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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MASTERS THESIS

By

Sarah E. Laveck

July 18, 2002

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## INTRODUCTION

### Thesis Proposal:

The purpose of this thesis is to develop a visual language inspired by microscopic organic life forms. I will do this by creating and viewing slides underneath a microscope. From the microscope I will visually record what inspires me from that microscopic world. I will then use those drawings for inspiration and create paintings based on those life forms. Ultimately creating for myself a visual language of forms that I use to communicate artistically.

Along with the scientific research of creating and viewing slides on the microscope, I will research abstract expressionists and color field artists like Helen Frankenthaler, Georgia O'Keeffe, the early works of Jackson Pollock, and Lee Krasner. I will use this research to determine how I use color and form as part of my visual language and how I express myself through it.

In this body of work my first goal was to look at microscopic living things. To do this, I purchased a basic microscope and began to utilize the pre-made slides as well as ones that I made myself of living things. My goal in doing this was to try to make the connection between different living things and the basic building blocks of life. I began noticing that there were some basic organic forms that were consistent among living organisms. These were the forms I began to draw and paint.

I had three other goals in doing this body of research. The second goal was to work in acrylic paint. I chose acrylic paint because it is less toxic than other paints and it is a fast drying medium which would allow for easy transport to and from my off campus

studio and school. And lastly, acrylic is a medium I hadn't used much and I wanted to see what I could do with it and how far I could push the medium.

The third goal I had was to work in a style that was different yet related to what I had done in the past. The fourth goal I had set out to explore was the issue of space in my work and how I should address it.

## NEW IDEAS

As I was getting started I made a list of ideas or things I wanted to begin sketching from the microscope. The list included plant life, water samples from various sources, human bodily fluid, skin, fingernails and hair. As stated in my introduction some of these slides were pre-made and some I created.

Immediately, I thought of looking at blood and doing portraits of friends and family. One problem was that no one wanted me to prick his or her finger and I couldn't even prick my own finger. So, that idea was scratched. I decided to concentrate on plant life, saliva, hair and skin, as my samples were more easily obtained.

In my early paintings I experimented with a watered down acrylic, layering, creating a seamless blend of colors. I began with expanding the possibilities of the acrylic paint by adding Goldens synthetic polymer medium in gloss and matte to my acrylic paint. This has allowed me to work in rich glazes and achieve the look of an oil painting. It has really been quite fascinating and a huge learning experience for me to experiment with these different blending techniques.

One challenge in the work I am presenting and in the work I have created in the past is depicting the illusion of space in my paintings. I have struggled to decide if I should render the shallow space of the microscopic forms that inspire me or if I should exaggerate that space to appear much deeper. I tend to combine the shallow space and the deep space, the rendered volumetric forms with the flat graphic forms. I seem to be fascinated by their relationship and struggle to make them successful in the same pictorial space. Some of the possibilities that I have thought about for achieving the illusion of

space in the round format is the use of gradients, the idea of a tube or tunnel like affect in the background, and using a variety of sized and shaped organic forms that diminish in size and fade in intensity as they go back into space. This technique of creating the illusion of depth wasn't developed by me it's been used for hundreds of years, I have just applied it to the abstract realm and my own unique visual language. As I have been struggling with volumetric and flat objects in the same work I have enjoyed experimenting with the play of soft and hard edges, texture and smooth paint, and thick and thin areas in the same painting. I have also been experimenting with different types of mark making, using things other than a brush or palette knife to apply my paint. I have been printing on the canvases and boards, using my hands, cardboard, spray paint and tin cans. This experimentation has really opened the door for me to visually begin to let go of the tightly rendered volumetric forms and replace them with more basic elements like: lines, shapes and forms in space. These forms truly reflect the painting process and they seem to have a more raw energetic feeling. This exploration has been a huge breakthrough and has been my major discovery in my own artwork (and in myself).

