

**Out of Shape, Out of Line
East Meets West**

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Artist Statement

My art is about reduction, simplicity, and color. I use geometric or organic shapes, straight or flowing lines, and bright colors. All of these elements are reduced to their minimal essence. In my paintings, I like to show the creative process by layering paints and exposing subsurface materials and textures. This allows room for contemplation and interpretation.

On one hand, my art is influenced by my appreciation for Minimalist art, an art form of visual simplicity in form and content. On the other hand, my art is inspired by my interest in Asian art, intensified by a recent trip to Japan. Japanese art is direct and unpretentious. It embraces understated elegance and often exposes natural processes, revealing a delight in seeing beauty in imperfection. Minimalism and Asian art serve as the platform for my work.

Out of Shape, Out of Line East Meets West

Introduction

When I started working as a public school teacher I had just graduated from the University of Virginia with an undergraduate degree in German Literature and Art History. I was hired to teach four German classes and an Advanced Placement (AP) art history course. I was delighted to teach the art history class and thoroughly enjoyed it. The following year I had hoped to teach this class again. To my surprise, I learned that I was not officially qualified to teach art history even with a degree in that subject. In order to teach it on a continuous basis I needed to take an additional twenty-seven credits in studio art. Upon completion of these extra credits I would be able to receive an endorsement in art which then would qualify me to teach art history, and studio courses as well.

I decided to take classes for credit in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) Off-Campus Graduate Art Program offered through Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). After I finished my first two classes I applied for admission to the MIS degree program. Once accepted, I enjoyed the wide range of classes, and recently I received my endorsement to teach art history and studio art. Had it not been for my desire to continue teaching that art history class I would not have become aware of the MIS program, nor would I have had the incentive to enroll in it. In addition to art history I realized that making art hands-on was another passion of mine. A subtle desire for creating art had always been there but it needed to be reawakened.

Aesthetics

In the beginning, I did not know which direction I would take my art. Other than a single

college drawing class, the last time I had studied studio art was in secondary school. I always had a keen interest in art, which was reinforced and influenced during the almost five years that I lived in Florence, Italy. Art in Florence is an everyday fact of life, and the incredible exposure to art helped train my eye and shape my perception of art.

In my first works I focused on colorful, geometric forms which were composed precisely by using basic math and measuring tools. The end results were well-crafted but over-articulated, mechanical pieces of art that left little room for interpretation. However, with time and practice I was able to move away from “constructing” my art towards a much freer approach. Instead of using exact lines and designs that I would map out beforehand, I eventually let my emotions, moods, and feelings guide me. My lines became looser and more fluid. I would still use the same simple shapes but they became larger areas of color and less precise. This new approach meant that I became more personally involved in my art, because it reflected more of my inner self and it allowed for more creativity. My art was more engaging for me and for the viewer. What I created before was pleasing to the eye but it did not reveal much about me. I wanted everything to be perfect and did not take any risks. By constructing everything I could avoid making any mistakes.

My new approach to painting happened quite by accident. I had painted one of my typical constructed pieces but I did not like it. I considered the piece ruined, and out of frustration, I took a big brush and painted over everything with several layers of paint. I loved the outcome! I could hardly believe that my ruined piece had become a beautiful painting. What I learned from this incident is that paint is very forgiving, and I could always cover something that I did not like. It made me realize that adding more layers of paint and allowing marks to show through the layers gave a painting more depth and made it more interesting. More than anything else, though, this

accidental discovery allowed me to become more experimental and creative.

Now, my paintings are created using gestural marks and I rely more on my own instincts. I am focused on the layering of paint and less on the precision of form. I enjoy the uninhibited process of creating, which is an exploration and a breaking down of my own boundaries. My process often results in unexpected and exciting outcomes. The physical process of making art without prediction of what the end result might be allows me to push material far beyond what I thought was possible.

My own art at present can be described as an art of reduction of basic forms and shapes, repetition of form, and a limited palette of mostly bright colors. I also use simple, reductive lines when drawing shapes. Reducing shapes, lines, and color to their minimal essence allows room for interpretation and contemplation. High-saturated colors convey a certain mood and help direct the viewer's eye to the artwork. When using a more monochromatic color scheme I will often add a bright color as a contrast. On one hand, my art is an art of reduction. On the other hand, it includes an additive process with layering colors and adding surface texture. I experiment with layering acrylic paints or oils to create surface texture and depth. I may add sand to the paint in order to obtain a rough texture or an encaustic coating for a smoother, more vibrant finish. All these different layers, whether sand or paint or wax, create either real or visual texture.

