Unmasking Creativity: Process & Product

The Georgia Art Education Association 2011 Member Exhibition
Sandra Bird

This installation/contemporary shrine is dedicated to Obatala Nla, the Yoruba Orisha who is labeled “The Creator of Mankind,” “King of the White Cloth,” or even “Chief of the Un-dyed Cloth” (among many other names throughout the Yoruba Diaspora). He/she is the secretary and one of the favored Orisha of Olodumare, the Supreme Being of the Yoruba Pantheon. Among many of the fascinating things about this deity are his/her associations to the color white (or to all the colors at once) as well as a defined affinity for silver. This installation features several white bands of cloth draped above a sacred space, marked by chalk around the stationary center. Hopefully, viewers will feel free to enter the folds of Obatala’s white gown to explore this Orisha’s attributes. In my opinion, an exhibition theme examining creativity demands some personal reflection on the dual nature of creator and created (which you and I cannot avoid as “human” products). Obatala seems an appropriate figure to illustrate this idea, as he/she is both product of the Divine, and also the first earthly producer (according to Yoruba myths).

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Although creativity is a multidimensional, multifaceted complex of ideas, the inspiration and illumination for artworks is often found in the mundane and the ordinary. The works chosen for Unmasking Creativity: Process and Product were evaluated not only for their aesthetic production, but also for the explanation of their creative process. Providing a glimpse into what motivated the artist’s choices offers the viewer a deeper understanding of the work.

Special Thanks

As GAEA conference chair, I would like to thank the following for their support of this exhibition:

From Kennesaw State University, Teresa Bramlette Reeves, Director of the KSU Museum and Galleries, and the museum staff Kirstie Tepper and Mary-Elizabeth Watson; Shane McDonald, Eric Sembrat and the team of Drupal website developers for hosting the exhibition submission site; Joseph Meeks, Dean of the College of the Arts; Joe Thomas, Chair of the Visual Arts department; GAEA conference committee members, especially Rob Lester for the conference logo design; and all the GAEA members who generously submitted works for the show. A special thanks to Lanny Milbrandt and Enid Zimmerman for selecting the prizewinners.

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Bruce Bowman

Both my media and subject matter are informed by many sources. One of my greatest sources of inspiration comes from my teaching, which for the past five years has included film and digital photography. This focus on photography encouraged a keen interest in exploring the medium’s technical and expressive possibilities. I am most drawn to pinhole photography and cyanotypes.

The work in this show is a pinhole photograph, dyed blue with Berg toner. I made the camera with black foam core and a piece of aluminum can several years ago, and I’m still using it! As the exposures are about eight minutes long with this process, I look for subject matter that would either look interesting with some blur (like a stream), or that is stationary (such as a landscape) and take into account that the photograph will end up looking somewhat old or antiqued. It is my goal to create images that evoke a sense of timelessness, quietness, and isolation.

Ken Callaway

As a teenager I was afflicted with OCD, and since then I have been interested in understanding the relationship between obsession and creativity. My creative life has been marked alternately by periods of routine and repetition contrasted with moments of breakthrough insight.

The initial appearance of turtles in my work occurred in my drawings of Georgia flora and fauna. In 1996 I produced a work called “Salvation of Mud” where tortoise shell patterns were superimposed over my face accompanied by narratives on self, landscape, and memory.

The shell image has multiple meanings. In myth the turtle is a mediator between earth and water, it can also mean withdrawal and introspection. Art has always had the capacity to let a thing be both itself and something else, and thus exist in “sustained irresolution” offering a passage between routines and habits of thought into novel experience.

In this image, the empty gopher tortoise shell is juxtaposed with the interior of an abandoned barn built by my father. The repetition created by the cracked mud echoes the markings of a shell, but also can be read as a map. There is a conflation of shell and place and simultaneously a memento of loss and passing.
Tom L. Cato

For over 38 years I have found inspiration and beauty in my environment and have strived to show this in my paintings and photographs. I make art for my own pleasure and personal growth. Whether my audience responds positively or negatively to my work, I view it as having been successful in transcending my interpretation of the environment. Images of the environment, including nature and man-made objects, have been a part of my visual repertoire for many years. Fragile relationships exist between people and their environments and the work included in this exhibition is part of a series that explores these relationships. I work with formal principles of design while integrating ideas of human philosophy. The abandoned greenhouse associated with the Reynolds Mansion on Sapelo Island, Georgia, provides the perfect vehicle for my research. My background as a painter heavily influences final decisions that I make, such as manipulating the work with a photographic filter to create a watercolor-like effect. The result is a certain mysterious beauty of a man-made environment falling into disrepair and being reclaimed by nature.

