TO MAKE AND BELIEVE; THE CAPACITY OF
ART TO REVEAL AND TRANSCEND

A Thesis

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by

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Thank you Patrick for being there and your help in making this possible.
To my son Ryley
VITA


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FIELDS OF STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

Art evokes discovery; the discovery of images, ideas, and awareness which arise from both the subconscious and actual life experience. By bridging these two levels of consciousness we deepen our self-awareness and that of the world around us.

My work revolves around the exploration of dualities and the expression of life experiences. I make use of metaphorical imagery that is both intensely personal and universal. In the juxtaposition of recognizable imagery with the abstract, or the painted two-dimensional surface with the found object, dualities are exposed which are both mysterious and familiar. These dualities reflect the spontaneous nature of the subconscious and the conscious choices of reason.

The physicality of my materials plays an integral role in my work. I approach my paintings as objects rather than pictorial representations. In light of this view, I have acquired a heightened awareness of all aspects of my work. The edge of the painting is just as important as the front of the picture plane.

My materials serve as visual elements and also as metaphor and symbol. I make use of objects found in my immediate environment because they carry attitudes from my culture and reflect my life in some way. The use of found objects, however, is not without a sense of humor. Including the practical object in an art piece makes light of our society's obsession with function and also reveals the role of object as symbol. To see a common household tool, such as a used and worn broom, mounted on a pristine gallery wall forces the viewer to question his or her preconceptions of this object. By
approaching my concept through this slightly wacky, off-beat manner my work is made
more friendly and inviting while at the same time holding greater import. The object,
reclaimed from its natural environment, now takes on a new role as symbol or
monument and has significance on both the subconscious and conscious level.

Oil paint can serve to highlight or conceal the identity of an object or can express
that which cannot already be found in the physical world. Paint allows me to venture
beyond the given form and mass of the object making the intermarriage of the two rich
in possibilities. My work is full of contrasts, relationships and discovered images which
are brought to life through the union of paint and object.

Re-occurring images of brooms, wings and bands appearing to be eyes, run through
my work. Feelings, emotions and ideas take physical form through colors, materials and
images such as these. I look for physical form to define feelings which are rooted in
both subconscious and conscious experience. The driving force behind my desire to
make art is to fulfill a need to explore and communicate a part of my being that is too
often neglected in our modern culture. I believe we all share a common spirit which can
be reached, however fleetingly, through the primal act of abstracting images and symbols
with marks, forms and assemblages.
EVOLUTION

Mid-way through my graduate studies I became pregnant with my first child. This discovery had a profound influence upon my perception of who I was and what my art could be. It became natural to me that art should be born of life experiences, both conscious and subconscious. Finally I found I was able to focus on one direction and see an overall purpose and pattern to my artmaking.

Previous to this event much of my work centered on the making of art about art until it was robbed of any substance. Looking back upon my work, from undergraduate onward, the pieces that continue to speak to me and possess impact are those which express life.

Since beginning graduate school my work evolved from a pictorial style to an approach in which I regard my paintings as objects. My palette simplified and coalesced as I moved away from giving the maximum amount of information to the minimum. My paintings became unified and coherent, no longer suffering the fate of visually compartmentalizing into many little compositions inside one painting.

I spent my whole first year experimenting with using a multitude of materials from foam board to bubble wrap. Struggling to understand form, I built and found complex shapes to paint upon. This was a great learning process which helped me to discern what it was I wanted. But it took a profound event, that of creating another human being, to turn my work around and make it my own.
With new focus I moved on to interpreting and expressing aspects of my pregnancy. This began with charcoal drawings on paper which were very direct and immediate. I began to use symbols indicative of my pregnant state such as the chair images in *Pressure Ribs* (Plate I) or the purse in *Pregnant Handbag #3* (Plate II). In these initial drawings I attempted to capture the feeling of my expanding ribcage and the force exerted upon them. I used the chair as a metaphor due to both its anthropomorphic qualities and containing, supportive function.

I felt very positive about my drawings because they freed me from all the baggage which oil painting can carry with it. Drawing gave me a direct link to expressing the subconscious because I was not concerned with technique or color only with marks on a white surface. This raw, naked approach to artmaking was both refreshing and revitalizing.