My approach to selecting the support on which to paint also involves exploration and experimentation. I paint on canvas, wood, silk, rice paper, or plastic. No matter what medium I choose I still use the same approach to simplicity, color, and form. For different painting techniques I try to choose the best support as well as match my support with my theme. For Asian-inspired art I prefer to use paper. I also enjoy the physical aspect of building my own

wooden panels to use with encaustic. My art, approach, and content reference the structure of the support.

Influences

My art is inspired by Minimalist art. Minimalism, as the word indicates, was an art movement that promoted the reduction or a minimum of colors, shapes, lines, and content. The word “Minimalism” was first used as a pejorative term for a group of young artists who emerged in the 1960’s and who challenged the boundaries and restrictions set forth by the Abstract Expressionism of the previous generation. These artists saw their approach as an alternative to the gestural excesses of Abstract Expressionism. They believed in the literalness of the object, meaning the object symbolized itself and became the focus.

Although Minimalists’ work was quite different from each other, they shared the basic love for simple, geometrical forms often repeated in serial form. Instead of traditional materials they used industrial materials such as aluminum, brass, Formica, and Plexiglas. They used prefabricated materials and often hired companies to machine-produce pieces with these materials according to their specifications. By having their artworks assembled by machine, the hand of the artist was removed. The Minimalists saw the artist’s touch as a distraction to their work.

In my own work there are parallels to Minimalist art, such as using simple geometrical forms and lines, a small range of colors and shapes, and simplicity in form and content. My art differs from Minimalism because I do show my hand and reveal my process by layering paints and using different colors and textures. I also use organic forms, which they did not use. Minimalists wanted their viewers to respond only to the literal object in front of them, its

medium and form. My artistic process of layering and exposing subsurface materials and textures allows room for interpretation and contemplation.

In addition to Minimalism I use Asian art as an inspirational platform for my art. There are many similarities between the two art forms: a love for balance, simplification of form, and a concept of clean lines and empty space. The art object becomes a focus of contemplation, drawing attention to its most important and essential elements. Asian art differs from Minimalism by its usage of gestural flowing lines and marks, revealing the artists' hand.

Painting plays an important part in Chinese and Japanese art and shows a close relationship to calligraphy. Often, writing in the form of a poem is added to a painting. Quality of the brushstroke is very important and reveals the artist's hand and personality. Once the artist starts drawing his line, using ink and paper as the preferred medium, he will do it in one move without any interruption or correction. When I draw lines in my paintings, often on handmade Asian paper, I also try to do this in one long continuous stroke, and sometimes I add writing to it.

The Chinese color palette is more subdued than the Japanese, using a monochrome color scheme or different tones of one color in order for the viewer to reflect on philosophical ideas. Although I am intrigued by bright colors, I also use more subtle colors to allow for contemplation. Under Zen Buddhism in the thirteenth-century, with its emphasis on meditation, monks would express their spiritual path visually with a few spontaneous, unpredictable strokes or rapidly drawn lines or empty circles. The concepts of emptiness and simplicity were important to obtain an understanding of the meaning of life, and ultimately enlightenment. In my work I use some of these same principles. I spontaneously draw a line, circle, or any other shape that comes to mind without any sketch or plan. If I don't like the outcome, I paint over it and try again in accordance with the Asian concept of impermanence.

Japanese art initially borrowed from Chinese painting. However, over time Japan developed its own distinct aesthetic style, including a palette of very bright colors. Typical for Japanese art is its refined simplicity, a deep appreciation of nature, and a love for imperfection. Where other cultures try to disguise an accidental mistake, a splash of paint or ink, a fingerprint, or the mark of a tool, Japanese culture delights in these unpredictable little mishaps.

Minimalists removed the hand of the artist from the work of art but Japanese art considers the art and the artist as a whole. Japanese art is very process-oriented, revealing how the art was created instead of concealing it. This relates to my own art, because I like to show the process with gestural marks, uneven surfaces, and layers of paint. I am particularly intrigued by Japanese woodblock prints with their bright colors, strong outlines, flat planes, and diagonal, asymmetrical lines. These are all elements that I incorporate into my own body of work.