Forgotten Sanctuary, Manipulated digital photograph

Gale Connelly

The idea of deconstructing a commonly understood image and using various art-making processes to reconstruct a newly found treasure is the most exciting way of creating for me personally. I try to keep an open mind and let the process (which always produces unpredictable results) guide the final image. I LOVE being in the moment of process and creation.

I start with personal photographs that are printed on regular printer paper multiple times. I tear some of the images with my hands to remove parts or edges. I work with one image at a time using lacquer thinner to transfer it onto watercolor paper with the assistance of a press. When the paper is lifted, the image is ALWAYS a surprise because only certain parts of the ink from the original will be printed on the page. I then draw and paint over the transferred image using a relaxed, doodling approach. As new lines and shapes appear and evolve, I become aware that I’ve embarked on a truly personal journey that will take me far away from where I began.

Leaves and Light Bubbles, Mixed media on paper
Debi Davis

The title of this piece is “My Brother Loved Cowboys” and it is dedicated to my brother Don who passed away three years ago. He had experienced several close calls when his blood pressure would drop while on dialysis. Each time he was rushed to the hospital. He would survive the incident but would be in the hospital for a few days. During one of these short hospital stays when I visited Don, it was a Saturday afternoon, and to my surprise, I realized he was watching cowboy movies! We talked about all of the old heroes, quoted some lines from John Wayne and Clint Eastwood, and even sang a few theme songs like the one from Rawhide! It brought back so many memories of when we were all together in one house! Don shyly revealed that every Saturday afternoon, he and his wife would microwave some popcorn and sit down to watch at least one cowboy movie. It had become a tradition over the previous 20 years! Shortly after my last visit and his subsequent release, he had another episode and he did not make it back to the hospital in time. I lost my cowboy-loving brother in an instant. This piece is in memory of him.

Dan DeFoor

The creative process is as varied as the individuals engaged in the creating. My process involves collaboration. The proverbial “two heads are better than one” can be expanded to “two heads working together are greater than the sum of their parts,” the Gestalt function of creating. And my prime collaborator for almost forty years is my wife Mary. What began as an effort to supplement our beginning teacher salaries of $8000 a year (by exhibiting and selling artwork at shows across the southeast) has become a wondrous journey. In creating our ceramic pieces the task of developing form is primarily mine, whereas surface texture and color (I’m color blind) are primarily Mary’s domain. But in all cases we talk, plan, refine, and work to the point of exhaustion, together. This piece is wheel thrown earthenware with airbrushed underglazes applied in a stenciling technique with clear overglaze.
Charles E. Earl

I have always enjoyed painting portraits. “Camry Wrapped in a Towel” personifies those personal aspects of the subject’s character that I like to capture. Camry is a very energetic and vivid person. She is a typical teenager who enjoys her family, friends, school, and life. Camry enjoys dressing in colors – lots of colors. This comes across as a somewhat whimsical aspect of her character. I feel this painting demonstrates that element of innocence perfectly. When I was observing her for this portrait, she was restlessly spinning about with a towel in her hand while entertaining me with a colorful anecdote. When she ended her story, the towel settled around her and she gave a soft backward glance over her left shoulder. This pose created the ideal moment for me to paint.

I love the challenge of trying to capture a very private or public moment of an individual’s life. Whether it is presented in a contextually complex or ordinary circumstance, doesn’t matter. As with Camry’s portrait, I think the emphasis on color contrast, bold shapes, and spatial placement of subject matter present a compelling image.

Dorothy Fletcher Eckmann

The artwork in this exhibition represents two artistic extremes: lithography and mixed media sculpture. The sculpture seeks to represent protective elements and curious surprises, and it symbolizes an important event that shaped my way of thinking.

In 1969, my daughters and I traveled across country from Vermont to live near family in Seattle. During this one-year transitional stay we awaited the safe return of my husband and father of my children from his second tour in Vietnam. The move was naturally disruptive for both my 1½ and 3½ year old girls. I recognized the need to nurture and strengthen their sisterly bond during this difficult period. In this piece I have tried to capture a sense of their closeness and desire to comfort each other over the absence of their dad. Cocoon also represents a love of materials and form in addition to telling a visual story. It is my hope that those who experience my work will make their own personal connection.
Rick Garner

My various interests in studio art, neuropsychology, art therapy and art education intersect to feed my artistic endeavors. In particular, my experience in using art with people who have suffered a traumatic brain injury contributed to the formation of the subject matter in this work. Additionally, I draw inspiration from biological, physiological, and neurological imagery.

