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### Breaking free

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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

BREAKING FREE

by

Fatemah Alazmi

Date: December 2012

**Thesis Approval**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Written here is an account of my journey exploring and investigating a new artistic path. I showcase the ways in which my visual production is unique both within the field of art but also and more importantly is an imprint of my authorship and personality.

As an abstract expressionist painter interested in formalism, my artwork suggests a universal language of color and form. Colors and distinctive shapes come to form a great energy and dynamism. Through the effect of the process, whereby all these elements are combined, I have attempted to transcend the norms of formalism and express the very nature of freedom through the work of art. I also speak about the many motivations for my personal and artistic transformation, looking at the ways in which my background and personality affect my overall work. I chronicle some key changes in my stylistic transformation - one that is always of progress and process. In effect, this research incorporates the challenges and determinant factors that directly feed into the overall transformation of my work and intellectual views.

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## Breaking Free

By

Fatima Alazmi

### Life in Kuwait

I was born in Kuwait, a majority Muslim country located in the Arabian Gulf. I am proud that Kuwait is largely seen as the most Democratic of Gulf countries. Women in Kuwait are treated as equal to men, distinguishing our cultural progressiveness from those around us. Personally, I consider the women of Kuwait to be among the most emancipated in all Gulf nations; achieving positions of power and influence. Despite this, Kuwaiti society is, by and large, socially conservative primarily due to the strong religious base.

I was born in a family who followed more “classical” Arabian traditions. My normal stance is one staunchly opposed to this perspective, an opinion that has obviously been problematic my entire life. As a teenager, I could not understand some religious orders. To make things worse, some strict Arabian traditions contradicted the leniency of Islamic Laws. I first had objections to this paradox at a very young age. During this time, it was not easy to reject these traditions. People around me started to see me as a rebel. That did not stop me from believing in myself.

Art became my diary; a record of my thoughts and beliefs. Through this action I became recognized as an active artist. In my work I used a narrative component and symbols to comment about my life, freedom, and my objections to restrictions. I made sundry work in different media; drawing, oil painting and sculpture. I participated in several local juried exhibitions and I won prizes. Unfortunately my art was not welcome in my family or in the environment surrounding me since it went against Islamic rule to draw living things such as (people or animals). I decided to do what I believed in and I disregarded others’ objections.

Thus the title of this paper, “Breaking Free,” is the most appropriate phrase to use since it extends itself thematically throughout the length of this paper. As I turn to largely discussing artistic and personal (human) freedoms and truth, breaking free marks the turn to my fully

realized artistic transformation. It is a breaking free from convention, artistic rights and transformative art, politics, popular opinion and injustice.

### My Background in Art

I have been interested in art since childhood. For me, art is a language. It translates thoughts, words, and the immaterial as well – into drawing. I first pursued art as a hobby, but quickly turned it into a profession. As a result of this journey, I have acquired many skills. When I first began to work in art, it consisted mostly of “narrative” work that focused on my personal life and feelings. I use symbolism in my art in order to attract people and reveal the personal content.

In Kuwait, I was trained as a classical artist. Throughout my undergraduate studies at Kuwait’s College of Art Education I studied many classical genres: painting, drawing, metal work, ceramic and sculpture. I showed strong interest in painting and sculpture. Aside from studio art, I also studied Art History, Art Critique, and Modern Art. In Kuwait, I found myself interested in surrealism and romantic art. These schools allowed and encouraged me to create my own style. My paintings are full of mystery and shocking visuals. My foremost desire as an artist is to spread wonder and curiosity upon the viewer. As a result, my hope is that the audience will engage with the painting on a deeper level. After graduating school in Kuwait, I taught painting and drawing for five years in a high school. After this experience, I applied and was accepted to attend Kuwait’s Art and Design Department at Kuwait University. I worked as a Teaching Assistant (TA) and assisted in ‘survey’ courses and ‘studio’ courses. I worked side-by-side with Kuwait and American Professors for the full Teaching Assistantship. This position gave me a wealth of experience and encouraged me to continue my graduate work in the USA; where I awaited learning about less traditional forms of art.