Progression

When I started in the MIS program, I first experimented with making jewelry. In jewelry I enjoyed the physical process of cutting, sanding, soldering, hammering, and the decision-making part of creating a design. This was a good starting point for me because I could plan everything out beforehand.

Next, I worked with kiln-formed glass. In kiln-formed glass an image is created by assembling glass pieces and glass powder. As I began to manipulate and arrange the glass shards for my kiln-formed glass pieces, I was able to apply what I had learned in jewelry-making. I paid attention to the importance of design planning and the overall artistic structure of a piece, but started to use a more painterly approach to the images. This made my glass designs with their simple lines and pared down minimalistic shapes look almost like paintings. In *Black and White*

Nude (Appendix, 1) I cut and carved different shapes out of white glass to create the abstracted body of a nude woman. For the ground I used black glass that I cut or crushed into different-sized small pieces. These pieces were used to fill in between the larger white shapes. The heat of the kiln fuses the loosely designed glass pieces together giving them a high-gloss, industrial look, similar to a finish that Minimalists desired in their work. Working more gesturally in the design of this piece led to my next piece, also made out of kiln-formed glass.

In *Walking Couple* (Appendix, 2) I developed the lines to be even more fluid and gestural. The image depicts two figures against a red and black background composed of triangles and rectangles, walking and talking to each other. Again, I am using simple shapes but they have become more intuitively drawn. In both glass pieces my work depicts the figure.

I turned away from the figure in my next works but still employed the same simplified shapes and lines. After working with glass, I also wanted to explore a different medium and chose painting. My first paintings were overly composed but they became increasingly larger, with color and overall design taking on more importance. Many of my paintings are developed in a series because I enjoy the visual continuity from one painting to the next, as well as the direct comparison.

An Asian style artwork at Nordstrom Department Stores inspired *Homage 1 to Nordstrom* (Appendix, 3). In this painting I utilized some of the bright colors and expressive lines from the original. I made large color fields of yellows, blues, and reds and added fluid, black, Asian-inspired lines to the mostly square and rectangular shapes. Instead of rice paper of the original, I chose a heavier grade white paper as my support and added Asian script. I used a computer program to translate my letter of intent for the MIS program into Chinese characters, which I used here. To achieve a glossy texture I layered gel medium over the letters, let it dry,

then I peeled the gel off leaving some uneven edges. This technique allowed me to eliminate parts of the white background and to leave the writing intact. As a result, the Chinese character fields had become transparent, interacting more directly with the other elements of the painting.

In *Red Painting 1* (Appendix, 4), one canvas of a diptych, I painted alternating layers of gray and black acrylics. Then, I covered these with one final layer of bright red paint. I scratched into the surfaces of the different layers, exposing my process of layering. To break the monotony of the red color, I overlapped long stripes in black and blue. Instead of using different shapes for imagery in my painting, my support became the shape: a large, red square. Minimalists, in order to avoid pictorial illusion, which they saw as a distraction to their work, reiterated the shape of their support as the subject. The painting and its support merge into one thing. *Red Painting 1* conforms to Minimalism with respect to image and shape. However, it is more closely related to Japanese art in the way I reveal my process.

After experimenting with different media, I realized that painting was the medium that I preferred. I liked the immediate results in the process of painting. My favorite supports are paper, canvas, and wooden panels. For the most part I pick my support depending on my mood. When painting with encaustic, however, I prefer wood panels because they can support the wax better than paper. My fondness for painting is also expressed in several books that I made. For example, *Envelope Book* (Appendix, 5) is constructed out of ten envelopes that I glued together vertically to form an accordion style book. Each envelope is covered with a piece of canvas to which I applied layers of gesso. The envelopes serve as supports for the small paintings housed in a single structure, the book. I used clean, simplified lines and shapes, and bright contrasting colors. The different color choices function to heighten the visual contrast between the envelopes. This was a strategy used by both Minimalists and Asian artists. For Asian-inspired

lines I used either Chinese or Japanese brushes, or brushes that I had made out of deer hide and bamboo. The cover of the book is made of soft, black leather to complement the color of the paintings inside, and to act as a frame when the book is open.

