

8-6-2009

Incidentally

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Incidentally

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Studio Art

by

Donna Sue Gamble

B.A. University of New Orleans, 2004

August 2009

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank the faculty, staff and my fellow students in the Fine Arts Department. I would especially like to thank Richard Johnson, Cheryl Hayes and Dr. A. Lawrence Jenkins, for their support and patience. Lastly, I would like to thank my family, specifically my husband Dennis and my sisters Christine and Linda, and all my friends for their continued love, faith and belief in my creative endeavors.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis primarily deals with two concepts in painting that I explored during my Graduate studies at the University of New Orleans. Both concepts are similar in execution but have two distinctly different results.

Key words: Cover-up, tension, mark making, process.

INTRODUCTION

A painting is made of paint-of fluids and stone-and paint has its own logic, and its own meanings even before it is shaped into the head of the Madonna. To an artist, a picture is both a sum of ideas and a blurry memory of “pushing paint,” breathing fumes, dripping oils, and wiping brushes, smearing and diluting and mixing. Bleary preverbal thoughts are intermixed with the namable concepts, figures and forms that are being represented...James Elkins, 1999.

James Elkins writes about “namable concepts” that are thought driven and are ultimately “represented” in the final product of painting: the picture.

Concepts that are formed from experience with paint inform an artist on the fundamental foundation of processes, namely the exploration into creative thought and development. At times the concepts are not so “namable”; more often than not the basic idea has to simmer and percolate and endure a series of births and deaths before the realization or the epiphany happens.

Observation and decisiveness take control, new ideas are executed and evidence of the concept is recorded. My work primarily deals with two separate and distinctive concepts, one that examines process painting and one that examines analytical painting. Both concepts are used to guide, control, manipulate and exploit the gesture and both are aesthetically driven. This thesis contains critical assessments of analytical paintings and the “new” ideas formed from study of remnants that are utilized in final compositions. It explores emotion

driven process work and uncovers the “history” of the resulting finished work. Color is emphasized and thematically used as a communication tool in all paintings shown. The execution of the new idea, the discovery of the ultimate “cover-up” and some “accidents” in the process are reflective of all changes that have occurred and been realized over the last three years.

The Analytical and the Aesthetic

I used to have the same lunch every day, for twenty years...Andy Warhol 1963

The analytical process of my new work began with the study of raw designs and patterns that I have identified as potential compositions in used palette paper I have saved from previous painting sessions. Not unlike Andy Warhol, who drank Campbell's soup at lunch everyday for twenty years and started conceptualizing the banality of the product resulting in the work "*Soup Can*" (1961-62), I too faced the repeated occurrence most painters deal with at the end of every painting session: the used palette paper. It was during these observations that I started looking at it in terms of the analytical and conceptual. I was working on large process paintings at the beginning of graduate school. The size of the canvas required large amounts of paint on the palette; at the end of each session I examined the paper and saw interesting passages that could be explored. The used palette paper revealed the very essence of the abstract expressionist school of thought: it was devoid of any object and looked convincingly emotion driven. It had quick action of brush work, pooled and dripped areas of thinned paint and thick impasto derived from mixing colors with a palette knife. It was much like process the paintings I had been executing up to this point.

After studying the used paper and cutting out potential compositions that were relevant to my ideas and experiences of mark making I began to consider the mark itself and how it functions in a painting. Could an incidental mark

function as a language or expression within the picture plane? Roy Lichtenstein produced a series of paintings of a brush mark. It was a commentary on the Abstract Expressionist style of the 1950's, the theory being that the expressionists placed on the "emphasis and eloquence" of a painter's touch.¹ In Roy Lichtenstein Brushstrokes: Four Decades, Dave Hickey states: [Roy was] ...stripping the image of direct narrative...[and] exploration into the concepts and components of painting itself, namely the brush mark."² An example is "*Yellow and White Brushstrokes*" (1965). The attraction for me, in my studies of the palette paper, was both the brush mark and the mystery. All the previously mentioned marks had their own formal devices but when looking at the small compositions of used paper I began to form a new concept of painting. The mystery deepened when I started questioning why these marks intrigued me so much that I was more excited about the unimagined use of these tiny compositions than I was about the painting I had just finished.

