Portraits in flight

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

PORTRAITS IN FLIGHT

by

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March 17, 1996
Approvals

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Introduction

The title of my thesis work was "Portraits in flight". The concept behind my thesis work was to create a textile medium which gave the expression of movement, appreciation, beauty and joy that can be found in life. This was important to me because I had just overcome a life threatening car accident. The accident caused me to question many aspects of my life. Through my healing, I found meaning and appreciation. I wanted my art work to visually represent my celebration of life.

Developing the Concept

I wanted to produce three dimensional shapes as opposed to two dimensional, because I felt it would express more movement, vitality and stimulate individual senses to bring out emotions.

I envisioned tunnels of fabric that I painted beforehand, with large fans blowing air through the tunnels. In my mind this gave the impression of wind blowing through open fields of flowers. I tried to imagine how one would feel standing in the fabric tunnels. I decided there had to be a cleaner, more defined structure, to give more strength and have a stronger impact upon the viewer. The image I envisioned lacked dynamics. It gave a weak impression, not one of graceful movement. I was at a point where I wanted to celebrate life and represent it in my art work. I began to search my environment for ideas for a clearer concept.
One afternoon, one of the S.A.C. Professors was showing a movie about a man (Oscar Bailey) who built very large kites. The impact of the movie was extremely inspiring to me. Oscar's kites moved through the sky like graceful birds. At that moment I decided to create graceful kite-like shapes which would express movement and grace. Now I knew I wanted to create three dimensional painted shapes. The shapes would have to be suspended from above to give a strong impact like Oscar's kites gave. However, I did not want each figure to move; I wanted each shape and painting to give the impression of movement.

In order to describe the process involved with my thesis project, I divided this paper into the following sections:

1. Developing my ability to design three dimensional shapes.
2. Developing and producing the structures.
3. Mediums used to paint.
4. Determining and painting the subject.
5. Combining the structure and paintings into sculptures.
6. Hanging the finalized sculptures as one cohesive unit.

**Developing My Ability to Design Three Dimensional Shapes**

I developed my three dimensional ability by experimenting in two of my classes prior to starting my thesis. Initially, experimenting in three dimensional art was very difficult because I had previously worked only two dimensionally. I had to let go of my insecurities of whether my art would be a success, failure or
attractive to the viewers eyes. I began to understand the difference between putting the fabric and structure together verses developing them as one piece. I developed my ability to produce three dimensional art by first ripping the silk paintings along the grain of the fabric into strips. I then rewove the strips to make the marriage of the structure and fabric more solid, complete and natural. To attach the fabric to a 1/8" round reed structure, each strip was wrapped around part of the reed at each end and secured with glue.

**Developing and Producing the Structures**

In order to develop the structures I began to produce models for possible thesis shapes. I tried not to be judgemental while I was creating them because I didn't want to endanger the natural flow of creativity. The model structures were made with 1/8" round reed that was dry and coiled giving them a natural curve. The model structures were crudely formed and secured with masking tape. I tried to work with the natural curve found in the round reed. I felt the smooth natural curves of the round reeds represented the flow I saw in Oscar's kites.

While creating the structures, I would listen to music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Marcus Allen's, "Quiet Moments." I began to realize how much this music influenced and encouraged the shapes I created. The "Quiet Moments" is very natural flowing music and has an oriental feel to it. The music helped me to create smooth flowing pieces. Mozart's music is energetic, playful, soft and full of life. This helped to bring out the creativity in me. Some shapes/
forms were inspired from what I envisioned when I listened to the music, such as violins, flutes and oboes.

Initially I tried using a 1/2" round reed to produce the full scale pieces. It wasn't easy to go from a six inch model to a six foot piece. I found the 1/2" reed was much too difficult to work with and did not react in a similar fashion to the small, spring-like 1/8" reed that I had used in the models. I experimented with copper tubing, 1/2" steel rods, laminated wood and plastic tubing. None of these materials gave the effect I was looking for. I wanted a round material that would bend and react like the natural curves found in the 1/8" round reed but would also be strong enough to handle the weight of the full scale size.

With support from a metal sculptor (Louis Barrett), we experimented with 1/4" steel rods. When the steel rods were bent around a garbage can, we achieved the same natural curve seen in the round reed and the rods maintained their strength. I drew rough sketches of each model to scale (every 1/2" on the model equaled one foot on the rods), so that we knew how long to cut each steel rod. We then bent the rods into the modeled shapes. In order to weld the joints, we clamped the ends of the rods together with vise grips. My friend and I decided that it would make the most sense for him to weld, for the following reasons: 1. Welding the small rods together is one of the more difficult welds; 2. There wasn't sufficient time for me to learn to weld before my thesis show. After the welding was completed I grinded, filed and sanded each piece. The pieces were then painted with a flat black Rustoleum™ paint which was mixed with one third paint thinner. The structures were now complete.