### Traveling to the USA

During my first year as a graduate student, I experimented with many processes to find a new style. Doing this increased my understanding of contemporary art. During my period as a student in *Art Since 1950*, I witnessed and felt two distinct things come together: an increase in my understanding of contemporary art, and the meaning behind the freedom of expressing emotion. Through this interference grew my reverence for abstract expressionism; particularly

the work of Jackson Pollack. I copied and investigated one of Pollock's central pieces. I approached my investigation with my body and its sensations. Pollock mentioned once "What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event ... what matters always is the revelation contained in act"<sup>1</sup>. Pollock taught me to be spontaneous and recognize what it truly means to journey toward comprehending the work of art and that this just as important as the artwork itself. This inspiration naturally changed my view of art and set about redefining my definition of art and the artist.

## Exploring New Ideas

### Revolution

My determination to understand how art was changing for me during this process made me no less susceptible to natural human fears; the fear of trying something new, the fear of using new colors and forms, and of leaving behind my comfort zone of painting just narrative and figurative art. In spite of these fears, I threw all caution to the wind and asked myself: how will things begin and how will they end?

My first experimentation with abstract art was on stretched canvas and is titled *Revolution*<sup>2</sup>. First, I painted the background with an atmospheric gradation of light to dark in shades of greens and blues, giving the illusion of infinite space. I had applied this background previously on surrealist paintings using atmospheric gradations in landscapes and seascapes. The sky is important for me. It is a spiritual source as well implying infinity and mystery. I retained this feature of spiritual space and mystery in my new work. After finishing the background, I began to express my feelings directly on the canvas. In the beginning, I used contrasting intense colors because I wanted to show strong emotion and energy, so I chose light cadmium red with greens and blues. I blended colors to look abstract on one side and to gradually look representative of shapes on the other side. I created a shape that represents a ribbon moving in dynamic directions in endless space. This ribbon was not meant to be symbolic; merely a line of movement and energy.

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<sup>1</sup> Fineberg, Jonathan. 2011. *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press. (Fineberg 2011, 97)

<sup>2</sup> See "List of Illustrations," Figure 1, "Revolution"

I enjoyed the expression and movement of the first canvas, but required more room both physically and aesthetically. Space became a major concern. On a similar sized canvas, I set up a diptych that added considerably to my art by blending abstract expressionism with a self-portrait. *Revolution* was a personal revolution. It is my figure, my story, and a beginning in a new direction. The painting is also about my struggle to break old habits, get over myself and move forward. Emotionally, this piece was liberating. I created my own unique shapes and had the ability to choose alternative colors (mainly with figures). Inspired by Pollack's spontaneous movements (splashes and drips), distinct shapes and lines of ribbon were incorporated into my painting to achieve a similar affect. My work incorporates a sense of movement, demonstrating an object's response to a given force.

### In My Explorations

#### Expand

For this new project, I incorporated some of my prior techniques and forms but also sought to explore new avenues. I took apart the diptych of my former piece, to construe scale. I wanted to build a big canvas, engulfing the viewer in my emotions. Second, I eliminated the "figure" as the subject. My goal was to create a direct connection between painting and viewer.<sup>3</sup> I used the shapes of ribbons and spheres. The ribbons dynamically move from the very deep dark center of the painting, expanding until they reach the edges. They appear to be coming toward the viewer. Similarly, the spheres swim away from the center of the painting. The focus of this painting was more centric. My artistic intention was for the painting to give off an illusion of depth and infinite space. I wanted the objects to come from a mysterious place of endless space and expand toward the viewer. I also wanted the painting to take the viewer inside this deep space, to allow him or her to momentarily live through experience. *Expand* gives the viewer a sense of expansion. When I finished the painting, I turned the canvas forty-five degrees, making it diamond-like. I believe this was a success due to the inclusion of the diagonally shaped twisted ribbons that emphasized movement and made the painting appear much larger. The viewer's perception of this relationship is one where the artwork surrounds them, and thus fulfilling a goal of mine to create something more *realistic* that would come toward the viewers.