I learned a photocopy paper transfer technique from a fellow graduate student, and ideas about the new paintings evolved to the point of production. In Figure 1, entitled "Sideways," I combined some process methods with a portion of palette paper that had been photocopied and transferred onto a section of the canvas (the pink portions of the painting are the transferred blueprint). The reassigned pink portions were painted with fine detail and deliberate marks following the palette paper design. Originally, the idea was to

¹ Michael Kimmelman, *Portraits: Talking with Artists at The Met, The Modern, The Louvre and Elsewhere*, (New York: Random House 1998.) 82.

² David Hickey, *Roy Lichtenstein, Brushstrokes: Four Decades*, (New York: Mitchell-Innes & Nash 2001) 81.

combine several painting styles to see if tension between the processes would develop within the picture plane. The success of the first painting sparked my creative intellect. I considered that I was building upon some aspects of Warhol's work: the duplication and repetition of an image; nothing is a one time event, consequently, there is no magic in the brush stroke and any mark can be replicated.



Figure 1, "*Sideways*" 2008 Collage and Acrylic on canvas 36" X 36".

In Tom Freidman's 1990 sculpture, "Untitled," the artist dropped pick-up sticks onto a gallery floor and with a second pile he meticulously duplicated the random nature of the first pile. It was spontaneous chaos yet systematic in nature. And like Freidman, I too am capturing the moment of an incidental occurrence that is then repeated. Kristin Baker's father was a race track driver, and she grew up in the racing culture. It was through years of observation that she made it the subject of her art. Her current success is based on her subject matter (race car crashes), the size of her paintings (10' X 15' and larger), and the style in which she executes her work (a combination of learned processes very similar to those I employ).

It became apparent in my work that I was exploring an irony inherent in the effort of trying to make a mark a "casual" act. From my studies and limited experience with this new style of painting, I realized that it is possible to make a mark a "casual" act if the original mark was made without intending to explore or re-invent. To push the concept further, the paintings were compartmentalized into sections of fine brush work juxtaposed with the remaining canvas which was used as a palette in preparation to paint another process painting as seen in Fig. 2 and 3. (The "compartments" are reminiscent of frescoed niches found in churches and cathedrals in Rome during the Renaissance; each niche has its own particular narrative yet they all also contribute to the whole).



Figure 2, *Un-intended*, 2008 Collage and Acrylic on canvas 20" X 20".

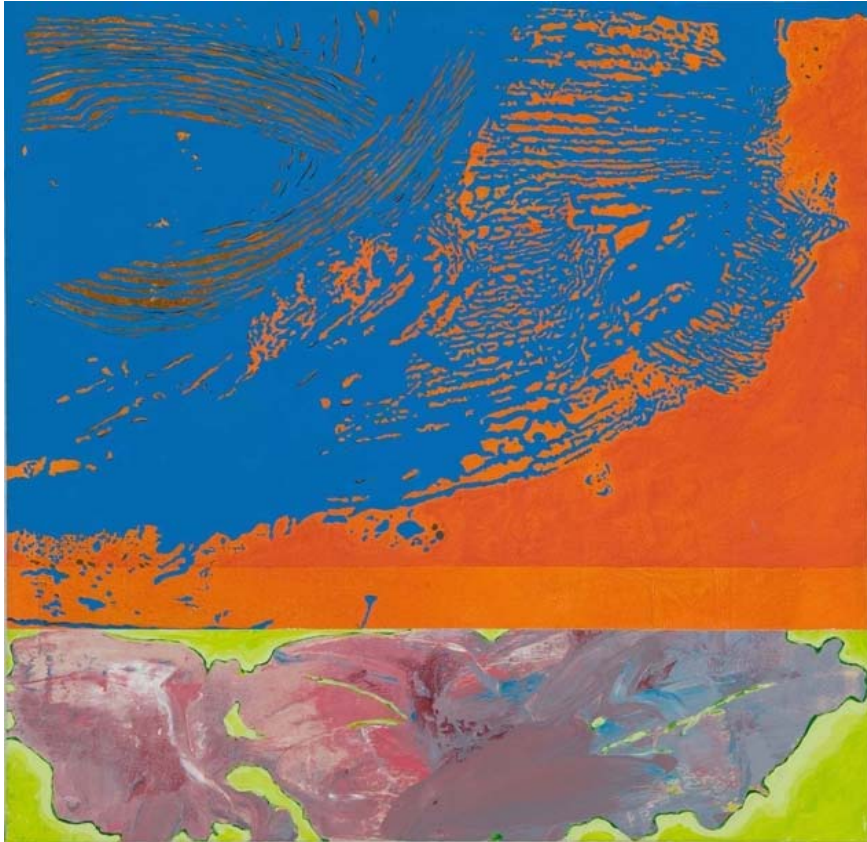


Figure 3, *Incidentally*, 2008 Collage and Acrylic on canvas 20" X 20".