Another book is titled *Accordion Book I* (Appendix, 6). This book is made of two interlocking accordion folds, one of them being the structure, the other one the painting that is being displayed within the structure. My painting was inspired by Asian calligraphy. I used black block printing ink that I applied with special long-haired brushes that I had bought in Japan. After I completed my design of curved, intertwined lines that I had painted on thin rice paper, I folded it, glued it, and incorporated it into the eight-fold support structure of the book. For the cover I used black cardboard to go with the Asian theme of simplicity and understatement. The structure of the book was inspired by a Japanese folding screen. When opened, the book shows a design of interwoven lines in contrast with large areas of empty space. The empty space in Asian calligraphy is as important as the filled space.

The interaction of color and empty space is also important in my next piece. *Cadmium Red 2* (Appendix, 7) is composed of black, white, grey, and red wax. Here, I exposed my process of layering wax, scraping it away, and adding more wax. The more layers I applied, the more sculptural the piece became. I also used heat to diffuse and shift the layers of black, white, and grey encaustic before adding a final coat of red. With this final coat of wax, I added more visual texture to my painting. As is often the case in Minimalist art, the square wooden support and the surface are the subject of the painting. This piece with its simplified color scheme invites the viewer into contemplation.

My next piece also invites the viewer to contemplate. *Contemplation* (Appendix, 8) is part of a series of small works on paper. I used small postcards that I collected at art shows or

during my travels as my support. I cover the cards completely with gesso before I start working on them. This particular piece consists of layers of white, pink, and grey acrylic paint. On top of the pink layer I drew a large, light grey Chinese-like character. Then, I covered this lightly with a wash of grey acrylic, so that parts of the pink were still visible. Over parts of the Chinese character, I drew a simple black square and intuitively added a couple additional thick, black lines. With the back of my paintbrush I scratched into the black shapes revealing the pink and grey layers underneath to expose my process. This piece is Asian-inspired but also has Minimalist properties due to my use of basic shapes that are reduced to their bare essence. The simple, uncluttered lines and shapes invite the viewers into contemplation, allowing them to concentrate on the “object” in front of them. Minimalists similarly wanted the viewer to see the literalness of the object without referring to anything else but the art work itself, which should be experienced wholly and totally on its own terms.

In my early works I used only simple geometric shapes in mostly bright colors inspired by Minimalism. Gradually, I added Asian-inspired lines to my paintings. These simple fluid lines became more abstracted over time. I moved away from literally painting geometric designs and let the support of the piece represent the shape instead. I also used more monochromatic colors to further emphasize the shape of the work. In my first paintings I tried to make my surface as even as possible, trying to hide any flaws. Now, inspired by Japanese art, I show as much of the process as possible and I enjoy revealing it.

In my art I try to merge my love for Minimalist design and Japanese art, both of which I came to appreciate during my art history studies. These two art forms represent my interest for simple design and elegance. During a recent trip to Japan, I had the opportunity to experience first-hand the *wabi sabi* aesthetics of seeing beauty in imperfection, and embracing simplicity

and understatement, concepts I incorporate into my body of work.

Conclusion

When I started taking classes in the MIS program, my principal goal was to satisfy a requirement that would allow me to teach art history. I did not view myself as an artist. During the course of my studies my perception of myself in that regard gradually changed; I now see myself as an artist. This transformation is due to the in-depth knowledge I acquired by studying different media, styles, and techniques taught by knowledgeable and inspiring instructors. With determination, guidance, and hard work I learned to use different processes and materials to express myself in a style that defines me as an artist. I have found a direction that I can continue to explore, refine, alter, and reinvent. Being an artist is a lifetime of searching and discovering new things, and my education at VCU has prepared me well for this road ahead.

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Appendix

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Figure 1. *Black and White Nude*, glass, 10-1/2" x 7-1/2" x 1/8", 2006.



Figure 2. *Walking Couple*, glass, 10-1/2" x 7-1/2" x 1/8", 2006.