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<sup>3</sup> See "List of Illustrations," Figure 2, "Expand"

With that in mind, I expanded the artwork by placing real spheres on the ground in front of the painting. The spheres were made of hollow steel, and varied in sizes. I painted them using the same colors as in the painting. I emphasized the shades and light on the steel spheres. After I finished, I arranged them in front the painting, laying them out from the smallest to the largest. This arrangement automatically created a space around the viewer.

I found a common concept between my work and Frank Stella's relief paintings with the difference in application. "Stella gave the image a sense of being real, by breaking through the pictorial boundaries to coexist in our everyday space. He painted the metal reliefs to fuse the piece with life in a physical pictorial presence"<sup>4</sup>. Stella's expansiveness is still on the wall but in my work I expanded the objects and liberated them as separate units on the floor. My concept was to merge the space between them and the illusionistic space of the painting into one unit.

### Allure

For *Allure*<sup>5</sup>, my third piece, I decided to change the lines of energy (represented by ribbons) and replace them with a paper trail. Using yellow and purple, contrasting colors, I added to my concept of energy. I created a trail of paper as a spiral design. From a deep infinite space, the energy comes from the center of the painting, perhaps, as if wind blew the forms towards the viewer. This trail of paper also continued to cross the boundary of the painting.

I made a small model of this piece using cardboard and water colors. The model was helpful in giving me insight on how to approach it on a larger scale. I chose to paint on wood in order to shape one of the boundary's sides. This shape served as a continuation for the paper trail. I chose one-inch thick wood because I wanted to screw metal representations of paper onto it. For the three-dimensional objects I chose aluminum sheets of 0.8 thick; a light metal that is easy to shape. I used a plasma cutter to cut the aluminum sheets. I shaped them using a metal rolling machine. Some of this "metal" paper was to be attached onto the wood painting while

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<sup>4</sup> Rubin, William and Frank Stella. 2002. *Frank Stella: 1970-1987*. New York: MOMA Press.

(Rubin and Stella 2002, 73)

<sup>5</sup> See "List of Illustrations," Figure 3, "Allure"

remaining partially flat. I also intended for the paper trail to increase in size as it continued from the painting. I painted the aluminum surface similar to the two-dimensional objects to emphasize and control the light on the real object, as well as assuring the same colors and brush strokes for both.

I then screwed two aluminum papers onto the painting. I rotated the painting into a diagonal position, like the previous painting. The twisted paper line then faced downwards. I installed one of the aluminum papers on the wall, close to but not touching the painting. Then I continued the trail onto the ground, one after the other, increasing in size going toward the viewer. Similar to the previous painting, I created an inviting space for the audience to walk around and through the artwork.

*Allure* was my first experiment in shaping my canvas. This work gave me a clear vision for the direction I wanted to pursue. I was very excited to do more experiments in combining painting with sculpture. This time, I wanted to shape my painting even more and break the traditional rule of rectangular paintings.

### Endeavor

Jackson Pollack inspired me to break free from traditional artistic styles; however, there is also a great amount of similarity between my work and that of Frank Stella, specifically artistic “dimensionality” and perceived space. Stella notes:

...with its inherent three-dimensional illusionism in constant tension with its two-dimensional surfaces...Pictorial space is one in which you have two-dimensional forms tricked out to give the appearance of three-dimensional ones, so that the space you actually perceive comes down somewhere in-between, and somewhere in-between isn't a bad analogy of my work<sup>6</sup>.

My ultimate intention was to blend sculpture and painting together. I wanted to extend the two-dimensional illusionary elements by making them pop-out from the painting and

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<sup>6</sup> Rubin, William and Frank Stella, 77.

transforming them into three-dimensional objects. I tried to challenge the viewers' perception in order to explore the fine line between illusion and reality. To create this piece, I used plywood. It is easy to shape and can support the weight of the objects added onto the surface.