My intent here, however, did not justify the means, and its inherent value was lost on the idea because there was no act of executing an “actual” new painting. The main concept again blossomed with recognition that the thick blobby paint held its own appeal. It is the perfect foil to the flatness of the delicately painted segments. It gives the work depth and dimension and is complementary to the captured image. Tomma Abts, a German born contemporary painter, is known for her small, flat, opaque paintings. The opaque portions of my new work is similar to the over all flatness she achieves in her work.

In many ways I am deconstructing the formality of mark making (is the mark made on palette paper truly formal?) by isolating existing marks and lending them to a new frame work in which they function and can be viewed. The reconstructed marks are utilized to develop the concept of remnants, which are usually discarded, becoming the main focus of the work as seen in Fig. 4. In this respect, the dialogue created fascinates me on many levels,

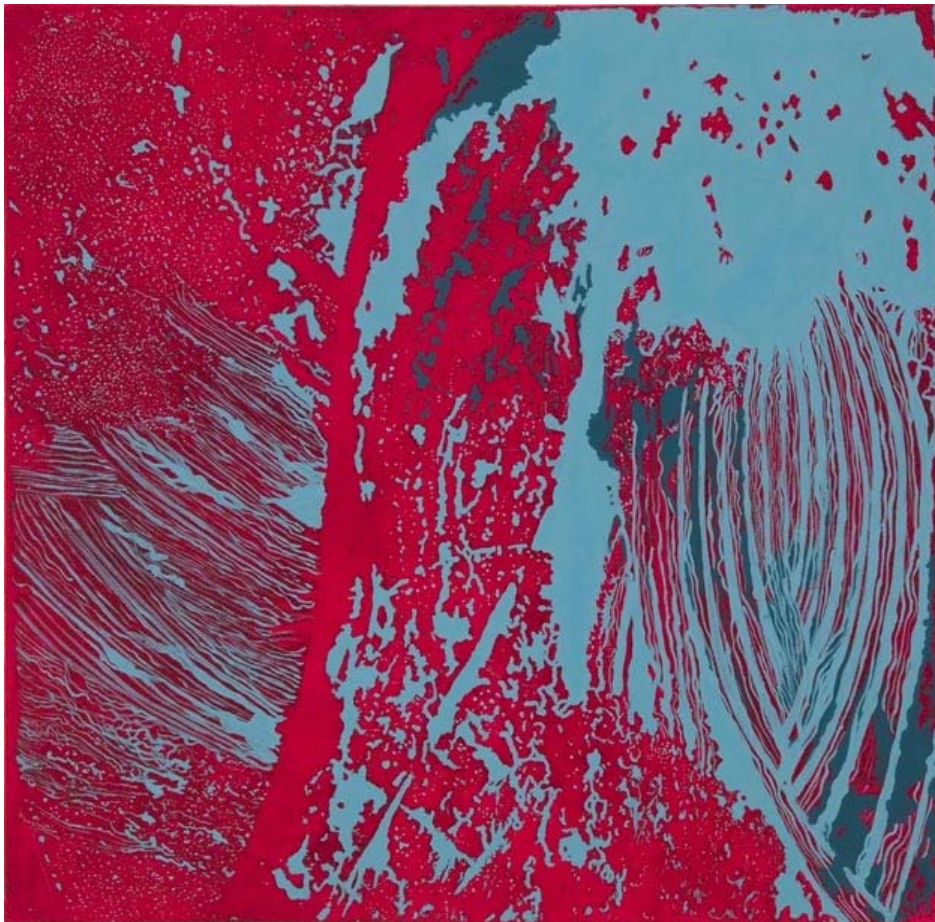


Figure 4, *Red Sea*, 2009 Collage and Acrylic on canvas 36" X 36".

some that are unexplainable and others that have to do with how planned and methodical and even obsessive I have become when creating these works.

The embellishment of the fine brush marks seen in Fig. 4 have become “active” participants in paintings that are aesthetically driven and made with informed decisions. By making the most of these participants, I am still exploring the visual dialectic of a combination of mark making. It is my intent that the marks work as “self-generated entities” as I follow the guidelines, which are transferred from the palette paper onto the canvas and painted according to the palette pattern.

In Fig. 5 I have removed the compartments completely, allowing the fine painted portions and the thick impasto to collide. This approach allows me both to paint detail from the transferred plan and to re-paint the gesture created by the palette knife, thereby repeating that mark (palette knife) in turn. These processes inform me about the subtleness of painting and manipulating a mark.