I struggled early on working with acrylic paint trying to achieve the results I desired. I wanted to layer like watercolor, with washes and in some areas and in others I wanted to build up an impasto (a thick, rich, buttery, texture). I had success with this in oil paint. I wanted to work and have a better understanding of acrylic paint for a number of reasons. I wanted first and foremost to concentrate on something different, although related, to my undergraduate work. I wanted to work with a safe, fast drying, and easy cleanup medium that was a little outside of my comfort level. These qualities have helped with my off campus studio situation, especially in the beginning of my research



when I had to transport my paintings back and forth from campus every two weeks. I experienced a degree of paint consistency I liked by using Golden's Gloss Polymer Medium. I used the medium to increase the fluidity and texture of the acrylic paint.

Another problem I ran into during my exploration with the possibilities of achieving space and working with acrylic paint was that my color relationships and compositions became a secondary concern and were ultimately suffering. This was only remedied by drawing and sketching a lot. Those basic visual relationships I once saw in my head were fading as I was struggling to develop a new style, related to my past, but definitely in my future. My color relationships were unsuccessful as well, I realized I was so concerned with experimental mark making possibilities and different mediums that my color choices were becoming arbitrary and unsuccessful. The first step I took in alleviating that problem was to severely limit my once limitless palette.

My inner struggle from complexity toward simplicity in my artwork has been also a quest in my life. As I look out the window of my studio to the rolling hills, wooded forestland, farmland, and houses spotted here and there on the hills, I notice the calmness I long for and dread at the same time. The simplicity of the forms and their relationships to one another are so fluid so basic, and yet so quiet. As in my artwork simplicity has been a thing I have strived for, somewhat unsuccessfully. Could it be that the simple would require more thought more inner searching for meanings that do not want to be uncovered? It is easier, for me, to become so complex in life and my expression of it in art that I seem to be running away from the true soul of my work, my true soul.

*"One of the most tragic things I know about human nature is that all of us tend to put off living. We are all dreaming of some magical rose garden over the horizon-*

*instead of enjoying the roses that are blooming outside our windows today.” – Dale Carnegie.<sup>1</sup>*

It's easy to paint what is natural, comfortable. I have been searching for simplicity of the paint, the soul of it, how it reacts with water, how it reacts with medium, how it reacts with a simple palette, simple ground. Painting for painting's sake for the pure simple beauty of its texture, translucency, opaqueness, and illusionary qualities is not as easy as it looks. It's like opening up my soul and searching for my true self, the raw, bare bones, nitty gritty me. And sometimes opening up that inner self erupts a lot of inner struggle and conflict between what is comfortable and easy, my complexity, or what is raw, untamed, somewhat scary to my inner psyche, calmness and simplicity. In life it is so easy to fill your day, week, month, year, life with things that you classify as priorities and after years and years of this constant stress and cluttered days you begin to lose sight of the simple things in life, what really matters. Sometimes what your heart and soul longs for is scary to your more rational mind. Painting has always been therapeutic for me and I think I have reached a very important and insightful turning point as an artist and in my life. The simple yet important structures in art, like the elements of art: line, shape, color, texture, value, space and form can be related to the basic elements to sustain life, so basic we seem to forget, oxygen, water, sunlight, nourishment, shelter, protection, family, and love. Things like our quest for greater socio-economic status and possessions often cloud what life is really about. That has been true of my life. The past six months I have been trying to change that.

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<sup>1</sup> Dale Carnegie, "Quotes and Quips, Insights on Living the Seven Habits," Franklin Covey Corporation, USA. 90.

*“All men should strive to learn before they die what they are running from, and to, and why.” – James Thurber<sup>2</sup>*

Making a less chaotic life for myself would force me to develop stronger relationships with people, something that scares me a bit, because there is a greater chance for those people to have more of an effect over me or chance for them to take their love or friendship away. I have found that if I am busy and constantly goal oriented I limit the relationships I build with others thus limiting my potential to deal with feelings regarding those relationships whether good or bad.

