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Nature vs. nurture

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NATURE VS. NURTURE

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Louisiana State University and
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requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

By
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Abstract

My work utilizes the metaphor of the family garden gone wild to represent growing up in a difficult family environment. The plants struggle in an environment that turns the typical, quiet backyard garden into a chaotic jungle. This body of work illustrates a variety of printmaking techniques such as mezzotint, silkscreen, drawing, and etching. The vibration and saturation of intense colors create imaginary plants that are highly illusionistic. The troubled environment is represented by the nocturnal background.
Nature vs. Nurture: Welcome to the Jungle

Jungle – [slang] a place or situation in which people engage in ruthless competition or in a struggle for survival.

Surrealism began in the 1920’s by French writer/poet André Breton, the primary theorist of the Movement. Surrealism expressed a new approach to reality and explored, by influenced psychological theories of Sigmund Freud, through the unconscious mind. Breton defined Surrealism as “pure psychic automatism by which one intends to express verbally, in writing or by other method, the real functioning of the mind. Dictation by thought, in the absence of any control exercise by reason, and beyond any esthetic or moral preoccupation.” (Rubin, 121). Other artists who influenced my interpretation of surrealism are: Jan Švankmajer, Roland Topor, Salvador Dalí, Mark Ryden. In my body of work, Surrealism is conveyed in the unexpected actions and reactions of the Dead Reds and Weenie Roses in a troubled environment.

These works address ideas about a family garden turned into a tangled jungle. There are a variety of fictional, surreal plants in the family garden. As they grow, the plants develop individual and sometimes unusual personalities. The Dead Reds and the Weenie Roses are two kinds of plants that exist in the environment of the family garden. Both of these residents are vying for dominance.

The Dead Reds are green monstrous-like plants with colorful bulbs that often attack other plants. They have deep dark personalities that I would label as bullies in the plant world. The Dead Reads have been used and abused as shoots and they see every plant as inferior to them. They are the culprits of all plants and take great pleasure in making other plants feel miserable. This creates a feeling of superiority for them. Their reputation as the bullies of the
plant world has bruised their egos. The Dead Reds gain power and put fear into other plants by creating discord and initiating fights. They also have a passion for seeking unknown revenge and power over the Weenie Roses.

Dead Reds are like weeds. Their goals are to take over and destroy other plants. They have little regard for delicate flowering plants which they feel are weak and inferior. These plants portray the monster-like male dominant household figure I grew up with. In this body of work, they are enraged by their dark past that is constantly haunting them. Their pathogen mentality earned them a reputation of being a nuisance and bringing misery into the garden.

Weenie Roses have purple and pink bulbs that are soft and smooth with green, thorny stingers. They are the most vulnerable plants and are easily hurt by the Dead Reds. Weenie Roses will go out of their way to keep peace within the environment. Their caring personalities earned their reputation of being the well-liked plants. Although they have razor-sharp stingers, they rarely use them. It would be against their caring nature to do any harm unless provoked. They are often the abused victims of the Dead Reds. They also try their best to maintain peace but their well-liked personality causes more chaos with the Dead Reds.

Weenie Roses are portrayed as the female figures in the household. The term “weenie” is slang for a weakling. I portray the Weenie Roses as reticent types of plants that are nurturing and try to maintain the colorful backyard. Weenie Roses are colorful and nurturing to the other plants but they are the enemies of the Dead Reds. They lose the majority of their battles with the Dead Reds because they will not lower their standards. Weenie Roses are living in misery because they are constantly in conflict with the Dead Reds. They struggle to maintain their sanity in the once peaceful backyard that has now turned into a jungle.
Nature vs. Nurture

Growing up, I was told that a family household is always a “nurturing” environment filled with love and support. This description will always sound like rubbish to me. I always thought of family life as a lifestyle of misery. Every time I came home it was always the same old routine with the male dominant figure of the household expressing anger, swearing at the female figures, or a female figure leaving the room crying hysterically.

