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### Atmosphere of an Explosion

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# Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

The college of Art and Design

School of Art

In Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS in Fine Arts Studio

## *Atmosphere of an Explosion*

By

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## Table of Contents

1. Abstract	4
2. Introduction	5
3. Context and Influences	5
4. Shape & Form	7
a. Circle Panels	7
b. Shaped Panels	8
c. Small Woodcuts	10
6. Atmosphere of An Explosion	10
7. Conclusion	11
8. Bibliography	12
9. Appendix	13

## **Abstract**

The thesis work explores the impact of an abusive environment and in what ways that abuse influences and directs an individual's state of mind. My creative exploration comes from my intimate, personal childhood memories and experiences. Working through the influences that the cycle of trauma creates, led me to the use of a variety of materials to focus in a singular voice in this body of work. I developed a symbolic and emotive visual vocabulary that speaks about how I have been shaped both spiritually and emotionally, through my exposure and my journey of self-healing. I will discuss in this thesis how important it was for me to use both the shape of the work, and the medium underscored by the intimacy of mark-making to create a narrative that illustrated my personal and ongoing trek to overcome the obstacles beyond my control and to use those events as inspiration for not only my work but who I am today.

## Introduction

My intimate familiarity with substance abuse served as a guide for the development of my voice in this body of work. Responding critically to the impulsiveness and frustration that I have found to be intrinsic to the characteristics expressed by those individuals exposed to traumatic environments and events. Referencing back to contemporary culture, I also incorporated as important elements, found images from pop culture. In addition, I created these images in pairs or with a binary system because such a system underscores the dichotomy of the public face of victims and the private angst and damage under the surface. Using graphic images of public and private as well as past and present decontextualized what we tend to assume about people and instead creates new dialogue and meaning related to my personal experiences. I focused on the construction of object-based art that creates the illusion of space through layering and mark making. The space and imagery allows for a type of narrative within this difficult subject. These paintings and woodcuts intentionally contain a sense of energy that speaks to my emotive connection to the concepts through my strong use of color and bold compositional structure.

## Contextual Influences

As an undergraduate, I began a series of collages called "*The Accumulation of Time*", that were the centerpiece for my undergraduate work. Formally, this series is an exploration of binary layering thorough the use of color and texture. It references the large archive of found paper materials that both inspired and motivated my creation of the collages. I found that nuggets of visual stories were formed and subsequently narrated by marks, color, directional shapes, and forms layered in a complex compositional structure. This blending of material, process, and

expression created a sense of spontaneity in the final piece. These works also afforded me the opportunity to weave in my personal narrative throughout the work. In the aftermath of personal trauma past actions, obsessions and the process of enduring loss become substantial and encompassing, almost overwhelming for anyone who has experienced it. In addition to the impact of abuse, victims are also subjected to distortions of perception and time, mostly as a result of survivor fight or flee response. It creates a surreal foundation for both memory and trigger responses to everyday situations and experiences. I am interested in creating an intersection of experience, memory, and personal interpretation and how they seem to be both at odds and interconnected. I was inspired to pursue this body of work as a result of an event I experienced during time in “rehab” for my own brush with substance abuse. During that time, a story was told to the participants. The storyteller talked about how every personal narrative has three sides: what happened, what you think happened, and those things that happened in-between those polar points. This concept assisted in my eventual creation of a platform for my own binary storytelling. This is my focus and where I find the greatest influences for my work: The narrative ambiguity that allows a distortion of time and place, which invites personal response. Throughout my continued healing journey, these layers of assumptions, interpretations, actions, and lulls have created a radius of both constructiveness and destructiveness that this work emulates.

## **Shape and Form**

### Circle Panels

Circles forms and shapes have been used and interpreted as never ending cycles of beginning and ending. Although often used for that reason, I am also drawn to circle’s constant rhythm of perpetual motion, which I feel keeps me creatively grounded. The binary directional

quality of the circle creates a sense of balance that helps me order my composition by affording me the opportunity to take advantage of its constraining boundary while also taking advantage of its relentless energy. I am able to move my narrative in and out of the structure its permeable edges, making it a natural selection for this body of work.