The pure matter of the artistic brain is to abstract sculptural forms from this neuro-imagery by utilizing natural materials that imitate the components and structures of the mind. This methodology reinforces that “all is one and one is all.” Mind is an essence, however, that cannot be accounted for by the structure of the brain alone. Art draws on the brain to create mind.

Robin Jones

Nesting Place is a series that I have been working on for almost a year and a half. The theme centers on my innate habit of nesting and my maternal instinct. The idea of habit led me to habitat, thus I began weaving nests and making eggs. I use found, recycled materials and Styrofoam to construct my nests, just as birds forage for nesting materials. I relate to my namesake, the robin, in that we are both constantly tucking tidbits away that might be useful in the future. My growth is reflected in the additive quality of my work as I weave one strip at a time in just the right place. The unassuming materials find new purpose as providers of an environment meant to inspire, nurture, and support new life.

Have you ever been annoyed at a bird that built its nest in your gutter or in an eave of your house? The plans we make in life aren’t always the most convenient for other people. For this installation, I placed cardboard nests around the gallery space in unassuming places: in corners, nestled behind pedestals, etc. Their presence and placement is meant to be unorthodox, vulnerable and not necessarily “convenient.”
Alexandra Kates

Through my photographic journey, certain subjects have spoken to me and I've tried to capture their simple essence, their texture, and their form. Van Dyke Brown, a light sensitive substance with a pigment similar in color to the Flemish painter’s brown, was used as the medium. I selected the dark, natural hues to enhance the rough, weathered organic materials in my subjects and the smooth, off-white paper to provide a soft background and depth within the deep brown shadows. I am drawn to the mysterious look of the process and the distortion provided by the brush strokes.

As I created this series, I discovered that the image captured was only a starting point. My “blank canvas” is my photograph, and there are infinite methods in which to explore the visual possibilities for the final product. I use a diptych format to encourage viewers to compare and contrast the two images and thus linger over the work.

J. Stephen Lahr

This construction assemblage piece was developed after a visit to Haldkidiki peninsula, Satri, Greece in 1996. Behind a small restaurant was an astonishing temple made from wood and copper screen that was used for drying anchovies caught in the nearby Aegean Sea. I did not so much copy this structure as reconstruct it in my own way, keeping important aspects the same (or similar), but designing and constructing the piece as something new and different. To me, this collage of old and new is a very postmodern idea. I like assembling, recycling, and appropriating ideas and images. It took me several years to find appropriately aged wood, then to design the structure, build it, and populate it with fake anchovies. It took even more time to find the copper screen, which was very expensive. I couldn’t use real anchovies so I purchased artificial bait from Bass Pro (and that is another story).
Paula McNeill

Driving west on State Road 87 across the Gila Indian Reservation near the small town of Coolidge, Arizona, out of the corner of my eye, I saw what looked like a white bike tied to a barbed wire fence. I didn't turn my car around to take a better look, but the image stayed with me for a long time.

The next year I was driving along the same highway, this time looking for the white bike. I had made up all kinds of stories as to the circumstances surrounding the bike, such as, was an Indian child hit on the highway and her bike placed on the fence as a kind of memorial? Was it some kind of art installation or what? I stopped, read the sign, and snapped the picture. Mystery solved.

Lauren Christine Phillips

The best thing about taking pictures with film is the element of surprise. The viewfinder on my camera is wildly inaccurate so I can't entirely rely upon it. I'm not exactly sure what I'm taking as a picture. I can't even really preview an image as I am shooting it. It may take months before I finish a roll and thus some images wait a while before being revealed. Once the pictures are developed, sometimes I see more failed pictures than good ones; some are cropped wrong, some are too blurred, some are too dark, some have too much flash... The failures make me appreciate the good pictures, when they miraculously appear.
This work, and the process of creating it, was a part of my a/r/tographic* study on the nature of caring in art education. Proponents of a/r/tography recognize how “the simultaneous use of language, image, materials, situations, space, and time” allow for research and theory to become “an embodied, living space of inquiry” (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p.106). Without directly stating it, I tried to convey through this work how wholeness-in-process means being attentive to the parts that were not whole. The altered wedding dress with nesting black birds evolved from my reflections on the limits of caring. It began as a symbolic work, but the process of working in fabric began to change its meaning. The birds that were once supposed to be vicious and threatening became guises of the spirit that entered my life in unexpected ways. The delicate act of sewing affected my view on how we come to relate to materials, theory, and practice. In creating this work, in the transformation that occurred, I was able to imagine a new way to care.