For my new piece titled *Endeavor*<sup>7</sup>, I created flamboyant ribbons breaking free from the background. Some of the ribbons continued outside the boundary of the same flat surface as the two-dimensional illusion. And for other ribbons, I made a slot through some areas of the canvas weaving them through, creating a three-dimensional object.

These aluminum ribbons follow the same ribbon lines in the two-dimensional painting. I painted the aluminum in the same vibrant colors in order to blend the sculpture with the painting. I continued to use the aluminum sheets because of their flexible quality; to shape, cut, bend and manipulate them. Also, I intended to deny the material itself. It was more important for me to show the sculpture as a form rather than a material; therefore, I covered it with paint, not allowing the aluminum to have a voice.

The results of this piece differed from previous works. My palette was busy with various bold colors, and the shape of the canvas was much more interesting. The irregular contour emphasized movement.

*Endeavor* is similar to the external contour and the motions of objects in Elizabeth Murray's paintings. "In Murray's work everything is in flux; we are pulled in by the sense of objects and space on the move, of color and painted and literal shapes subject to various internal and external pressures"<sup>8</sup>. I learned from Murray that the external contour is no less important to emphasize movement. "In her work the physical facts of building a stretcher and making a painting play an active role in the final image, both extending and checking its highly illusive space and highly allusive narrative"<sup>9</sup>.

Similar to Frank Stella, Murray's paintings challenged the fine line between the illusion and the real object. Her canvases jut-out from the wall in a pictorial illusionism within a three-dimensional structure.

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<sup>7</sup> See "List of Illustrations," Figure 4, "Endeavor"

<sup>8</sup> Smith, Robert. "Motion Pictures," Graze, Sue and Kathy, Halbreich. *Elizabeth Murray: Paintings and Drawings*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.(Smith 1987, 8)

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*,9

## Explosion

After completing *Endeavor*, I started to think of ideas for the fifth project. For this work, I wanted to build a three-dimensional canvas rather than a flat one. I designed it to explode from the middle, and gave it sharp edges. The ribbons in this project are taller and twisted into different curves. I screwed them behind the painting so that they appear to be emerging from the split in the center. The ribbons are large enough to extend into the viewers' space. I called this painting *Explosion*<sup>10</sup>. Here I decided against painting on any type of aluminum. Instead, the open metal gave a sense of power, strength and unquestionable beauty. I simplified the painting this time around and used a methodology reminiscent to that of building a sculpture. This sparked inspiration for my final project. I decided to assemble my final work as a piece which stands on the ground, like a sculpture, each feature having been called forth in equal measure, each an equal component of interest.

## Breaking Free

My final piece is titled *Breaking Free*<sup>11</sup> and for good cause. The most attractive feature of this work might very well be in its construction. "Breaking Free" is made up of a three-dimensional wooden canvas, not unlike a pedestal however with irregular contours. The most prominent element of this project is its ribbon component. Four large ribbons were fabricated out of aluminum sheets. This project and its elements move beyond two-dimensional transitional space from the canvas and into the environment of the viewer.

## Challenges and Lessons

The very concepts of my work create certain challenges. It follows then that the work itself would be challenging as well. First, I had to build my canvas. I cut the wood for this canvas myself, a process that took longer than anticipated. I also painted directly on wood for the first time and realized that no matter the number of coats of paint applied, the color remained transparent. Gluing canvas on the plywood and painting *after* I installed the primary objects made painting easier and gave me a better idea of how the project would progress. Solving these

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<sup>10</sup> See "List of Illustrations," Figure 5, "Explosion"

<sup>11</sup> See "List of Illustrations," Figure 6, "Breaking Free"

two challenges were essential to my artistic vision. A third challenge has been the application of a third dimension by blending sculpture and painting together and exploring the fine line between illusion and reality. This concept is one I intend to analyze beyond this thesis in a new project.