During the construction of the shapes I learned how to observe the quality of curves and lines of each piece. For example, I learned how to detect a dead or
flat spot in the metal shapes. Even more importantly, I learned how to work three dimensionally.

**Mediums used to Paint**

After completing a series of pastel drawings in one of my classes, I switched mediums to water colors and French dyes on a silk fabric, since I was blending pastels in a way that was better suited for paint. At this point I had little painting experience. During my second year of graduate school, I spent a lot of time painting on silk. As a beginner at silk painting I picked flowers that had fairly simple clean lines as subjects. Silk paintings are vibrant with texture from the fabric and have brilliant color from the dyes. The more I painted, I realized that silk would be the other medium in my thesis.

At the same time my professors and I realized that when I painted on a large scale, I was able to tap into more of my natural artistic ability. So, I continued to work on a larger scale, two by three feet being the smallest piece.

**Determining and Painting the Subject**

I decided to use flowers as my subject because flowers are full of color and life. Even though they don't actually move, their vitality expresses images of beautiful movement and these were the qualities I wanted to bring out in my art work.
I drew pastels of fresh exotic flowers, because I have always been touched by their intense beauty. Flowers have such incredibly rich color and form, so I tried to capture their vitality in my paintings and drawings.

During this time period I was reading the writings by Daisoku Ikeada. In some of Mr. Ikeada's writings, he compares human life to flowers and their blossoming. Here are two quotes from Mr. Ikeada:

"The pure lotus blossom, which grows in a muddy swamp, also symbolizes the emergence of Buddhahood within the life of the ordinary person." 

"The keynote of this culture is the everlasting flowering of human life." 

Daisoku Ikeada's writings put into words the abstract feelings I had when drawing and painting these flowers.

I wanted to pick a single flower for my thesis, so I bought a half dozen exotic flowers and completed a photo session. I hired a photographer to ensure quality photos. A black backdrop was used to enhance the clarity of each petal in a flower. Since I worked with fresh flowers in the past I knew the pro and cons in using them. With fresh flowers one can see all of the small details. The color and shape or lines are brilliant but both of these characteristics fade very quickly (within 48 hours of buying them). This time constraint made completing


many large paintings from the same flower difficult. I decided to use a combination of fresh (for details) and photos for color and shape.

From the photos, I picked the five star lily for the following reasons. The shape in the photo was simple enough for me to work with and had graceful lines. The colors were exciting and appealing to my senses: shades of crimson with white in the petals and different greens in the leaves and stems. I also liked the strong impact the black backdrop gave the flower.

I picked one photograph of the five star lily and separated it into seven sections (see figure 1a and 1b). Each section was a 6 foot by 40 inch painted panel. In order to scale the photo to a six foot panel, I enlarged the picture on an overhead projector onto a wall to get it to the desired size. I then traced the outlines of the flower on paper taped to the wall. I used these tracings as a guide for the silk panels.

I used gutta as the resist to trace the outlines onto silk. I experimented with different types of resist and had found that gutta worked the best. The gutta had a consistent thickness that gave me control in drawing the outlines of the flower.

The panels were painted in a three week period to achieve consistency in color, method, attitude and style. The first phase of painting was done with a paint brush and misting the painted silk with a water spray bottle. I diluted the dyes 1:1 with water. My approach was to paint small dots of dye instead of long brush strokes (more of a impressionist style). I would paint part of a panel and then let it dry. I would then mist it with the water bottle and let dry. I would repeat this cycle until I felt the brush phase was completed. The panels were steamed to set the colors and dry cleaned to remove the gutta. Next, each panel
Figure 1a. A color scan of the original photograph used for my paintings.

Figure 1b. The photo broken into the seven sections for the panels.
was airbrushed with French dyes to enhance each piece. Misting was also used during the airbrush process. Each piece was steamed a final time to set the colors. I was now ready to combine the fabric and metal structures into cohesive sculptures.

Combining the Structures and Paintings into Sculptures

Before I could combine the structure with the fabric panels, I had to match each panel with a steel structure. I accomplished this by pairing up panels and structures that had similar curves and by matching up a steel structure that would have the best space for each panel. I picked a plane on each structure that enhanced the shape that was painted on a panel.

The paintings were ripped and rewoven into a fabric similar to the art work I experimented with in my classes. Each silk panel was ripped into three inch strips vertically and then steamed pressed. I constructed one sculpture at a time while suspending it from the ceiling. The ripped strips from the panels were used as the warp in the weave. I used silk mesh as the weft because it was strong enough to hold the painted strips together and transparent enough to allow the viewer to see the painted silk strips behind them (see figure 2). This helped give a nice smooth surface. In retrospect I believe a cotton mesh would have worked just as well.

