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Full Circle

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FULL CIRCLE

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 School of Art

By
Elizabeth Cowhig
B.A., Clark University, 1999
M.P.A, Clark University, 2001
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For Gung and Lulu,
who left while I was away.

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Abstract

My paintings are a result of a mainly intuitive process that evolves out of the combination of shape, color, and texture and originates from personal ideologies involving health phobias and religious beliefs. The imagery in the paintings is of biological origin, cells that fill up with matter, dense spheres that recall cancerous build up, the compositions and colors are inspired by Italian Renaissance paintings. The tangible is inserted into the realm of the ethereal.

Introduction

At first it was all about surface. Later it became all about color. Then, the “big idea” stage led me to believe that it was all about composition. I refer to the mindset I had about my paintings. Now I’ve come to realize that my concerns are all three – composition, color combinations, and painting process, in equal measure. Through my years of graduate school, I have struggled with many different ideas and theories relating to my work, but my three main concerns are the same now as when I began graduate school. Thus, I feel that I have come full circle.

I grew up in two households simultaneously: that of my parents – New England liberal-thinking, no-nonsense, Special-Education Administrators who stressed education and learning above all; and that of my grand-aunts, two very devout Roman Catholic old ladies. One of my first memories as a child was falling asleep listening to the sound of my grand-aunts reciting their nightly rosary. My education contained the same duality. All of elementary school was spent at Immaculate Conception School where Saints’ Feast Days, learning Stations of the Cross, and singing hymns took precedence over memorizing state capitals and presidents’ names. My high school experience was the opposite. It was an environment where I excelled in math and science.

Praying, it seemed, was the answer to everything: the illness of a grandparent, the ability to do well on a particularly challenging trigonometry test, even to prevent the cancellation of Mighty Mouse from the Saturday morning cartoon lineup. All would be resolved through prayer. My willingness to believe in the usefulness of prayer has always intrigued me even though through my years of Catholic School education it was never fully explained exactly what (or whom) we were praying to. Blind faith was a demanded necessity.

This compliance with blind faith was a result of being raised by old ladies. I acquired other “old lady” traits, in particular Italian old lady traits. I fall asleep early, watch re-runs of my favorite television shows until I’ve memorized the script, and unfortunately the worst trait I’ve picked up is the tendency to believe I have a multitude of physical ailments. After being told a hundred times by my grandmother that I would catch my death if I went outdoors with wet hair I started to believe that going outdoors with wet hair directly leads to death. My grandmother started complaining of her degenerative disk disease when she was in her seventies—I started recognizing symptoms in my twenties. The worst was when my grand-aunt would quietly take her nitroglycerine pills. I knew what pain she was feeling—I believed I could feel the same pain, that I was in danger of having the heart attack. That is when I began praying. When I begin to fear my illness, prayer allows me to have peace of mind.

Towards the end of high school I took a trip to Italy—to the birthplace of my mother’s family. Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* was the painting that revealed the nature of painting to me. It was so beautiful that it shimmered; it was a living painting hanging on a wall. It was the first time I felt the longing, the desire to possess the painting, the desire that only artists feel, the collector/gatherer mentality mixed with the zealous need to create. I was nearly jealous of Botticelli, wanting to paint an image that would garner the same response. I tried to touch Botticelli’s painting and was luckily restrained and snapped back to life by my father, or I still might be in a Florentine prison today.

My background, in particular my Roman Catholic education, my paranoia concerning my health, and my interest in math and structure have influenced my main concerns as a painter, which are composition, color combinations, and painting process. My graduate thesis show, entitled *Full Circle*, includes five large-scale oil paintings on canvas and a series of six-inch panels that combine oil and resin.

Composition

My religious education and background were the catalyst for my interest in religious-themed Italian Renaissance paintings. I have an envious fascination with their particularity. Each saint has characteristics, color combinations, and accessories that are particular to his or her legend. Their traits are nearly uniform in all the paintings, no matter the painter. The compositional arrangements also have consistencies in their structure; for instance, altarpieces are composed with a central emphasis and saints flanking symmetrically on either side. I aim to have this same type of consistent compositional structure throughout my body of work.

I strive in my own paintings to re-interpret the rather predictable composition of a Renaissance painting. I was taught as a young painter that compositions such as that of a Madonna and Child painting which will always have the Madonna's head placed along the central vertical axis, about two-thirds of the way up the panel, are undesirable. According to my personal painting theory, in a visually interesting painting, (simply stated) all information should be arranged to avoid the central axis and the corners or edges. I am interested in composing successful paintings that use conventional compositional devices, such as centrally located information, low horizon lines that bisect the picture plane, and designs that favor a symmetrical and balanced distribution of color or shape.