In *Explosion*, it was more difficult to partially paint some areas while leaving other metal parts exposed. Visually, the paints on some parts of the metal became layered. I tried to avoid this by making the paint resemble metal. I gradually mixed the color to match the metal by blending silver along the color's edges. In addition, I placed a silver layer on top of this painting. This reduced the intensity of the colors and gave it a silver shine, similar to the metal.

### A View of My Work

#### What is Freedom?

When I decided to travel to the USA for my degree, I had no idea what I was in store for. While studying at the Rochester Institute of Technology I was shaken by a dramatic political event in Syria. Both the Syrian Civil War and, wider, the Arab Spring, have inspired a greater sense of truth in my work as I observe the worldwide political response to these events. The war has claimed fifty-thousand civilian lives, while all global news sources tell us the West will not intervene. This lack of support and intervention has (prompted a level of compassion, truth and freedom in my work, and has also changed my artistic and moral compasses). My stance on "freedom" and what it means to be free has been altered and, therefore, so has my art. A 'liberation' from 'restriction' and elements of restriction in my work have come to be the central thrust upon which my examination of freedom takes place. I question that if inaction is the answer to such destruction and oppression, how free can I really be? I am left feeling that all my freedoms: social, political, and cultural; are all ostensibly preordained. I use art to investigate this paradox and my project as a thematic border by which I secure full dedication to these important issues

Assessing my freedom with respect to the events in Syria has shown me that I must always question conventions and maintain both an artistic and personal integrity. As David Icke once said: "The greatest form of control is control that you cannot see, touch, taste. Sitting in a prison where you can't see the bars, does not make people rebel against not being free, when

they think they are.”<sup>12</sup> My ‘rebellious’ artistic shifts are wholly reminiscent of this assessment. One essential question remains: what type of artwork can exist in such a climate?

My theses originated from the idea of liberating artistic elements from existing as simply mere illusion and bring them to life as real objects. My goals centered on breaking boundaries [of the canvas as well] and attempting to paint “beyond”. I wished to create my own imprint, an indication of my personality. Artists who inspire me on this path include Frank Stella and Elizabeth Murray. Especially in regard to Frank Stella, these are painters who have broken “traditional” artistic limitations by – along with many other uses - applying distinctively shaped canvases. These painters also use bold colors and inventive shapes which suggest their role in developing new forms of expressionism such as neo-expressionism. Similarly, I use painting and sculpture to achieve a blend of illusion and reality, which most accurately expresses my concept of breaking free.

My work is distinct and different than traditional abstract expressionism. The work emphasizes strong, intense contrasting colors with rough lines and shapes. I believe that non-representational painting expresses emotional truths in the most direct ways. I wanted to expose myself to human experience through individual exploration and my task of “breaking free” was to not only pinpoint this exchange, but offer solutions as well.

Currently I am interested in sculptural painting and working with three-dimensional concepts to investigate the fine line between illusion and reality. Recently I produced a three-dimensional canvas that initially exposes itself to its viewer through a space in the wall. I am researching art that challenges the role of ‘wall paintings’ and relationships between various three-dimensional elements overlapping one another. Though my final work became a sculpture, many questions have been asked whether this was where I would continue my investigation. My goals were never to transform from paintings to sculpture. In my previous work as an artist, in Kuwait, I experimented with sculpture and different materials. Now I am more interested in investigating the fine line between illusion and the real object.

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<sup>12</sup>*Radical Truth: Knowledge & Revolution*. DVD. Directed by Jay Weidner. 2011; Burbank, CA: Sacred Mysteries Video, 2011.

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Illustrations



Figure 1, *Revolution*. Canvas, 48 x 36. April 2011.