In order to attach the silk strips to the metal structure, a high grade white glue (Sobo Glue) was used. The glue was easy to use because it had a good adhesive quality that held the silk strips in place during construction. The strips
Figure 2. A close-up of one of the sculptures showing the silk gauze weft.
could easily be lifted up and moved many times without losing the adhesive qualities of the glue. The glue dried clear which helped give a professional finish to the pieces.

I was very surprised at the durability of the silk. I found that I was able to reglue and reattach the silk pieces many times when needed without damaging the integrity of the silk. While constructing the first piece I decided to add a thick gold metallic thread between each silk strip (weft and warp). The gold added to the richness of each piece (see figure 3).

After each piece was constructed I used a black permanent textile marker to clean up the appearance where the metal and silk strips met. Wherever the fabric was glued to the metal I painted it black with the marker. This helped give each piece a clean finished groomed look.

**Hanging the Finalized Sculptures into one Cohesive Unit**

It was my intent to suspend each of the seven sculptures from a ceiling so that they would hang similarly to a mobile. The difference would be that each sculpture would be hung individually within the group. The gallery at R.I.T. had 26' ceilings, so I ordered twenty four foot scaffolding in order to hang my sculptures. My sculpture were suspended form the ceiling with clear monofillament 50-100 weight thread for strength, durability and safety. It may have been a bit of an overkill, but I didn't want to take a chance of any of my sculpture falling on someone's head. Also, the translucent thread did not detract from the sculptures.
Figure 3. A photo of one of the sculptures showing the gold thread woven in the weft and warp.
Before I started to hang my show I knew vertically (in relationship to each other) which way I wanted to hang each sculpture. I didn't know horizontally (in relationship to each other) or in dealing with each sculpture's own axis. Fortunately, I had a wonderful group of friends who visually helped me hang the show. The hanging process went very smoothly because a friend of mine had patience and experience using scaffolding. The hanging process took six hours to complete. I was very pleased with the placement of each sculpture. The sculptures could be hung many different ways but I felt it was the best arrangement for the space occupied. We then directed light beams through the sculptures to illuminate the beauty of the satin silk and the rich colors in the paintings (see figures 4).

The Conclusion

The title of my work was "Portraits in flight". My work celebrates life by expressing movement, appreciation, beauty and joy. It was named Portraits because it was a portrait of myself (perhaps to some; a portrait in abstract/subconscious terms). To express life I felt that it was important to exhibit movement (as in life is not stationary, it is always moving or changing). It was also important to have the portraits or sections of a portrait suspended like a kite in the air to represent flight, a travel in one's life.

As explained earlier I first built the steel structures out of 1/4" rods. Then the seven panels were painted with French dyes and ripped into strips. The strips were then rewoven with silk gauze within each steel structure. The ends
Figure 4. Front view of my thesis show in the gallery.
of the silk were attached to the steel with glue. The seven structures were then suspended in the air from the rafters to form one cohesive environmental sculpture.

It is important to explain the significance of the subject chosen for the paintings and how the actual shapes were derived. Each panel painted was a section of a five star lily. A flower was chosen as the subject to represent a human life. Like human beings, no flower is identical. The blossoming of a flower represented the blossoming and beauty that can be found in life. I realize this concept is not new but hopefully expressed in a new refreshing manner. The metal structures were very graceful and organic but some of them had long tails that formed sharp points. The points were not always received in a positive manner. In the long run the points were a little dangerous when produced at the full scale size. At the time I was too close to the shapes to know why I wanted to create graceful shapes which sometimes ended in a sharp point. In retrospect I wanted to express a true or "realistic approach" to life: it's beauty and ugliness, it's pleasure and it's pain.

I believe this "realistic approach" enabled me to create art work of greater depth in contrast to shallow art work. I found that during my education at R.I.T. I had many experiences that helped me to express myself through my art at a much deeper and real level. My most significant experience was the life threatening car accident that happened to me at the end of my first year. It was emotionally difficult for me to deal with. It was such a traumatic experience that I used my art work to express myself in order to deal with my reality. From there I found out that expressing my true emotions through my art work created much stronger pieces. I also realized that one does not have to create pretty art work
for it to be beautiful, strong and powerful. Fortunately I was able to take a potentially devastating situation and use it to move forward as an artist and a person. These experiences aided in developing the title for my thesis.

The approach I took for the overall view of my thesis was one of experimentation. Since this was a body of art work for myself as opposed to a commission, I could experiment with my approach to producing it. Instead of planning every step ahead of time with each step a proven procedure, I developed a concept and worked with the raw materials. In a sense, I built my thesis using my instincts instead of an overly planned approach. Most dynamic art work comes from an individual's subconscious/instincts. Your subconscious can guide you in the right direction to create your best work. I worked this way in creating my thesis and found it worked well for me. My approach was experimental, and as with all experiments there is a risk factor involved. I felt that's what a thesis was all about.
Figure 5. A photo showing actual size of one of the sculptures.
Figure 6. A photo showing actual size of one of the sculptures.