In my painting *St. Lucy Altarpiece* I maintain the same positioning of information as in a typical altarpiece, and more specifically in Domenico Veneziano's *St. Lucy Altarpiece*. The small circles along the bottom of my painting line up as Saints Francis, John the Baptist, Zenobius, and Lucy line up in Veneziano's painting. The challenge I present myself is to keep this space activated and connected to the rest of the painting.

Italian Renaissance paintings have such a strong basis in math. Since the Italian painters were immersed in the theories of perspective, their paintings are very precisely constructed. I am not as fascinated with their accurate portrayal of perspective as I am with their use of the picture plane and surface. For example, I looked to Giotto's *Virtues and Vices* from the Arena Chapel. The idea of a border, or a window-framing device, which contains the image and also allows the image to flow into the borders, inspires my collage work and subsequent panel paintings.

I was looking at Simone Martini's *Annunciation* as an example of a wacky spatial world where objects – in this case a virgin, an angel, flowers, etc. – appear on the surface, the words they speak are imbedded into the surface with raised gesso, and all appear to be in a flat yet interior space. In my paintings I combine areas of texture and relief with areas of matte or flat paint.

My background in math had a strong influence on my early paintings. I enjoyed math for its consistency: six plus seven always adds up to thirteen. Writing proofs in geometry, for instance, was a particular favorite of mine. In proof writing each step that leads to the resolution of an equation is broken down and written out in detail. While I don't utilize proof writing when viewing a Renaissance painting, I am interested in the breakdown of the space within the picture plane. In several of Bellini's *Madonna and Child* paintings, for instance, he divides his space into three not necessarily equal parts, using a green curtain behind Mary and Child to bisect a continuous landscape. I began *Green Curtain I* and *Green Curtain II* as a joined canvas and divided the picture plane as Bellini had in his *Madonna and Child* (c. 1468) in the Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan. When they eventually became two separate paintings I let my instincts take over to continue to divide the space within the painting.

Color Combination

Investigating color, and the effects color arrangements and combinations have on a composition, is very important in my work. In the past I have used color instinctively, relying on combinations of complementary colors. When planning the color schemes for the paintings in *Full Circle*, I decided to pull inspiration from color combinations within Italian Renaissance paintings.

When looking at Fra Angelico's paintings, I became interested in simplifying the color schemes in my paintings. Fra Angelico's paintings, specifically his frescoes in the Convent of San Marco in Florence, are painted with a limited palette; the backgrounds are beige tones and the figures, clothing, and sparse setting are painted with pale, muted colors. In response to Fra Angelico's paintings, I began my paintings *St. Lucy Altarpiece* and *Remorse* with a ground of unbleached titanium, unbleached titanium pale, white, brilliant yellow extra pale, and zinc buff. Onto this ground, I built up the surface with areas of rich glazes of color.

Studying the subtle color variations of beiges in the Fra Angelico paintings led me to want to do a further study of a particular color. I chose pink for its various bodily references but also for its prominence in several Venetian Renaissance oil paintings. The recent death of my grandmother, whose name was Lucy, prompted me to look to Domenico Veneziano's *St. Lucy Altarpiece* for color inspiration. I mixed thirty different variations of pink, attempting to match the pink in Domenico's painting. I painted my mixtures each on a separate six-inch panel. In my painting, *St. Lucy Altarpiece*, the only pink that remains is towards the lower right, where St. Lucy is located in the Florentine painting.

For my next color study I chose green – more specifically the green of the curtain in Giovanni Bellini's *Brera Madonna and Child*. Bellini's green cloth, which is thinly rimmed in bright red, breaks up a continuous landscape. I

wanted the green to serve a similar purpose in my two paintings, *Green Curtain I* and *Green Curtain II*, as it did in Bellini's, that being the backdrop to draw attention to the important element of the painting. I mixed thirty variations of green and painted some of the mixtures on separate six-inch panels; the rest I painted onto parts of the pink six-inch panels I had created when testing color for my *St. Lucy Altarpiece*. The small-scale six-inch panel series in *Full Circle* was developed through these color studies.

For *Green Curtain I* and *Green Curtain II*, I mixed tones that would contrast with the green and resemble skin tones. I became fascinated with mixing combinations of yellow ochre, alizarin crimson, rose doré, raw sienna, and white. The result is a fleshy pink color that is at the same time rather ugly and intriguing. The rose doré gives beauty to the color, but the raw sienna dulls it down and gives the color a rather earthy grittiness. Combining this pink color with the strong green from the Bellini painting became the focus for *Green Curtain I* and *Green Curtain II*.

