MY FATHER BEFORE ME

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

by

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December, 2015
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my special appreciation and thanks to my advisor Professor Isabel Farnsworth, you have been a tremendous mentor for me. I would like to thank you for encouraging my research and for allowing me to grow as an artist. Your help and advice kept me motivated for the duration of this project. I would also like to thank the other committee members, Dr. Diane Scillia and Janice Lessman-Moss for serving as representatives of my team, even at hardship. I also want to thank you for letting my defense be an enjoyable moment, and for your splendid comments and suggestions. I would especially like to thank my colleague Miwa Neishi for her involvement at almost every level of this journey. All of you have been there to support me and assist in my growth.

A special thanks to my family. Words cannot express how grateful I am to my sons, John and David, for all of the sacrifices made on my behalf. I would also like to thank all of my friends who supported me even while I was being self-centered. I would like express appreciation to my cherished wife, Clare, who spent sleepless nights with me and was always my support in the moments when there was no one to answer my queries.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn’t mention and give thanks here to Dr. Walter Cha and Dr. Ryan Berglund, as well as their respective teammates, for nurturing me back to physical well-being. Thank you.
MY FATHER BEFORE ME

This body of work was created in response to my efforts to cope positively with having been diagnosed with two forms of cancer. The American Art Therapy Association defines art therapy, in part, like this: “A goal in art therapy is to improve or restore a client’s functioning and his or her sense of personal well-being.” Although some would argue that the process of creating this suite of work, as an academically trained artist, is not formally “art therapy,” I would say the efforts were regenerative; and therefore, functioned in much the same way.

After the first diagnosis in November of 2014, I fell into a state of depression and due to the limited time constraints would be unable to see a therapist for months. So, I turned to my art in an attempt to step outside of the truth; I sought distraction and solace. The drawings are an attempt to exorcise inhibiting, unproductive emotions. Making art can open up a hole in what, when you’re despondent, feels like a flawless gloom. According to musician Leonard Cohen, “There is a crack in everything – that’s where the light gets in.”

Formally, this exhibition consists of two elements. Ten framed 40” x 30” works on heavy, off-white paper and a large scale wall-sculpture. The mixed media works on dense paper are made with clothing dye, sumi ink, coffee, copper leaf and acrylic paint. The liquid media are used as a type of wash, in much the same way as East Asian brush painting uses black ink. The wet combinations are created by floating one medium on top of the other, each kept in bounds by the surface tension of the first liquid applied to the flat plane of the paper. The warm, water-based palette was chosen for the compatibility of the shades and based on the fact that
there is sufficient contrasting granular density between the media. I chose these agents because of the way they bleed together on their own, creating fine filaments of crystalized pigment. The various shapes and forms come from the fact that I would work on as many as three at a time and was consciously attempting to avoid repetitive movements and profiles.

In the current gallery setting natural light is combined with the spotlights. Because sunlight provides the neutral balance between warm and cool ends of the light spectrum the drawings change in appearance from day to night, thus, depending when seen, the sense of depth and layering is altered. The 49” x 39” frames are constructed with four-inch-wide aspen boarding, common household molding, parting strips and black acrylic paint which makes these settings part of the composition.

Some might claim otherwise, but I argue that the modern concept of the frame as part of the drawing, derives from Robert Rauschenberg, 1953 work “Erased de Kooning Drawing”. In her extensive essay on the subject of this artwork, Sarah Roberts points out that Rauschenberg may have given no thought to the significance of the frame at the time he created the drawing with erasers. During a 1988 conservation treatment Rauschenberg had a studio assistant write “DO NOT REMOVE DRAWING FROM FRAME FRAME [sic] IS PART OF THE DRAWING” on the back. Roberts posits that “Once it was literally and textually framed, the smudgy piece of paper—and the act of erasure it represents—became something more” (Roberts). One satisfying factor in the decision to create my own frame was determined, in part, by the dance between the sumi ink and the dark wood (FIGURE 1 MY FATHER BEFORE ME PICTURE).

These wooden, shadowy structures can be thought of as windows exposing my actual state of mind and what I imagined was happening to my flesh and blood; foreign chemical
substances and mutating cells spreading, seemingly unopposed like constituents working together planning my demise. The black filaments created by floating the particles and crystals of traditional Japanese ink in wet coffee, the color of thinning oxidized blood, are representative of my emotions during the treatment and recovery processes.

When I mixed the media together the physical act of combination was dynamic; two bifurcating fluids attempting to achieve equilibrium while trying to escape from the same crowded space but eventually settling in, and although now dry, they are still expressing the struggle.

The geometric shapes, whether drawn or constructed from copper are a metaphor characterizing organs infiltrated by unknown elements and enflamed masses and are used repetitively to help me make sense of what was happening; a paper facsimile of my imagination. Because the copper leaf oxidizes naturally, or is forced to change by chemical reaction, organic patterns are created in the discoloration thus expressing a deeper perception of violation and degradation.