The desire to capture the spontaneity and directness of drawing in my paintings led me to work on *Watcher* (Plate III) immediately after completing a drawing in order to maintain my stream of consciousness. The strength of this piece is due to its direct relation to drawing and to my emotional state as a pregnant woman. I feel *Watcher* brings forth a part of my subconscious because it was so impulsive. This piece began with an all-encompassing vision of a vivid red. This red was to become a symbol for lifeblood. Life cycles rely upon the power of blood for support. A woman’s menstrual cycle is a constant reminder of her potential for creating life. After conception, the flow of blood stops, becoming the constituent of the embryo’s environment, allowing a new life to begin. Blood flows back and forth through the umbilical cord from mother to child, and is also the painful color of birth. Thus, red, which is present in *Watcher* and some of my paintings to follow, is an emblem of the whole cycle of life and the procreative forces of nature.
As this painting, **Watcher**, continued it took on a surprising presence. While working on this painting an image arose which appeared to be watching me. The rectangular plexiglass insert above the center of this piece took on the quality of a band of eyes with its misty, evocative depth. The strange yet familiar nature of this piece became expressive of the feeling of carrying a child inside of me who was a stranger yet part of me at the same time. I was later to discover this same unexpected presence while working on another painting entitled **Looking Out From the Soft Grey** (Plate IV). **Watcher** was the first piece to become an object rather than a two-dimensional illusion of pictorial space. This painting marks my transition from a pictorial style to an objective one and is the first painting successfully expressing my pregnant state.

My images are primarily symbolic and move back and forth between being representational or abstract. Representational images carry specific implications which the abstract cannot. By contrast, abstract imagery contains possibility and mystery, much like the feeling one gets from looking at a sketch verses a finished drawing. I prefer to imply my concept rather than directly define it, thus leaving room for the viewers imagination as well as my own. The juxtaposition of representational imagery and the abstract allows me to draw allusions to the known world while reaching beyond it into the ethereal. This juxtaposition exposes the duality of our conscious life, which is based upon the world of objects, and the subconscious world of the mind.

Sometimes the workings of the subconscious are abstract and assume no recognizable form. They are best expressed simply through color or atmosphere. Other times recognizable images arise which are linked with our dreams, memories and other subliminal associations some of which carry universal import.

Our experiences of art and of dreaming are both based upon a visual language. This language consists of complex visual metaphors which are not always readily understood. The metaphors of my art and those of dreams are similar in that they both are capable
of capturing human fears and aspirations. Yet, the symbology I use differs from dream imagery because mine are the metaphors of both conscious and subconscious experience.

The representational image of wings reoccurs throughout my work. This image symbolizes the protective, nesting quality of being pregnant with child. Eventually, after the birth of my son, this protective feeling in the wings evolved to express the tension between freedom and responsibility. Birth gave me physical freedom and an incredible sense of relief, however, I now had a completely dependent person to care for. I found my work began to express this state by appearing more open and light yet still restrained.

The protective wings image first appeared in Watcher as the white, thickly painted area surrounding the red and black figure. But it was not until Looking Out From the Soft Grey, which is a piece related in concept to Watcher, that I consciously introduced the wings. Here the wings are tightly drawn together, strongly and resiliently protecting the enclosed figure. The wings express the feeling of harboring and nurturing a child inside of my abdominal walls. While I was pregnant, the wings image appeared so intensely protective in my work that it was shield-like, as in Fortress (Plate V). Following the birth of my son, however, the wings became soft, delicate and somewhat transparent as in Mother-Wife (Plate VI). This change occurred naturally with the passage of time and was related to my changing role as mother. The transparent wings of Mother-Wife and the fluid wings of Yellow Wing (Plate VII) seem capable of bending and flexing as if to allow for my son’s growth as an individual. This ability of symbols to adapt and evolve reflects the cognitive fluidity between the hemispheres of subconscious and conscious experience and the insightful nature of creative process.

Art reveals truth, much of which is not consciously realized until seen in hindsight. The relationships I discover between art and life, or even on a more formal level of materials and composition, compel me to continue to paint.
MATERIALS

My feelings, ideas and emotions find physical manifestation through the materials I use. During the process of painting I seek a balance between conscious control, subconscious influences and the integrity of the material I'm working with. As my work has evolved to express my life, so has come a change in the way I handle my materials. Previous to my pregnancy and its effect upon my art, I used found objects and three dimensional materials without being sensitive to their form or function. Instead I tended to decorate their surfaces with an excessive amount of color, texture and shape. My vision changed from painting pictorially or decoratively to a respect for the object. In addition I sought to find new insights from the found objects themselves.

