Recollection and memory

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Recolletion and Memory

by

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Contents

1. Introduction
2. Explanation
3. Conclusion
4. Color Plates
5. References
Color Plates

Color Plate 1 - Naivety
Color Plate 2 - Remembrance
Color Plate 3 - Sacred in Solitude
Color Plate 4 - Ritual and Respect
Color Plate 5 - Comfort
Color Plate 6 - Temptation & Intrigue 1
Color Plate 7 - Temptation & Intrigue 2
Color Plate 8 - Perseverance
Color Plate 9 - Minute Infinity
Color Plate 10 - Autonomy
Recollection and Memory

"To touch earth is to have harmony with nature."
(Zona, 1994, p. 85)

For a span of time during my childhood my family would spend most weekends during spring and summer camping. Many of my days were spent exploring the woods, creek and pond in the area. From these experiences I have developed a body of work revealing images that have always remained vivid in my memory. Each experience, some trivial at the time, holds a kind of metaphor in relation to life for me. Therefore, I have titled the pieces according to the quality or emotion that, in my opinion, the images represent or hold.

I've often found myself envious of the profound understanding and connection that Native Americans have had with nature. The respect that this culture holds for life and the earth is inspiring. Contemporary society should be so blessed to comprehend the wisdom that Native Americans have. Through my experiences, including the events portrayed in my paintings I feel I have developed a great appreciation for our earth and the truths it holds. Upon reviewing Guy A. Zona's book The Soul Would Have No Rainbow if the Eyes Had No Tears (1994), a compilation of Native American proverbs, I recognized a connection between a selection of the quotes and my feelings about life and nature that are related to my paintings. Therefore I have cited some of these proverbs where they appropriately support the essence of my work.

This paper will discuss the process of my thesis in terms of idea development, background of subject matter, meaning of subject matter as well as some insights into technical choices such as composition, color and professional influences.
The process of developing this body of work in and of itself was soothing and provided a sense of grounding. While reflecting back on years spent exploring the woods, a flood of images came to mind. From these images I focused on those that were most vivid in my visual as well as emotional memory. Relying solely on memory and impression, I developed sketches, pastel drawings and small sample paintings to test the visual quality of these memories. I recognize reference materials as valid sources for rendering certain subject matter, but these images are about visual impression and emotive quality rather than detail accuracy.

Through this progression I became more and more in touch with the essence of the images I was trying to portray. I realized that these aren’t just frozen images like those a camera would see. These places were seen and experienced through a child’s eyes.

I progressed to develop larger pieces. Being memories of nature impressed upon small eyes, certain images commanded larger proportions. This gave them a more impressive vantage point, drawing the viewer into the essence of the experience. *Temptation and Intrigue 2* (Color Plate 7) is a primary example of this element. Its predecessor, *Temptation and Intrigue 1* (Color Plate 6) in its smaller form, does possess an element of curiosity or ambiguity - however it is held primarily within the technique and idea of the image/shapes being portrayed. *Temptation and Intrigue 2* (Color Plate 7) although still not quite life size, is large enough to draw the audience directly into it’s elements.

When all of the paintings were complete I spent some time viewing them to evaluate the impact or impression that the images had on me the first time that they were experienced, as well as the feeling that they evoked now. In many cases, although probably subconscious in my youth, I believe that they may be the same. From this process the titles for the pieces were derived. The best means for illustrating this process is to reveal the background of each paintings subject matter.
“To go on a vision quest is to go into the presence of the great mystery.”
(Zona, 1994, p.113)

Temptation and Intrigue 1 and 2 (Color Plate 6, 7) are paintings of a bridge created in a creek bed with galvanized steel tubing, approximately 3-4’ in diameter. Since many of my days were spent exploring the lengths of the creek, this view was an everyday sight. As common as it was, not a day went by that I was not tempted to walk through the tubes instead of going up and over the dirt road to reach the other side. Although there was probably no imminent danger, there always was the restraint of a mother’s warning not to go in them.

“All things have inner meaning and form and power.”
(Zona, 1994, p.115)

Minute Infinity (Color Plate 9) is another painting that commanded a larger scale. The idea behind this painting is reminiscent of how small a puddle could seem in the middle of a vast yard and landscape, yet how enormous it became when embarked upon by a small toy sailboat. The painting captures the subject matter roughly at 200% of its actual size. That size relationship, being to an adult, approximately the same as the actual puddle to a child. In any case, the area of space in the painting depicting the puddle, compared to a human is not very large, however, the viewer does recognize the dwarfing effect it has on a solitary, little boat. Vivid is the image of this moment in my memory. To me, a child quietly watching a toy sail boat in a dark puddle seems to be such a simple event. It amazes me now that such a young mind on some level realized such an irony.