Figure 5, *Up Surge* 2009 Collage and Acrylic on canvas 20.5" X 44.75"

The Accident Exposed

...I don't use the accident-cause I deny the accident...Jackson Pollock, 1950.

Jackson Pollock's infamous quote above was said in an interview with William Wright not long after the execution of one of his best known works, Number 1 (Lavender Mist) in 1950. In many respects, I am also denying the accident (it is true that the brush, when picking up paint from the palette, is used purposely and deliberately) by exposing characteristics of paint that have been accidentally dropped, smudged, and congealed. It is those "accidental" moments that have given my work one of its most appealing qualities, an unintended topographical look in the finished work. The paintings look convincingly similar to the macro world of the human finger print or the micro world of system structures within the cells of a plant. In his book *Earth From Above*, photographer Yann Arthus-Bertrand has used his camera to photograph the topography of the earth from an aircraft. The photograph of a desert in Morocco is very reminiscent of the self-generated entities that are created completely without intent but share a common thread with Arthus-Bertrand's work. In my mind I not only deny the accident, it is the crux and beauty of my recent work.

The Process and the Aesthetic

I realized there were about ten thousand brush strokes, and that each brush stroke is a decision. Robert Motherwell, 1963.

Robert Motherwell's painting, *In Black and White No.2, 1975*, is the work that he refers to in the above statement. It was important for me to look at his works because they inform me that process painting is about decisions and marks and how they work in sync. I am building my work on many different levels and some of the processes I use are about making a mark, standing back and responding to that mark, making a decision, responding to that decision, in an endless cycle. At times it is hard to know when process paintings are complete, sometimes I never know if my paintings are really finished, but I listen to the work (metaphorically) and wait for it to tell me. It was during this process driven mindset that I concluded that my early paintings, in academia, were more than only process driven, the paintings actually had a deeper and more personal meaning, one that I could not articulate when I made them but which has come to me now that I have distance from the mode of thinking in terms of the expressionist school of thought. There has to be a beginning of intellectualizing the creative process and to understand when and where the process first began and what it was that first sparked the imagination.

For me, that creative process began when I was very young; my brother-in-law (Robert) drew a quick portrait sketch of one of my sisters. It was gestural, done with vine charcoal on a piece of yellowed paper, and it was one of the

most fascinating and magical events that I remember experiencing as a child. “I want to do that!” I told him, and he proceeded to teach me the basic elements of mark making. I credit Robert with creating in me a need to create. At that moment I understood little of what I was doing, but I did comprehend that this “new” thing I could do was mine-all mine.

In a family with 9 children it was hard to get attention. As I practiced with the charcoal I was developing a language no else in the family knew. I would draw a portrait of a friend and give it as a gift. I felt special, validated and satisfied at my own way. It wasn't until much later in life (High School) that I learned to paint. It was then that I began my quiet obsession with the tactile quality of the medium, of moving paint on a surface in the process of creating imagery. It wasn't the end result that I couldn't resist, it was the experimentation with more and more gestures on the canvas and the build up of paint that took precedence over everything; it trumped portraiture or any other “style” of painting I had been taught in school or elsewhere. I really did not understand the drive to watch my hand in motion, but I painted quite a few canvases during those years. I really have no memory of the end result, but I do remember that there was a desire inside me that could not be satisfied until I had a brush in my hand. Discussing these formative years is important as they laid the foundation I am building on today.

An important aspect of my earlier grad school work is the element of the “cover-up” in which I view myself as the symbol for the canvas and the paint as the layers of defense against the childhood pain from which I have not escaped.

At first I thought of this protection as the “history” of the painting/myself; I was always building layers and layers of paint but only (at my discretion) would the top layers be visible; I would allow small windows for the viewer to see those first layers, Figs. 6 and 7, but I would continue to build layers until I felt satisfied that the canvas was fully protected. Freud talked about the “windows to the unconscious” a technique for diagnosing hidden problems in childhood and the resistance of bringing these conflicts to the consciousness.³

I suppose in a sense I have resisted this notion of bringing conflicts to consciousness to protect myself from living in the world as a vulnerable human. Consequently, I built layers or veneers in my paintings for the same reasons. In Figures 6 *Apertures* and 7 *Peep Show*, from 2006, overlapping planes allow the eye to see multiple fields at once. I am looking through to the very first processes of washes, drips, stains, pours or impasto. These first layers are important as a very basic foundation for the many formal elements I incorporate, and they relate to the idea of the “cover-up.”

³ Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (London: W.W. Norton & Co, 1923) 19 & 20.



Figure 6, *Apertures*, 2006 Acrylic on canvas. 48" X 58".



Figure 7, *Peep Show*, 2006 Acrylic on canvas. 75" X 75".

Masking/Taping is a process that is different from layering because it is employed to reinforce the idea of hidden information and what is and is not revealed in the final work. Tape is applied on top of the layering process, areas

are painted over and the tape removed revealing sharp edges that collide with the under laid portions.

Leah Ollman reviewed Kristin Baker's show in Los Angeles in 2005. She writes, "...Baker has developed a style reminiscent of cut-paper collage. Shapes remain hard-edged and discrete, but they layer and interweave with lush intensity. Chaos and control are in exquisite balance."⁴ Baker's work informs mine by reinforcing my thoughts about my approach to painting. When I see her work, I think critically about how I fit in the art world today. An old Professor of mine once said to me "like minds think alike" making the point that artists exploring a visual dialogue can reach the same conclusions and extrapolations thereby ending up with similar work. Baker is currently receiving accolades for implementing the type of structured process paintings that I produced early in my grad studies.

For me, in the process paintings, I generate a collaboration of oppositions of many visual components-those I want the viewer to see and those I do not. The organic nature of the orb has been a re-occurring theme of my early work. I unconsciously painted circles over and over again never questioning my motivation (maybe a lens to some unsatisfied need). After much examination I have come to conclude that the sphere is used as a signifier, to give relevance to the idea of looking through a visual field. Often, however, the orb is a flat disc, not masked, of opaque color used as a foil to prevent the viewer from seeing the under laid portions. In a sense it acts as both an extension and a

⁴ "Ride to Live, Live to Ride" Rev. of [Kristin Baker](#), by Leah Ollman. [Los Angeles Times](#) 1 April 2005: E22-23.

screen by disrupting the sharp edges of the taped areas. The aesthetics of these paintings incorporate painting devices and are used in conjunction with assessments and conclusions I have expanded upon in all my early work.

The atmospheric passages combined with the globe structures can give my work the feeling of distant galaxies, but these areas are not intended to depict or represent anything other than how I process and respond to the surface of the work and my innate need to watch my hand in motion. However, when combined with the other formal aspects; it lends itself to the sumptuousness of the finished product. It is the juxtaposition of the “closed” forms and the “open” forms that creates the tension important in my early work. It has been my experience in executing work and looking at other artists’ work that the surface tension is the “unnamed something” that captures and holds the audience. Questions arise about what the work is trying to say, what its meaning is. I attribute this quality as one that helps to create tension in my work.

Another quality of tension is the perception and sensation of what I want the audience to feel or experience. It is important in the apparent “movement effect” of the painted surface and that is clearly seen in Figure 7. This painting’s appeal exists in many layers on the canvas, each cover is relative to the previous one. The painting still maintains an over all quality even though it is like a train wreck (does it make the audience feel tense?) in that the eye does not quite know what to look at first; it is nearly an overload of information. It has obvious energy that conveys its generosity. It represents the ultimate

“cover-up” as it defuses the connection of the process of painting and becomes more purposely about creating repeated structures within the picture plane. The structures mingle and repel (another aspect of tension) as they compete on the canvas for attention; there is no ambiguity, only controlled information.

An additional concept of my paintings is based on the movement of the abstract expressionists and their ideas of painting pure emotion, with an emphasis on the internal psyche and its importance to the end result.

According to Eleanor Munro, Hans Hofmann stated:

...a work of art, drawing or painting, was to have its internal life as a system of pushes and pulls acting across the whole surface. Then these interrelated thrusts would generate an all-over field of energy.⁵

It is that field of energy that is so relevant in my work. In Fig. 8 the combination of painting techniques intensifies and activates the canvas resulting in a work that is visceral in nature.

⁵ Eleanor Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists*, (New York: Simon & Schuster 1979) 110.



Figure 8, *Relevancies*, 2007 Acrylic on canvas 6'.7" X 13'.6".

The Color Combinations and Applications

The color devices I use are essential to the success of all my work. I have a fascination with simultaneous contrast, and making color seem to move on the canvas is subconsciously done. In Bridget Riley's painting, *August*, (1995) she uses simultaneous contrast with colors and tones to give her work the perception of movement. Riley is one of the founding members of Op Art and all my work from the last decade is influenced by her color combinations and the vibrating effect that she achieves on the picture plane.