*“ There is more to life than increasing its speed.” – Mohandas K. Gandhi<sup>3</sup>*

The quote by Gandhi can be true of painting. A great painting can be created with a limited palette, painting for painting sake, and a less chaotic, cluttered composition. This journey has been a helpful one in my life and art. I've learned the only way to live is to live. I need to let my guard down and take risks. In the past, although I painted in an abstract manner, I struggled to control the way the paint was applied. Now I am letting the paint speak for itself, letting it take on a life of its own.

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<sup>2</sup> James Thurber, “Quotes and Quips, Insights on Living the 7 Habits” Franklin Covey Corporation, USA. 39.



## EXPLANATION OF ARTWORK

*“Every painting might appear to be different from the next when it is actually part of a body of work that is similar in feel and approach.” - Helen Frankenthaler<sup>4</sup>*



Figure 1. *Study for Inside Out.*

In figure 1, I wanted to diverge from the previous drawings and sketches that I had been creating. Up until this point I was still concerned with form and line creating something somewhat recognizable to explain everything to the viewer instead of just letting the essence of the painting and the concept out, in a fresh, not overworked or analytic manner. It was also at this time that I started to look back at the work of the artists that inspired me to become a painter in the first place. Artists like O’Keeffe, Frankenthaler, Krasner, and Pollock gave me perspective on some of the ideas I had been struggling with.

At this point I also began to explore the possibilities of not using the circle (that I had originally set out to use) as the format for my composition. I also felt getting away from the circle allowed me to free up my drawing and painting. In this work I strived to suggest the circle. I played with a figure/ground space relationship and color scheme, something that directly influenced untitled #3.

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<sup>3</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, “Quotes and Quips, Insights on Living the 7 Habits” Franklin Covey Corporation, USA. 63.

<sup>4</sup>Helen Frankthaler, “After Mountains and Sea: Frankenthaler 1956-1959” by Julia Brown, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, NY. 36.

*“Very often, the artist spells out for the viewer what should instead be pieced together consciously or subconsciously. A painting, no matter how labored it is, should have a kind of immediacy, a freshness and shorthand that leave it for the viewer to fill in the rest.”* (After Mountains and Sea: Frankenthaler 1956-1959).<sup>5</sup>

I wanted to break the circle open a little and kind of let it flow out and morph itself into the foreground and background. I deliberately used a cold gray neutral paper as the ground and I consciously tried to make the paper play less of a graphic negative space role as it had in some of my earlier drawings and sketches. It was also at this time I began to explore the possibilities of the diptych as being a play on inside, outside, positive and negative. I limited my palette accordingly to achieve this effect. I tried to focus on the line quality, the brush strokes and the way paint reacts naturally when it is applied to a ground using a paint tool. As in some of my earlier work I wanted to still keep some hint of drawing in the piece, so I drew into the acrylic paint with a water-soluble crayon. The line quality in this painting sketch is directly related to the strand like organic forms found in all living objects (part of my earlier research). This sketch was a breakthrough for me where I finally realized how all the pieces of what I wanted to do and achieve in the painting research came together.



Figure 2

In his painting sketch I was again working with breaking away from the circle format but still suggesting the circle in the pictorial space. I also focused on having a limited palette of

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<sup>5</sup>Helen Frankenthaler, “After Mountains and Sea: Frankenthaler 1956-1959.” by Julia Brown, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, NY. 36.

two colors plus white and working in a more minimal manner, keeping the composition simple. The energy this piece has comes from the intuitive brush marks and scrape marks on the paper. The limited palette helps not to distract from this raw energetic quality. Also the strong diagonals in the brush marks as well as the way they break out of the circle shape helps activate the space and add movement to the composition. The color though limited is attractive to me because the red and green compliment each other that, along with the strong diagonal lines make this painting very dynamic. The way in which the green was applied suggests a tunnel or cavernous space. This helps add depth as well as mystery of what that space holds.