“The greatest strength is gentleness.”
(Zona, 1994, p.62)
Autonomy (Color Plate 10), another of the larger scale paintings reveals a lone dandelion standing proudly among a group of rocks in a creek bed. To the average person a dandelion is a nasty impostor that blemishes their lawn. To me, in this setting, the flower seemed to possess such strength, being able to sprout up among a harsh environment of water, sand and rocks. I created the image in a larger than life composition to enhance the juxtaposition between the opposing forces. ‘Autonomy’ seemed clearly to be the optimal choice for a title. In many ways this piece exudes the warmth and softness of a sunny summer day, yet the dandelion is very inspiring and empowering in its subtle strength. A common flower has forced it’s way up in a seemingly less than ideal habitat. As a woman surviving in a primarily male dominated society I now find this image/circumstance symbolic and inspiring.

“You must live your life from beginning to end; no one else can do it for you.”
(Zona, 1994, p.64)

Perseverance (Color Plate. 8), the fourth in the series of larger paintings, depicts a steep, sun baked, dirt road cutting a path through a field of wild flowers. The only route for transportation from one area of the campground to another, many journeys were expedited up and down this bumpy incline. So simple is the imagery in this painting and yet its concept is very strong. When I view this scene I still hear the vibrating sounds of cicadas basking in sunlight. I see the Brown Eyed Susans and Queen Anne’s Lace dancing in the gentle summer breeze. Having no inhabitants along most of the path, a journey up the hill could offer a sense of peace and solitude. On scorching hot days a climb up it was like an endless journey across desert dunes. No matter what the circumstances or the method, “the big hill” was the only means by which to get most anywhere. “The big hill” is like the path of life that we all
follow. Some days it's a joy, some days a trial, but the only way to get anywhere is with perseverance.

Six smaller, sample paintings comprised the rest of my body of work. Some are actual sample paintings and some were executed simultaneously or after the larger final pieces.

“When we show our respect for other living things, they respond with respect for us.”
(Zona, 1994, p.22)

*Ritual and Respect* (Color Plate 4) summarizes a collection of toads that I would catch throughout the weekend and house in “the blue bucket”. Once the car was unloaded and camp was set up, I would set about creating a suitable habitat for small creatures in “the blue bucket”. Once accomplished I would scour the yard and probable hiding spots primarily for toads, sometimes salamanders and any other foreign creature that might present itself. I would keep them in “the blue bucket” for the weekend and set them free just before leaving on Sunday night. This experience because of its regularity became a ritual. Not a weekend went by that this act didn’t take place. As a result of this process I became educated on different species and developed a great respect for these and all living creatures.

“If I am in harmony with my family, that is success.”
(Zona, 1994, p.49)

*Comfort* (Color Plate 5) is a painting of a humorous “Chipmunk Crossing” sign that my Grandmother would place in a small garden in the yard. It was placed soon after we got there for the first weekend of the season and remained there throughout the camping season until retrieved just before we would leave for fall and winter. Used as an embellishment
for the lawn/garden the “Chipmunk Crossing” sign was an ever-present icon existing rain or shine. Although in many respects it was probably taken for granted, I now realize it as a symbol of comfort. It could have just as easily said “Home Sweet Home”.

“When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world.”
(Muir, 1995, p. April 11)

_Sacred in Solitude_ (Color Plate 3) is the result of a lesson learned at a young age. One day in the woods I discovered a beautiful white flower that I’d never seen before. Excited by my discovery and realizing the appreciation my mother might have for seeing it, I picked it. Upon bringing it to my family, an odd look came over their faces. A look of pleasure for my generosity and horror as well. They proceeded to inform me that this flower, a Trillium, was a protected species and therefore should never be picked. After that day the plant took on a very sacred form for me. Usually found singly or in small numbers the flowers seemed to hold an essence that was spiritual in nature. With each flower existing independently amongst other wood undergrowth, and realizing its value as a result of its declining numbers, the flower always seemed to be ‘sacred in its solitude’.

“One has to face fear or forever run from it.”
(Zona, 1994, p.125)

_Naivety_ (Color Plate 1) depicts the fear experienced by an ignorant child imagining the horror and danger that the spines on a bull head catfish could inflict. From time to time my grandfather would take me up to the pond that existed nearby the entrance to the campground. At that time the primary stock in the pond was bull head catfish. When I was
quite young my grandfather would warn me not to touch or hold them because they had sharp spines that could stab. Not having actually seen the spines and not comprehending the reality of the concept, my visions of this weapon and the pain it might inflict were horrific. On the occasion inspiring the painting, my whole family had gathered at the pond. With the aid of my grandfather I caught a bull head and my family felt it appropriate to document the event with a photograph. My grandfather cradled the suffocating fish in his hand on a leather glove. As a result of my family encouraging me to hold it, the black spine wielding monster was presented before me with three people saying “go on hold it, it won’t hurt you”. Sure. Naivety and fear won and the photo is that of me standing apprehensively behind my grandfather and the fish. The painting represents the image existing in my memory of the bull head being presented to me.