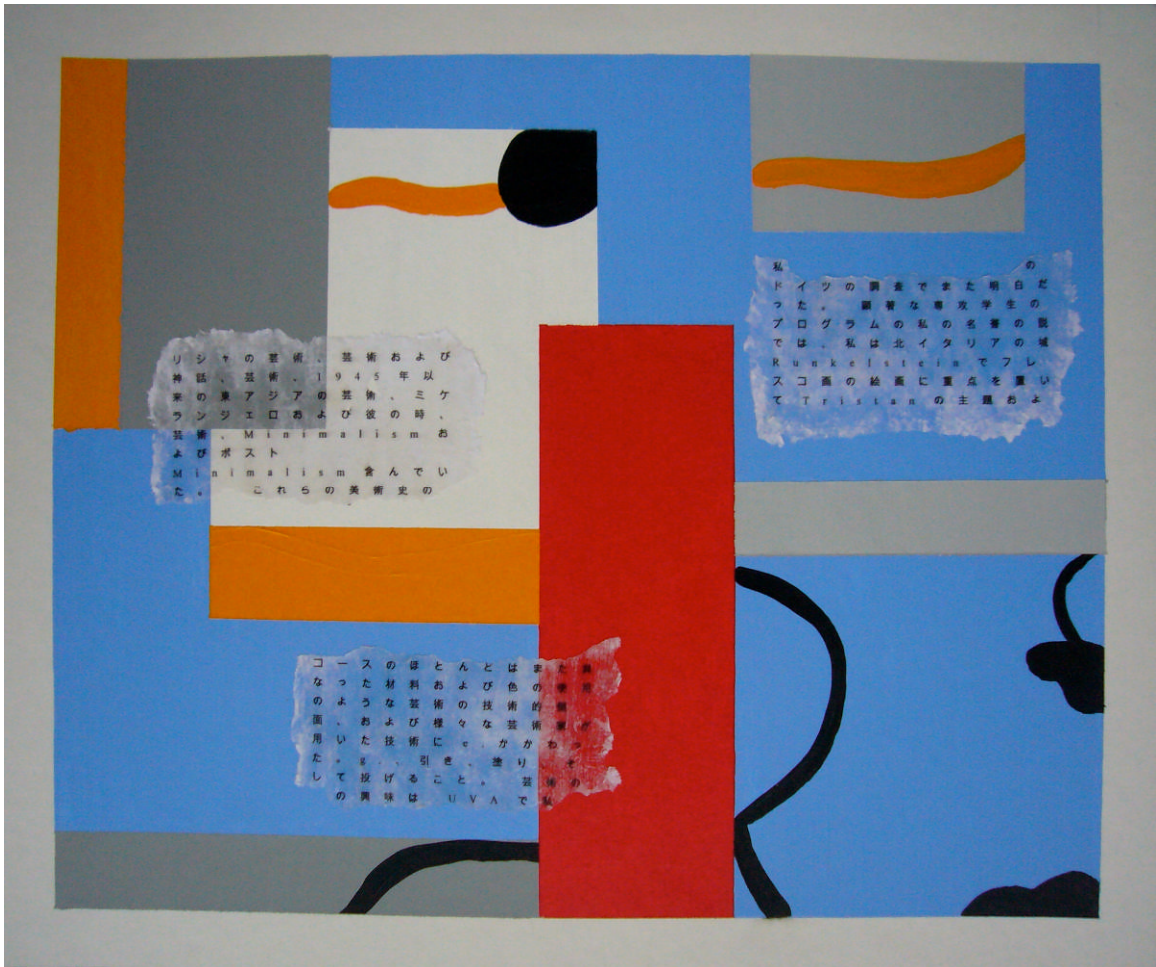


Figure 3. *Homage 1 to Nordstrom*, acrylic on paper, 20" x 24", 2007.



Figure 4. *Red Painting 1*, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 24", 2008.



Figure 5. *Envelope Book*, mixed media, 10" x 51" x 1", 2008.



Figure 6. *Accordion Book 1*, mixed media, 10-1/2" x 27" x 3/8", 2008.



Figure 7. *Cadmium Red 2*, encaustic on wood panel, 11" x 11" x 1", 2009.



Figure 8. *Contemplation*, acrylic on paper, 6" x 4-1/2", 2009.

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- 2010 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies, Virginia Commonwealth University,
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EXHIBITIONS:

- 2010 *Out of Shape, Out of Line*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Visual Art Studio, Richmond, Virginia
- 2009 *bookart@artspace: An Invitational Exhibition*, Artspace Gallery, Richmond, Virginia (Curators: Michael Pierce, Ginna Cullen)