I use the found object for the role it plays as symbol or monument on both the conscious and subconscious level. Found objects are either consciously or intuitively chosen to become a part of an art object and carry functional as well as deeper emotional associations. These metaphorical images are intensely personal yet may also be universal. A broom, for instance, takes on a symbolic role in my painting Mother-Wife once it is enshrined upon the wall. The broom, which carries a history of being primarily a woman's tool, becomes metaphor for woman itself. It monumentalizes our roles as wife, caretaker, career person and homemaker. Flanking this broom are a pair of delicate wings which express, among other things, woman kind's dual role as mother and wife.
The brooms in my pieces have been handled and used. Designed for a common, mundane activity, brooms carry other associations in our myths and personal experiences. They hold a place in our collective memory from seeing them leaning in the corners of our houses, and from cloudy visions of our mothers sweeping. In our myths brooms possess life; they dance in the film Fantasia, and function as magical sticks upon which witches ride. Brooms are an example of a found object rich in associations from myth to family life; also, they are subliminally potent. All of the found objects I use in my pieces carry multi-layers of possible meaning which belie their common, mundane appearances.

My materials also pose relationships between the painted surface and the actual object. I am fascinated by the dichotomy of flat two-dimensional surface and the actual physical dimensions of the object. For example, in Stop-Flight (Plate VIII) I define the painted picture planes of the three panels and the traffic gate above them by drawing a charcoal line boundary at their edges. The history of the two-dimensional line makes one aware of the drawing-like quality of the piece. But at the same time, I declare these panels to be very much objects by careful, thick build-up of paint on their sides and by their particular placement on the wall. This dichotomy in Stop-Flight further enhances the conceptual tension of the duality of freedom and responsibility present in the outspread, yet inwardly directed wings.

Some of my pieces contain a private humor. In Broomstick (Plate IX), the broom has several layers of color underneath its straw-colored veneer. I ultimately decided to paint it in its natural colors to poke fun at the hallowed concept of preserving the integrity and purity of the material. Here the broom appears as its natural, untouched self but alas its painted surface is revealed upon closer inspection. Painting this broom "realistically" is a pun on the perception of paint as an illusionistic device to describe the real world.
IMAGINATION

"The restraint imposed by reason upon your imagination can cause one to reject too soon and discriminate too severely"

Francisco Goya

Imagination and play make the art making experience rich for me because they reveal what lies beneath the surface in the subconscious. Dream imagery, art images and the active imagination, being visually based, are all inter-related. Creativity relies on the discovery of imagery and ideas found through intuitive decisions. The artist continually moves back and forth between reason and intuition throughout the decision making process. The ability to bridge these two hemispheres links the artist with a part of the self from which much of our culture is alienated. Our society's values have become so materialistic that we often don't trust what we can't experience physically. As a result, many are distanced from their creative imaginations and any sense of mystery is kept at bay until they eventually lose the ability to use this skill. The child's gift of imagination is lost as we mature, yet, through art I believe we can achieve similar fulfillment. Through painting I make-believe and play, as well as communicate, and both are vital to my existence.
CONCLUSION

In art, as in dreams, we act out feelings and emotions through visual symbols. Some of these symbols are part of our personal mythology while others bear a common significance for human beings as a whole. My objects physically actualize my abstract thoughts, feelings and ideas. I continue to make these objects in order to better understand myself, my relation to the world at large, and to communicate beyond my own nucleus.

Ultimately, the essence of art lies in the experience of creating it and its quality of impact. Art has the power to bring the imagination to life, stir our emotions and communicate the sublime. Through painting I discover a wholeness of being and enrich my experience of life.
PLATE I
PRESSURE RIBS
PLATE II

PREGNANT HANDBAG #3
PLATE III

WATCHER
PLATE IV
LOOKING OUT FROM THE SOFT GREY
PLATE V

FORTRESS
PLATE VI

MOTHER-WIFE
PLATE VII

YELLOW WING
PLATE VIII
STOP-FLIGHT
PLATE IX

BROOMSTICK