I automatically choose colors that will compliment or resist one another much like I employed in the large process paintings and in the new work as well. Color is a significant tool I use to evoke a mood or elicit a feeling, or signify an event. The drama of color excites me because it demands attention. The expressive nature of color, some dominate and some subordinate, informs me how colors compete. My work is about exploring the vibrating optics of color which creates depth and atmosphere in the presence of other colors; it directly relates to how I choose these colors, which are both personal and randomly selected, and based on my intuitive process as an artist. In Figures 6, 7 and 8, it is evident that the use of clashing and interactive complements creates a dynamic rhythm of pulsating color. I want the audience to experience this movement and I want to draw out a response through intensity, brightness, and purity of the colors I use.

In my new work I have built on the concept of layering, but with a significant deviation. I use numerous layers of the same translucent color as the ground. These layers build up the intensity of the color to the point of saturation and almost give the ground a jewel-like quality. When the flat semi-opaque color is applied to the transferred design the flat color looks as if it is floating on the translucent ground. The effect is powerful and mesmerizing.

The Pertinence of the Execution

Canvas size was an important element in my early graduate work. It communicates a certain audacity to the audience and lends itself to the type of process painting I do; it creates a connection with the viewer as it envelopes him or her. There is an immediacy of experience with my large scale paintings; the size enhances intimacy as the viewer is drawn into the painted environment. Helen Frankenthaler states: “The gesture is that size, in relation to the thought, the arm, the body. You need that many feet of flat surface for the illusion, for the light.”⁶ And later in the same Eleanor Munro interview, Frankenthaler ties in scale with emotions by quoting Barnett Newman, “Scale equals feeling.”⁷ Kristin Baker comments, “I love painting large...It’s just a lot more fun to conquer. I want the paintings to create an environment that envelops you.”⁸ My large scale paintings are tied to those concepts of the expressionists’ as well new work being produced today. It is a commentary on my own ideas about what it is I’m expressing as an artist. To me, size is relative and often when an artist paints on a large scale it reflects his or her seriousness about their work. However, this concept does not discount that artists that paint small are not serious (I am currently working in small scale) about the work. It has been my experience that painting on a grand scale is not only about creating a mood; it speaks to courage and dedication.

⁶ Eleanor Munro., p. 207.

⁷ *ibiq.*

⁸ Dodie Kazanjian, “Color Surge” *Vogue* Mar. 2008: 383-387.

I believe that it takes nerve to face a large canvas of pure ground and start painting it; this daring is at the essence of what is pertinent to the execution of the piece. Brice Marden paints canvases that are 6' by 6', and he is quoted as saying the size of the canvas should be the size of the average man as it pushes the painting into the next realm.⁹ There is no other painting I've seen that pushes into the next realm or is more encompassing than Claude Monet's *Water Lilies*, c. 1920. It is the epitome of the points I am making about size lending itself to the style of painting that best suits its intent.

⁹ Chris Ofili, "Painters' paintings: Brice Marden and Chris Ofili in conversation," ArtForum Oct. 2006: 119-125.

The Discovery and Conclusion

Lee Krasner is considered the first “generation” (a term coined by art historians) of female expressionists. She embraced what she referred to as the dark side of the dialectic: fear and anxiety¹⁰. I relate to this statement on many levels. The insecurity I had was used in my paintings to “cover-up” metaphorically, communicatively and reflectively. It has only been through the process of painting that I shed the “personal” and embrace the “universal”.

My paintings are provocative nature and use multiple processes as mentioned on pages 19 and 20. Color, line, atmosphere and shape reflect both the control and spontaneity of action and gesture within the picture plane. My development in painting today is specifically a series of actions directed toward a particular result; for me, the goal is to make compelling paintings that propel me forward and keeps the channels of communication open with the audience. The processes I have discovered, the information gleaned and gathered and the foot hold I have made for myself reveals the confidence of creation and experimentation with an emphasis on the development of an inner visual dialogue. This language excites me as an artist. It feels innate and natural to let my ideas about mark making fluctuate with expanding and universal themes.

¹⁰ Eleanor Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists*, (New York: Simon & Schuster 1979) 119.

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VITA

Donna Sue Gamble was born in Henderson Nevada, and raised in Las Vegas Nevada. She pursued her education in California receiving an Associates Degree from Taft Community College in 1989. She received her B.A. from the University of New Orleans in 2004. She currently lives with her family in Mandeville, LA.