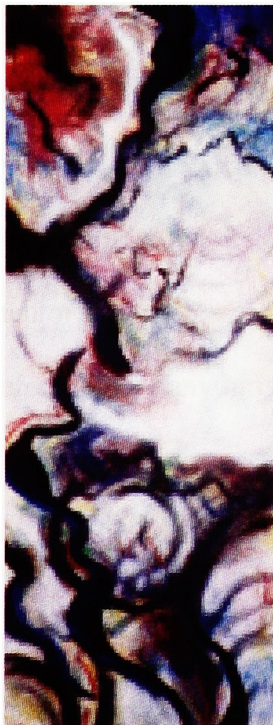


Figure 3.

I began making painting sketches experimenting with alternative ways to apply paint onto ground. I used a roller, spray paint, printed the ridges of a tin can, printed cardboard, and rings with jar lids. Combining these techniques with my biomorphic line quality and drawing-like approach to painting really began to jump-start my research of my self as an artist and an art maker. It opened my ideas to the different possibilities and how so much can be achieved by just playing. My sketches weren't labored, they were fresh and playful and I really enjoyed looking at them and exploring their surface



quality, space and line. I let myself go, loosened up, and let an artist take over. The scary thing was that I actually enjoyed the paintings I was producing that were less controlled. A point I thought I would never get to.

From these sketches and experiments I began this painting with one layer of paint put on with cans, cardboard, and a roller. Then I added another and another, some more defined line work than figure 1. And, of course some circular elements painted in an additive and subtractive way. Actually it was this piece that I realized how to repair one of my major stumbling blocks, my tendency toward chaos and excess. I used the black spray paint as an atmospheric tool in creating my line and the white spray paint as a more subtractive tool, deleting areas unnecessary to the overall flow and feel of the composition. This painting in that way also allowed to me to grow. Usually in my painting I reach a point where it just gels and then I go far beyond that point and overwork it. Suddenly it becomes a mess and I get discouraged, because I knew it started as something that really worked and my mind messed it up. I shared this with my mentor, Luvon Sheppard, and he helped me to slow down and take away, then get away, before adding anything. Then coming back to it and reflecting on whether it's finished or not.

The layers in this painting also play with the space, yet the black lines in the foreground seem flat or shallow in their space. I also began to think of color as value to achieve space. Using tints and shades as well as the original hue. This allows me to achieve space without tightly rendered organic forms. In this painting and as an artist I just said to myself, "so what". That is, I let myself just paint without as much thought and consideration of the exactness or meaning of each brush stroke. My painting can be

and have space at the same time, any attempt at me trying to spell that out to the viewer would take away its freshness, the natural quality of the paint, and I would fall into my old habits. Through my research of other artists this ambiguous space is something that Frankenthaler worked toward, as well.



Figure 4.

In this painting I consciously thought of my influences and what I had learned from the previous three paintings. I started with raw canvas

laid out on the floor of my studio. I enjoyed its texture and its natural color. I didn't want to destroy it. I had read that Frankenthaler used raw canvas and I loved the effect it gave to her paintings. But I was also concerned with its archival quality as well. So I primed the raw canvas with a clear polymer. In my undergraduate work I remembered watching films of various artists working in their studios, I was fascinated by the creative way they applied their paints to canvas. I was primarily fascinated with Jackson Pollack and Helen Frankenthaler. At the time the idea of not being able to completely control it (the paint) bothered me, scared me, I never would let myself go enough until this painting. I began to pour paint right on to the canvas laid out on the floor, letting the colors bleed naturally into one another; I became intoxicated by the affect. The look and feel of the paint was so enjoyable for me I didn't want to overwork my line, shape and form. I wanted some of that nice poured paint to have the spotlight. This is like having the things that matter

the most, the basic elements, have the spotlight, like in life, love and friendships are important. Like the other paintings in this body of work, it was rendered in unconventional ways (drawing on the canvas with water soluble crayon, staining, printing, and spray painting). This helped maintain the soul and atmospheric quality that the painting has.