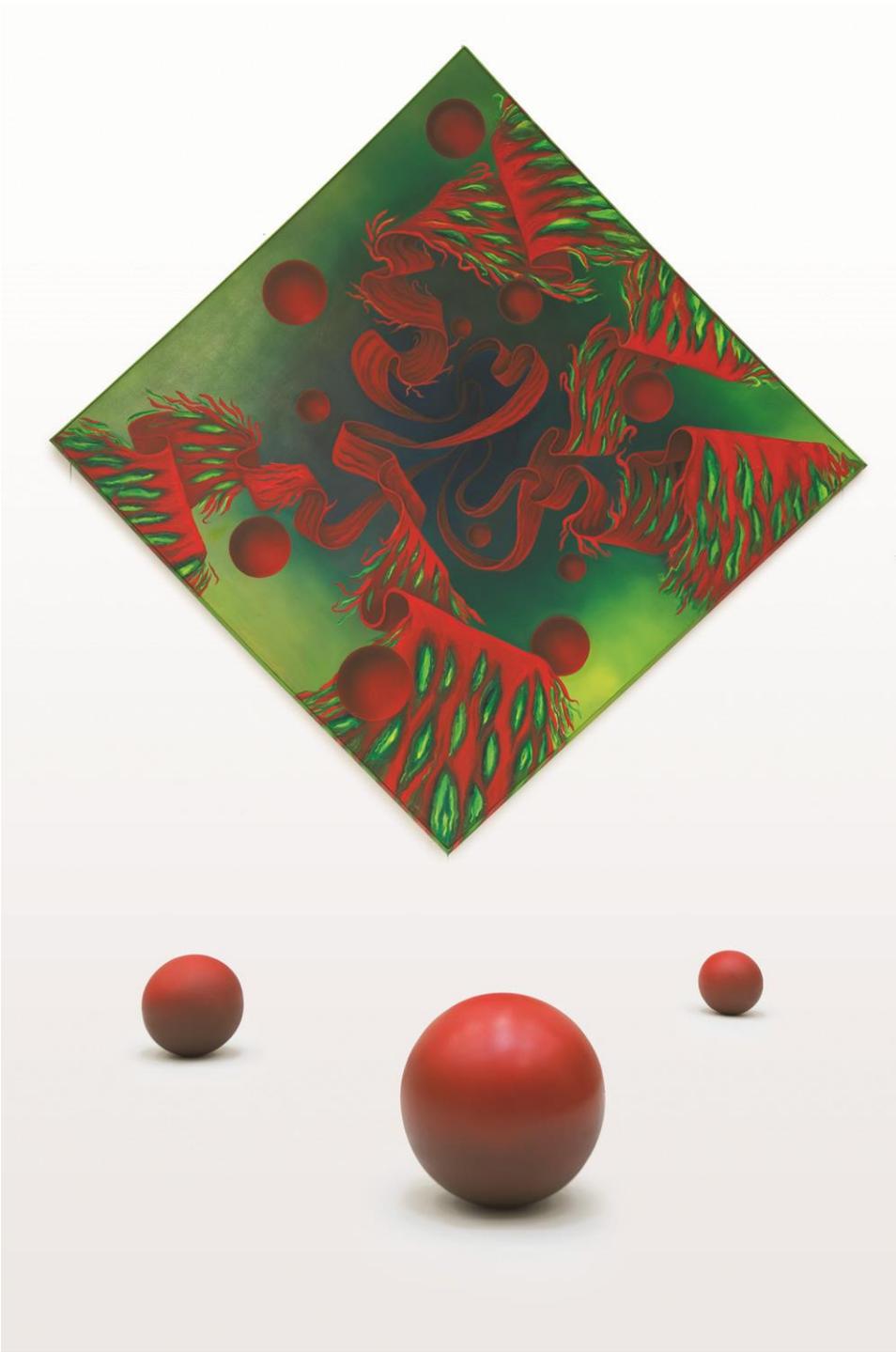


Figure 2, *Expand*. Canvas, 100 x 100. 2012



Figure 3, *Allure*. Wood, 68 x 68. 2012.



Figure 4, *Endeavor*. Canvas, 105 x 60. 2012.



Figure 5, *Explosion*. Canvas, 83x 70. 2012.



Figure 6, *Breaking Free*. Canvas, 45 x 70 x 70. 2012.