"Flowers are for our souls to enjoy."
(Zona, 1994, p.125)

Remembrance (Color Plate 2) is significant of the bunches of Forget-Me-Not s that sprung up in soft bunches all along the creek’s edge. Until now their symbolism was never so impressive. Forget-me-not the times spent with family. Forget-me-not a time of innocence and wonder and forget-me-not my kinship with nature.

In terms of technique, the two conscious elements that I dealt with were composition and color.

When I composed these pieces I found myself instilling a strong sense of positive and negative space as well as shape into the pieces. Whether an unconscious act of innocence or of education and training I’m not sure. Possibly a compromise of both. The pieces portray the focal point of an experience or visual scene. Quite often, in memory, extraneous matter is eliminated to enhance the quality of the image
stored. Visual impact is increased in the paintings by creating a tension between the pertinent elements within the composition. These memories, though introspective, are simple experiences of a young child. To convey the bare simplicity of the concepts it seemed appropriate to develop paintings that capture the fundamental image behind the meaning. For it wasn’t so much the scenery that was enlightening as the thoughts about it.

Color was of importance to me as well. I tried to maintain a level of realism in my palette choices while at the same point in time I did not restrain the introduction of impressionistic color. I felt that this could only enhance the personal quality I was trying to achieve in my pieces. My recollection and memory of these places and things are in a relatively realistic color scheme. I can recognize in my minds eye what the weather was at the time of the experience. In my paintings I tried to acknowledge this by how bright or warm a painting was executed. Most days were warm and sunny as are most of the paintings. However, in *Sacred in Solitude* (Color Plate 3) the shadows of a canopied forest dictates a slightly darker painting. *Minute Infinity* (Color Plate 9) takes place shortly after a period of rain. Therefore, little or no bright warm tones were used. Just the glimmer of an overcast sky creates a slight highlight at the puddles edge.

Once I had the concept for my thesis comprised, and prior to any sketching, I referenced some landscape painters and impressionists for any possible influences on how to handle the subject matter with which I was dealing. Although I didn’t find myself directly adopting any one painter’s style or point of view into my paintings, one artist that did impress me was Camille Pissarro. I found his style to be refreshing. His paintings hold a type of light that I had hoped mine would carry. The sensitivity with which he dealt with his subject matter interested me. Pissarro’s paintings are enjoyable at face value, while at the same time giving the impression that there is a personal story and insight behind
them. This was an issue that I felt would be important with my pieces. I wanted the viewer to be able to enjoy and respond to my paintings without requiring knowledge of the influences behind them - yet while sensing their essences ponder the artist’s relation to the paintings.

As stated earlier, the process and introspection involved in developing this Thesis has been refreshing. I recognize these experiences now to be a great influence and foundation for who I am today. Recalling this time period has reminded me of the fundamentals that are dear to who I am. Never have I felt so alive and healthy as when I existed in nature. In a world of paper pushing and traffic jams, quite often I wish I could go back or recapture these moments as a way of life. However, society has developed technology and lifestyles where the two seldom coexist.

“Listen to the voice of nature, for it holds treasures for you.” (Zona, 1994, p.86)

These images reinforce the idea of how vastly 'little things' can influence our lives. If we pass them over or take them for granted we are restricting ourselves from knowing many truths and treasures. One of the greatest rewards I have obtained through creating this body of work is that my memories have been documented. How amazing it is now after all these years to put something so delicate and innocent in a tangible form.

“I have been to the end of the earth.
I have been to the end of the waters.
I have been to the end of the sky.
I have been to the end of the mountains,
I have found none that are not my friends.”
(Zona, 1994, p. 40)
Naivety
19" x 22"
Oil on canvas

Color Plate 1
Remebrance
24" x 30"
Oil on canvas

Color Plate 2
Sacred in Solitude
15" x 36"
Oil on canvas

Color Plate 3
Ritual and Respect
24" x 24"
Oil on canvas

Color Plate 4
Comfort
14" x 18"
Oil on canvas

Color Plate 5
Temptation & Intrigue 1

15"x19"

Oil on canvas

Color Plate 6
Temptation & Intrigue 2
42" x 64"
Oil on canvas

Color Plate 7
Perseverance

36" x 56"

Oil on canvas

Color Plate 8
Color Plate 9

Minute Infinity
40" x 60"
Oil on canvas
Autonomy
43”x 47”
Oil on canvas

Color Plate 10
References