* In a collection of essays entitled A/R/Tography: Rendering Self Through Arts-Based Living, Rita Irwin and other artist/teachers explore ways to merge art-making, research and teaching into daily life and practice.

Steve Schetski

My artwork was inspired by a classroom project I completed with my students. It required them to interpret “black” as the central theme and to challenge everyone to think outside the box.

This work was spontaneous and utilized the non-traditional medium of roofing cement (asphalt) diluted with mineral spirits. I painted a self-portrait, focusing on the pupil of my left eye. The eye is often referred to as the window to the soul, reflecting our experiences, feelings, and judgments of the light and dark sides of our personality. I have visualized this idea by enclosing the pupil within two dark rectangles that represent the “walls” we create in our world. The layers intentionally go from a thin application to a very dark and heavy impasto layer for the inner rectangle. Black can be described as the absence of light, so I became intrigued with the idea of juxtaposing the mechanics of the eye for gathering light, and the psychological aspects of interpreting darkness in the mind’s eye.
Elizabeth Sheain

My father died March 21, 2006, just twenty days after the birth of my daughter. Since his death, the majority of my work has been about him. We had a complicated relationship. He was a recovering addict. In the last years of his life he tried to make peace with me. I'll never forget the day he came to me and apologized for all the horrors he had put me through growing up. In AA and NA this is step nine. It is a vital part of the recovery process. I can only imagine how hard it must have been for him.

This is an intaglio print based on a photograph I took of my father the year before he died. It is printed on a page from his NA book that I retrieved from his house after the funeral. The book was well worn and certain passages had been underlined. Reading it and the letters he kept inside it has been a kind of salve to my soul. I make art about addiction to highlight the situation and chronicle the problems faced by many families. I feel it is important to keep an artistic discussion going about the realities of life today. Addiction isn’t a happy subject, but it is a real issue. Making art about my experience has helped me deal with my father’s passing and our flawed relationship.

Paul Vogt

Glass can be an intimidating medium for the young and inexperienced. The question has always been why does glass have to be so complicated to work with? Thus, searching for a simpler method of forming pieces without furnaces, torches, molds, etchers, cutters, or grinders became a year-long endeavor.

The goal was to find an approach wherein one simply collected glass, placed it in a form, and kiln fired it. Significant to the exploration was the consideration of a creative process that could be adapted to most age groups. Finding glass, especially fusion glass, was no problem. A real concern was how to develop a casting form. After experimenting with numerous materials, I determined ceramic fiberboard to be the best option, though it requires a dust mask, good ventilation, and protective glasses. A dust vacuum is also a helpful piece of equipment.

I developed the following steps for this simplified approach to glass making:

1) Use a Dremel drill to carve “trenches” into the fiberboard
2) Collect and crush glass (or purchase coarse frit glass – which is better for younger individuals as it reduces glass cuts)
3) Place the glass in the fiberboard “trenches”
4) Fire the glass in a standard ceramic kiln at Cone 018-016
5) Repeat steps 3 and 4 if necessary
6) Cool the glass and separate it from the fiberboard to view the final product.
Debi West

I was inspired to create work based on my dissertation research, “Art with Purpose.” This is a study of my teaching philosophy, my personal life, and how one can take art education to the next level by teaching students that art can become a symbol for how we have the power to change the world through our creativity and skill.

My life as I knew it came to a stop on July 13th, 2008. That is the day that my son, Croy, died. I now am in the process of finding creative ways to live my life with “purpose” and everything I do now revolves around how I am learning to survive and move on in the midst of a broken heart. I started this piece by reworking three old canvases. I knew that I wanted to represent an ideal childhood - happiness, innocence, playfulness and joy. As I added color to the images on the canvas, textures emerged, the subject matter began to fade, and the formal elements took over. After applying stencils and masking tape, I realized that perhaps this entire process was a metaphor for loss and adaptation. This triptych represents the three years since Croy passed. There are many symbols throughout the piece that are reminiscent of my life, my Croy, and my teaching.