Plants have been a significant part of my family life from childhood to present. I would leave the house and go to the backyard garden to escape the misery. The backyard was filled with colorful plants and fresh air. As a child, I used to think that plants had it easy because they were taken care of by nature. For instance, they were provided with soil, water, and sunlight to stay healthy and bloomed with happiness. When I first learned about weeds, thorns and other plant features in elementary school, I realized that plants have it just as bad as humans. I used to think that plants could experience visual and emotional pleasure because of their color, shape, and scent. I now realize that plants can have everyday problems like all living things. Families are the same way. Both plants and families may look perfect on the outside but may suffer on the inside.

I use plants as a metaphor for human experiences. In order to deal with difficult emotional circumstances, I created the Dead Reds and Weenie Roses who are characters based on personality traits of my family members. My mission in creating images of plants was to create an intense environment within a peaceful setting. The plants are depicted experiencing the identical lifestyle of dysfunctional families who struggle to survive each others personalities.

The process of interacting with drawing and printmaking materials helps me cope with my home environment. Creating images of plants provide an avenue for me to not only express
these feelings but also to find peace in dealing with these intensely personal issues. The form of the Weenie Roses was inspired by keloids, raised pinkish scar tissues. The texture of the keloids has inspired me to explore this rendering style in future works.

Being in the studio is like being in a greenhouse, the artist is the botanist. Planting seeds is like applying color to paper, building up each layer of color is like watering a garden, resulting with flowering displays. The viewer does not know exactly how everything was put together but may enjoy the results.

I treat the copper plates like a gardener prepares soil for planting. Like planting seeds, the tiny pits are applied using a mezzotint rocker. I watch my jungle grow as I create my imagery on the plate by scraping mid-tones and burnishing highlights. This physical roughening of the surface adds to the intensity of the dark mood of the works and helps to make the fictional characters within them appear more realistic and seductive.

I’ve always had an obsession with realism and wanted to make my drawings look as realistic as possible. I gained an interest in mezzotints when I first saw a mezzotint print glued onto one of the pillars in the print shop. It may be one of the oldest and most difficult techniques in intaglio. I love the realistic quality and am fascinated that realism can be achieved in intaglio using this dark to light method.

Each image is printed on a small scale and framed with a matte. The matte serves as a window to imitate viewing through a window of destruction. The large scale works hang freely on the walls to imitate a closer view and to evoke the feel of being in the middle of chaos. Utilizing a claustrophobic landscape, I introduce these plants on both small and large formats. The small formats represent windows illustrating a troublesome world. The large formats illustrate windows that provide a close-up view of the colorful details in the intense surroundings of the garden.
Plants experience similar daily problems like all living things. Families are the same way. Both plants and families may seem perfect on the outside but may experience misery on the inside. I use plants as a metaphor for human experience. For example: the plants compete for dominance in the garden just like human beings fight for dominance in society. By purposely using intense colors, I strive to deceive the viewers by creating a floral landscape as a disguise for the dark personalities behind the plant images.

My work is based upon dark landscapes and close up views of unusual plants. Growing up in a difficult household, the backyard was a place for relief. The colorful plants surrounded me with calm, positive energy and made a challenging environment temporarily disappear. I’ve always envied plants because they look so peaceful, independent, and carefree. During rough times, their cheerful bright colors would make me mad and I wished that they were ugly. These plants have seductive shapes, and a scale which begets bad attitudes and ugly reactions. For example; tension is created as they can appear both visually pleasing and frightening at the same time. My goal is to seduce my viewers with warm bright colors and trap them with fear by using cool dark colors to give a cold intense feeling.

In the garden as in the real world, there are winners and losers, good and evil, weak and strong. The Dead Reds and the Weenie Roses battle for dominance in the garden just as all other living creatures fight for dominance in their surroundings. These conflicts are vividly illustrated in this body of work.
Image 1. *No Peace*, Color Mezzotint, 4”x 5”

Image 2. *Leaving*, Silkscreen and PrismaColors, 4”x 5”
Image 3. *Struggle*, Silkscreen and PrismaColors, 3”x 5”

Image 4. *Foul*, Engraving and Mezzotint, 4”x 5”
Image 5. *Dysfunctional*, Silkscreen and PrismaColors, 40”x 60”


Image 8. *Knock Out*, Colored Mezzotint, 3”x 5”
Bibliography


Vita

Renee’ Noel Smith was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in August 1982. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree from Southern University and A&M College in 2004. In 2008, she will receive her Master of Fine Arts in printmaking from Louisiana State University.