Painting Process

Process plays a very important part in my work. I use the small panels as tests for color, layering of pattern, shape combinations, and compositional ideas that will transfer to the larger paintings. My general painting process consists of layering color, sanding, layering paint mixed with textured mediums such as wax or acrylic gel, scraping or sanding until I obtain the surface I desire, then glazing. I began to develop this painting process when I started exploring my fascination with patterning, which, I believe, was fostered by my interest in geometry. I began using masking tape stencils to speed up the patterning process. For example, I created stencils that repeat a small rectangular shape. When layered and repeated using a stencil, a larger shape emerges, reminiscent of architectural units, of building blocks.

Within a contained environment the repetition of the mark represents the build-up of matter over time. After years of use, the paint, gel medium, and wax medium that was dragged through the stencil built up around the inside edge of the stencil. These stencils begin to literally represent the build-up of matter. When I use the stencil to draw it gives an irregular line, and when used in a painting the stencils leave an uneven pattern.

I mostly use the stencils on a wet paint layer, dragging paint mixed with wax medium. This leaves the information that comes through the stencil but also leaves a texture where the stencil pressed into the wet paint surface. The surface appears worked and manually built up. My paintings surfaces are very physical. The drips, clumps, and scrapes of paint relate to the internal workings of the body. The substance of oil paint is very seductive and corporeal. Oils, like lotions, are silky and inviting mediums that make the paint's texture creamy, and pigment when mixed with oil glazing mediums can make the luster of a surface undeniably attractive. I want the paint on the surface to maintain its

tactile, pleasing qualities. I refer not to color choice in the painting or the imagery within the painting, only to the physical nature of the paint.

The series of six-inch panels arose from my love of process and my habit of collecting. I naturally collect—it is a trait I was brought up with. For example, my parents, for each birthday, milestone, or special event, gave me a different Madame Alexander doll, each the same size and style but dressed differently. In the cabinet that houses them, they create a rather unified visual statement: one hundred, and counting, pieces of plastic, all the same height with the same face and hair dressed in different colors and styles. I create the same homogeneity with my panels. The sixty panels in *Full Circle* are equal in scale and materials but each are treated uniquely.

The panels begin as color studies. I use them to explore color mixtures; in this series they began as studies for pink and yellow. Within the color field I introduce a linear element, usually a drawing made from my stencils transferred onto acrylic gel medium. This process is derived from a process I used when creating a series of small collages. In the collage series I was interested in combining a color field derived from an extreme enlargement of areas of Italian Renaissance paintings and a linear drawing. With the six-inch panels I took the process a step further, mixing the color derived from the Renaissance paintings and then coating the surface with polyester resin.

Using acrylic gel medium and polyester resin has become an important part of my painting process. Scientists use these materials for various processes, specifically to isolate gene information in petri dishes and plates. I constructed my resin-pouring process in the same spirit as a scientific experiment. By pouring the resin when the panels are in various stages of glazing, I am never certain what the final result will be when the resin cures. The resin pulls away from areas of wet glaze, creating a pattern below the surface of the panel.

Conclusion

I take away from graduate school a more complex understanding of color, and the ability to communicate my ideas more clearly. My greatest challenge for the future will be to continue to push ideas through to their realization and challenge myself in terms of color combinations and composition. I have always allowed areas of paintings, the way they are resolved or the particular mark making, to inform paintings. Since I have learned to trust these instincts and allow the paintings to evolve through process as well as concept, I feel as though I have come full circle.

Images



Green Curtain II, Center, Green Curtain I, (left to right) 2005, oil on canvas, 52" x 54," "54 x 54," "52 x 54."



Remorse, (right) 2005, oil on canvas, 46" x 53."



Six-inch panel series, 2005, mixed media on panel.



St. Lucy Altarpiece, 2004, oil on canvas, 70" x 52.5."

Vita

Elizabeth Cowhig was born on October 9th 1977, in Lynn, Massachusetts. She was named after her father's paternal grandmother, a beloved little old lady who was just as eccentric, yet less dramatic and outspoken about it than her namesake. Elizabeth and her only sibling Sean, were raised by a porcelain doll maker and a one thousand plus jigsaw puzzle master who posed by day as special education teachers. Elizabeth spent five years being educated in the shadows of Sigmund Freud at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, where she graduated with a Bachelor in Arts and Sciences degree in 1999 and a Master of Public Administration in 2000. She received her Master of Fine Arts in 2005 from Louisiana State University.