Most of the drawings contain straight columns of acrylic paint particles (FIGURE 2 - PARTICLE PICTURE). While the viewer will affix them with their own meanings, as mentioned earlier, for me the rows are a transporting device taking me back to an earlier time in my life. I see them as a stabilizing mechanism embedded in a swirling vortex of emotional pandemonium.

The wall-sculpture consists of two hand-cut floor joists I removed from an archaic Ohio farmhouse and are 140.5” x 8” x 2” (FIGURE 3- SCULPTURAL ELEMENT PICTURE). I manipulated their appearance with paint, stain, parting strips, moldings and ceramic tiles. The two joists are mounted in the corner, joined with their tenens interlocked, and as such, become
“one piece” utilizing the architecture of the space as well as referencing their former lives as architectural elements. In an attempt to hybridize the principles of the drawings, the inlayed tiles mimic the particles applied to the paper pieces. I feel that the two-dimensional and sculptural elements combine to create a cohesive installation mounted in two adjoining spaces, allowing for a conversation back and forth as the viewer moves from one space to the other.

The work displayed grew from considerations that included, because of multiple surgeries, my inability to maneuver the heavy, totemic works I have been recently creating from found objects. The wall-sculpture, which came secondarily, was inspired by the works on paper. The inlayed ceramic tiles are a direct reflection of the linear “particle” system developed and employed as part of most of the compositions. By definition, the word “particle” is used to describe a small localized object to which can be ascribed several physical or chemical properties (Wikipedia). In the drawings, I use the dots (or particles) not only as a repetitive compositional element, but also to represent cumulative personal experience.

Seeing Robert Indiana’s retrospective, Beyond Love, at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2013 was a transporting experience. Coming into contact with a room full of works combining words and familiar shapes in vivid colors with construction detritus to make totemic art placed me in a convivial frame of mind. He once stated, “The Lost into Found, Junk into Art, the Neglected into the Wanted, the Unloved into the Loved, Dross into Gold…” Why make new “stuff” when I can repurpose what I already have?

As an emerging artist during the dominance of the Abstract Expressionist movement, Louise Nevelson utilized wooden objects that she collected from urban debris piles to create her massive installations. It was a process clearly inspired by the model of Marcel Duchamp’s found-object sculptures and readymades. Conventional wisdom has it that she purposefully
selected wooden objects for their suggestive capacity to call to mind urban structures, nature, and the heavenly bodies (Artstory). Her work inspires me but I choose my materials for their ability to reflect rural forms and nature. I’ve always believed that if Nevelson and I had identical architectural bits, it would be said that her work would represent a cityscape, and mine the countryside. In this case context equals environment.

Although none of them have ever said so directly, my art history professors have often given me the impression that my abstract works on paper were possible thanks to Wassily Kandinsky's first abstract watercolor, painted in 1910 (FIGURE 4- KANDINSKY PICTURE). It is considered by most scholars as one of the first artworks to come out from the representational practice of Western European painting entirely, erasing references to well known structures, all narrative insinuations, and principles of material representation. It has been said that, for Kandinsky, painting was a deeply spiritual practice and that he sought to communicate acute spirituality and the depth of our emotions through a universal visual language of abstract structures and colors. (Artstory) Furthermore, he viewed non-objective, abstract art as the ideal visual mode to express the psyche of the artist and to convey common emotions and ideas. I know that in my case I have reached deep inside myself to pull out thoughts and feelings I want to describe to the audience by using a similar language.

For the most part titles help viewers understand what they’re looking at and can give direction to know how to interpret the piece. Alternatively, composer Arnold Schoenberg once said, “Naming art may reveal too much.”, and subsequently wrote four compositions without naming them. It wasn’t until his publisher insisted that he relented. In the same spirit, I have refrained from revealing too much of my intent by using contemplative titles that conceptually reflect my experiences over the last year following my diagnosis. My intention is that the work
is open enough to allow for viewers to bring their subjective experiences and to interpret that work in ways that are meaningful to them.

One example of my titling is, “Fruit of the Poisoned Tree” a metaphorical reference to my body, the tree, having been corrupted by cancer and the subsequent treatments (FIGURE 5-POISONED TREE PICTURE). The title stems from the term “fruit of the poisonous tree” which is a legal metaphor to describe evidence acquired illegally by law enforcement personnel. That label will possibly have different connotations to different people unfamiliar with the expression.

This body of work is important to me, not just as a healing element in my life, but as a closing illustration of my formal art education. Its significance is that it comes to me through a practiced effort of applying what I know and how I feel about myself and how I have used common materials to create a body of work that expresses a finished level of aesthetic quality with intermediality.

Gene Baro, who curated the 1982 Carnegie International, wrote in that catalog, “Coming to terms with a work of art confers a deeper pleasure than judging it. Understanding is the reward of the hard work of looking.” It my hope that this body of work conveys some residue of the emotive content that I imbued it with through the making, as well it having the ability to speak to the viewer through the language of abstraction, visual poetics, form and materials.
REFERENCES

1. http://wikiart.org


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Figure 2

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Kandinsky’s First Abstract Watercolor
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Fruit of the Poisoned Tree