no going back.
Less and less you are that possibility you were.
More and more you have become those lives and deaths that have belonged to you.
You have become a sort of grave containing much that was and is no more in time, beloved then, now, and always.
And so you have become a sort of tree Standing over a grave.
Now more than ever you can be Generous toward each day that comes, young, to disappear forever, and yet remain unaging in the mind.
Every day you have less reason not to give yourself away.
—Wendell Berry from A Timbered Choir

Obedience
pleasing, yielding, pure, innocent

In few words, I should structure a personal definition of art.

October 7, 2003
My definitions will probably always be changing—as most things change, but the changes and ambiguities and transitions continually influence my understanding of my work.
For a while, my definitions focused on time and activity. A painter is a person who makes paintings. I am a painter because in my days I make paintings.
Today. A painter is primarily concerned with actively observing and collecting and ordering and expressing knowledge.
In the early pages of the little book I’ve carried with me for almost a year now is written—journal for naming themes, for listening, for recording faithfully.

November 11, 2003

Drive to the studio and park a good distance away
Draw from observation
Journal
Carve lines from linoleum blocks
Look at pictures of paintings in books
Read poetry and novels and art criticism
Spread color over a glass palette—mixing, measuring
Talk about art
Pile translucent papers—arranging, rearranging
Glaze, drip, pour, spread, scrub, rub paint into surface
Run finger over silk tissue, pressing to the linoleum block beneath, printing a line
Dye silk thread
Compile small parts
Embroider paper, connecting layers
Visit galleries, museums, their city hosts
Choose favorable dimensions that make invisible allusions
Prepare panels, sand them smooth
Mix chalk into rabbit’s skin glue in a double boiler
Ink a Plexiglas plate and sprinkle paper cuts over it
Struggle to crank the press
Beat flax into pulp for making paper
Dip arms into vat of flax pulp to pull a sheet
Transfer pulp from mould, to felts, to drier
Clean brushes
Drink coffee or tea or water and look
Trim dog’s hair and make brushes using a fly-fishing kit
Pour over the Williamsburg paint catalogue preparing to order
Mine for lines and shapes in ten large drawings covered with contour lines
Trace lines onto vellum, out of paint
Cut silhouettes out of paper
Return to my car and drive away

The second chapter of The Supper of the Lamb begins with the slightly absurd instruction to spend ‘sixty minutes or so’ chopping an onion….What is Capon’s point? Presumably not that we should all set aside sixty minutes every time we sauté a Vidalia. Rather, he is making ‘a case for paying attention.’ After an hour with your onion, you might begin to see ‘that the uniquenesses of creation are the result of continuous creative support, of effective regard by no mean lover.’ The lover of course is God. ‘He likes onions, therefore they are. The fit, the colors, the smell, the tensions, the tastes, the textures, the lines, the shapes are a response, not to
some forgotten decree that there may as well be onions as turnips, but to His present delight.’
—Lauren Winner from Mudhouse Sabbath

Atmosphere

shimmering, flickering, glistening, shining

My current measure for the success, or rather pertinence, of art that I see is this question—do I leave it with the desire to make art?
August 2003

Solids waver at the edge of disintegration into the hot, humid air
Reinforcing the lushness of this place
Overflow of fruit, foliage, vine, flower
Roots hidden in damp, fertile soil
Nature swallows architecture—
Evenings I run along the lakeshore.

Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,
Why, when the singing ended and we turned
Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,
The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
As the night descended, tilting in the air,
Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.
—Wallace Stevens from “The Idea of Order at Key West”
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Zinnias
Oil on Panel
27"x45"

Detail
Zinnias
Monotypes on Paper, Embroidered
21"x38"

Detail
Zinnias
Oil on Panel
27”x45”

Detail
Zinnias
Monotypes on Paper, Embroidered
18”x37”

Detail
Zinnias
Monotypes and Linoleum Block Prints on Paper, Embroidered
20"x38"

Detail
Zinnias
Oil on Panel
24"x40"
Zinnias
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Detail
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Zinnias
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Zinnias
Oil on Panel
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Detail
Zinnias
Monotypes on Paper, Embroidered
9"x10"
**Zinnias**
Monotypes and Linoleum Block Prints on Paper, Embroidered
9"x10"
Zinnias
Monotypes and Linoleum Block Prints on Paper, Embroidered
9"x10"
VITA

Carlyle Wolfe was born in Gainesville, Florida, on December 17, 1977. She is the daughter of Carlyle and Richard Wolfe. Carlyle grew up in Canton, Mississippi. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Mississippi, where she graduated with honors in December of 2000. The following August, Carlyle entered Louisiana State University’s Master of Fine Arts program. She plans to graduate in May of 2004.