Within these *tondos*, I wove a visual story on the revival of past experiences, using ubiquitous iconic symbols as a way of reinventing the event while creating that ambiguity between what happened and what I thought occurred. As with any survivor, there is a great deal of comfort in knowing the outcome before it even happens and regardless of its toxicity or healthy influence. Creating connections to times past and present allows me to cite common references and generate a sense of nostalgia for the viewer. I use that interplay in order to create areas of conceptual interest within the formal landscape, underscoring my exploration of the binary relationship between victim and observer. It is this structural game of hide and seek, the public, and private warring within every survivor, that works its way out in the art. My responses during the process of creation, were immediate. Each new addition of material or mark, allowed me to play my own devil's advocate, while concurrently creating a visual comfort zone. This binary approach to the use of the *tondo* form underscores the response/process and creates a structure to the visual alignment of each piece thereby connecting them through a visual journey of space and time.

## Shaped Panels

Shaped panels also lend themselves to this discussion and I was motivated by the idea of free floating, organic shapes moving along a wall that activated the binary nature of negative and positive space. Surface and placement now extended off the picture plane and into the physical



environment. Continuing to work with intuitive mark making, color relationships and a variety of imagery and materials, all key components in the tondos, found their place in the shaped panels as well. I was influenced by as well as gravitated toward these forms as a result of my relationship with a professor whose mentorship made a profound difference in the development of my visual vocabulary and storytelling. Paul Martyka was a central figure in my undergraduate education and I was especially drawn to his work. In his “Concertation with an Echo” I was drawn to the formal possibilities of two-dimensional work that I would pursue in my own work. In this series of hand printed, cut paper collages (Figure 1 and Figure 2), I could see a way to enlarge elements of my early explorations and create connections between materials and concepts. The phenomenon of clusters of visual information on the substrate not only allowed for visual variation, they afforded me the opportunity to explore my conceptual interest in the cycles of trauma, choices, and consequences. Similar to his formal approach to color, composition, shape, and form, I worked through the use of layers of acrylic paint and print generated material to create a sense of narrative that pushed against traditional interpretation of time and place. Shaped forms interconnected in unique ways is a shared component of both of our work. (Figure 4). Having once been a solid presence in my day-to-day existence, his impact, his life, and his death, are reflected in the construction of my shaped forms that both honor him in formal terms and within my own personal movement from his mentorship to my own form of expression.

In addition to Martyka, Elizabeth Murry is another direct influence. In an example of her work, *Sunshine*, (Figure 3), Murray explores depth and the illusion of depth, bringing to the foreground my interest in binary thinking. The push and pull between the idea and the end products references a kind of “black & white” perspective: almost two-sides of the same coin. Her work directly connects with my exploration of the ambiguity of the past and present.

Murray's use of bold color and dynamic line construction on a shaped surfaces, serves to organize the imagery in a contemporary and engaging composition. This use of space and edge emphasizes the ambiguity of the environment and the narrative qualities of her concept. This focus inspired me to become intimately aware of using space and concept in a similar fashion. Murray states, "My paintings are often strange, and sometimes show me a side of myself – a violence and physicality that scares me. It's not always pleasant or easy. I don't always like it, and really when I do them, it's a journey."<sup>(1)</sup> Corrine Robbins in her article, *Elizabeth Murray: Deconstructing Our Interiors* correctly addresses the same point of interest that I have in Murray's work, "Her 'journey' on our walls, besides formal pleasures, offers insights into our own contemporary inner world."<sup>(2)</sup> In particular, the mention of journey is what fascinates me the most. Most importantly, her idea concerning process as a physical thing, relates specifically to my own process which inevitably results in the creation of an atmosphere that exudes off the wall and envelops the viewer.

Frank Stella's work also uses shape, color, and form in ways that have always excited me. The elegant simplicity of his composition has an understated way of engaging the viewer. One of personal favorites is *Wolfeboro III* (Figure 4). The vibrant, fluorescent color and geometric substrate is bold. The layers and stacks of visual information found below the surface mirror my concept of binary. Their movement off the wall inspired me to venture into three-dimensional solutions. Stella also describes process in a manner that I also share, "I guess I was born with a structural or formal instinct and the best way that I could express it at the time I came onto the scene was in a somewhat rigid manner. I guess I'm basically a more rigid personality. So it wasn't a very conscious choice; that the way I like to put things together."<sup>(3)</sup> This very binary approach to the way he creates his art; rigid versus flexible and organic versus

geometric, inspired a similar dichotomy in my work; clarity versus ambiguity, and static versus movement.