Looking at this painting after time and throughout critiques I have realized the surrealistic quality of the atmosphere in the color and value. It is less cosmic and more surreal than the ones before it. I was curious and I looked back at my earlier undergraduate work, and I discovered I had some surrealistic characteristics like atmosphere, symbolism, fantasy, dream like, and ambiguous space. In this painting the expressive marks, natural flowing and blending paint, and color compliment crayon drawing. The modeled, stylistic, volumetric type drawing I had been drawn to in the past kind of leaked out in this piece, making it, to me, a more direct link to the symbolic nature of my undergraduate work. The symbolism in this work, as in others in my previous work is perceived to be somewhat sexual in nature. This I have concluded to be mostly subconscious on my part, because that is not my intent when I paint, these are forms that are inside of me and with a brush or drawing tool, I intuitively incorporate these forms into my art. These forms are derived from nature and through some rudimentary research with a microscope I have noticed similarity of basic organic form found in most living things. Therefore, the forms being perceived as sexual whether intentional or not is related to the realm of the biomorphic, something which I am drawn to.





Figure 5. *Inside Out*

In this painting I was directly influenced by figure 1. I enjoyed the play of inside and outside. In that drawing I was really drawn to the limited palette and the opposite foreground/background color scheme. I began this piece with that opposite color scheme in mind. I began to under paint each panel. The panel on the left had a red-orange circle in the center and a blue background with a pattern of red-orange circles painted over top. The panel on the right has an under painting of red-orange in the background and the circle is painted blue with an all over pattern of red-orange circles over top. From there I used the techniques of mark making and painting that I had come to discover in this overall body of work. In this piece I also wanted to push that inside out theme even more. I constructed this diptych out of two panels. The panel on the left has a circle cut out of the center and recessed about two inches from the surface. The panel on the right has a circle cut out of the center and the circle is protruding out about two inches.

Again, in this piece I played with different ways of applying paint to ground, using spray cans, rollers, printing on the panels, and drawing on them with crayon. I originally thought I might paint each panel tipped vertically, so that when they were pushed together they would create a more square composition. With the strong color and line work in this diptych I discovered early on by making them one long horizontal I could make them feel more restful, which would counter act the chaotic and expressive brush strokes.



Figure 6.

I began this painting in somewhat the same manner as figure 4, pouring paint onto fabric on my studio floor. I had painted on a cotton fabric like this in the

past and when it was gessoed it felt rough and bumpy like texture coat paint. The fabric's original color was a deep rich orange. The gesso didn't completely cover up the orange color and left a hint of the hue behind. As I had in the previous work in this exploration I limited my palette to three colors. I also incorporated the circular into the composition. This painting was completed after September 11, a tragic day in our nation's history, and this helped me keep it simple. There was no struggle to fill it with lines and marks that weren't important to the whole. The experience of September 11, made me realize, as I am sure it did others, the simple basic things that are important in life and to enjoy them. So that is why this one, for me, wasn't as chaotic, was less torture to paint, less push and pull than the rest. It is unfortunate that it took such a horrific event to really make me realize what's important in life and my artwork, but it is so.



## CONCLUSION

In this body of work I explored the possibilities of organic forms and lines in my work. I struggled to develop a new visual language in a new media, acrylic. I also struggled with the expressions and inner feelings, emotions that began to pour out intuitatively onto the painting surface. I grappled with my tendency towards chaos in life and art and I tried to go for something less chaotic, but just as stimulating.

I have achieved the goals I have set out for myself in this research and I have grown tremendously artistically and psychologically. I have used various techniques of applying acrylic paint to achieve the results I wanted. I worked outside my comfort zone in my choice of media, technique, and format. I have developed a new style different in feel, yet related to my past work. The new visual language I developed can be referred to as cosmic, microscopic, and purely expressive I feel that my work can no longer be labeled as completely an expression of biomorphic form. I have studied the works, interviews, and biographies of artists that I admire and feel have influenced my direction in this body of work. And lastly, I feel that in this piece of writing, I have pushed my self to analyze my soul as an artist.

## APPENDIX

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