## Small Woodcuts

*Every Parking Ticket Ever* installation is built from many small individual woodcuts.

Creating prints and art with these forms reflects my inner obsession for the subtractive process of woodcutting as well as the feel of the wood, the sound of the knife, and look of the marks on the surface of the block. This process also affords me a means to explore my interest in the concept of public and private surfaces. I relied on imagery from earlier work that was based on intuitive mark making and created stencils that again reflect my interest in a binary approach to imagery. In addition to the woodcuts, I also created another layer of visual information with screen-printed colored reliefs. Forming all these little gems of mixed media pieces into an installation gave me the opportunity to explore the space on the wall and create visual tension between and around each of the pieces making them both cohesive and yet individual; A more animated approach to displaying the woodcut. Paul Martyka's approach to developing relationships between his artworks influenced my choice to explore non-traditional materials as well as innovative ways to use this medium. Martyka believed you should rise about your abilities and skill levels and explore processes. If the work "called" for three-dimensional approach then you taught yourself how to make it that way, and the resolution would present itself in the end. I chose these woodcuts with the same thought in mind. The result was this installation that reflected my personal journey; a display of a community of parts that created a unified whole.

## **Atmosphere of An Explosion**

Despite preconceptions of how the work in my exhibit would be displayed, the process of installing the work caused changes to the layout. Once I was working in the space, I was able to clearly identify the different bodies of work and how they might speak to each other. Each body is capable of being experienced by itself, but when hung in a community with each other, an atmosphere began to build that I found ultimately more compelling. The installation process involved a series of spatial transformations of physical relationships between images that ultimately resulted in a stronger presentation. “Every Parking Ticket Ever”, consisting of 42 woodcut blocks, was originally organized in a horizontal line. Once it was installed in the space, both the concept and the visual attributes of the individual pieces demanded reconsideration and I decided to use a more animated format. In the future, I hope to create work that is all in a similar realm.

## **Conclusion**

“You can look at a painting for a whole weekend then never think of it again. You also look at a painting for a second and think about it for the rest of your life,”<sup>(4)</sup> a credo that Martyka imparted upon me. This was a revolutionary concept for me and it has given me the freedom to work the visual problem every day and to accept the conscious and unconscious choices I make in its creation. This body of work is only the beginning of my journey to explore options and challenges previously unconsidered. It allowed me to confront my fears and the negative impact of previous trauma. Reflecting on my graduate experience allowed me understand the process of loss, possession and that never ending thing called change. Through the journey that was my thesis I gained the experience of losing assumptions, weakness and self-deprecating tendencies and in return gaining patience, empathy and an experience I now possess and that will carry into my work and life as a creative problem solver.

## **Bibliography**

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## Appendix



**Figure 1** Paul Martyka, *I*, hand printed/hand-cut paper collage, 2013



**Figure 2** Paul Martyka, *Second Chance*, hand printed/hand-cut collage, 2016



**Figure 3** Elizabeth Murray, *Sunshine*, oil on canvas, 1993



**Figure 4** Frank Stella, *Wolfeboro III*, fluorescent alkyd paint on canvas, 1966



**Figure 5** (right) Sarah Kinard, *Paper Cut*, 36"x36", collage, 2018  
(left) Sarah Kinard, *Rug Burn*, 36"x36", collage, 2018





**Figure 6** Sarah Kinard, *Paper Cut*, 36"x36", collage, 2018



**Figure 7 (detail)** Sarah Kinard, *Paper Cut*, 36"x36", collage, 2018



**Figure 8** Sarah Kinard, *Rug Burn*, 36"x36", Collage, 2018





**Figure 9 (detail)** Sarah Kinard, *Rug Burn*, 36"x36", Collage, 2018



**Figure 10** Sarah Kinard, *Hang Nail*, 38x24", acrylic paint on shaped panel, 2018



**Figure 11** Sarah Kinard, *Bed Sores*, 40"x38", acrylic paint on shaped panels, 2018





**Figure 12** Sarah Kinard, *Every Parking Ticket Ever*, mixed media installation, 2018





**Figure 13** Sarah Kinard, *Every Parking Ticket Ever (Details of installation)*, mixed media installation, 2018