Pins and Needles - Brushstrokes of Emotion

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Abstract

Cathartic art provides psychological relief through the open expression of strong emotions. I believe that all art should evoke emotions, as I personally paint my feelings into each piece. When painting the portrait of my mother titled “Pins and Needles” I went through a lot of the same emotions I experienced when she left me in the hospital that night; the feeling of pins and needles in my heart. I have expressed my feelings in the only way I know how, through the strokes of my brush. I do not know for sure if I am fully successful in portraying my feelings as well as paying homage to the most important woman in my life. The accompanying series I created along side this piece was “Grave Expressions” which deals with the colorful landscapes, the statues, the stained glass, and even the wildlife that inhabit the cemetery. It's a contemplative setting in a way libraries and study areas are not; yet so often I hear people refer to these landmarks are creepy or scary. They are in fact places rich in history, architecture, peace, beauty and a place to honor the past. I began my first painting series also dealing with the death of my mother at Fredonia State College in New York with the Series “Vida y Muerte” which sprung from my fascination with vanitas. These were still lifes with infused symbolism referring to how limited our time is on earth and were especially associated with the Netherlands in the 16th and 17th centuries. I also drew on the Mexican holiday *Día de Muertos* or Day of the Dead, which celebrates those who have passed. The flowers were chosen to represent those important to me.

*Keywords:* art, death, life, healing

Brushstrokes of Emotion

**Vanitas, The Latin word means "vanity" and describes still lifes infused with symbolism referring to how limited our time on earth is**. Common vanitas symbols include skulls which are a reminder of the certainty of death. It’s associated with artists in the Netherlands in the 16th and 17th Century. (Fig. 1) There is also the Mexican holiday Día de Muertos (Day of the Dead) to celebrate those who have passed. On November first and second they celebrate their dead by visiting cemeteries and placing altars in the crypts and in their houses. Thus allowing the dead to leave the afterlife and wander for a few days in the world, visiting their family, homes and friends. Annual celebrations designated to the dead, represent an encounter not only of men with their ancestors, but also of the members of the community. Contributing to large interactions among groups, families, entire communities and their dead.

For the Maya, the dead have life, therefore their spirits have a need for sustenance just like the living. That is why they are given certain food to help them during their journey to the afterlife. This must be added, the Catholic festivity of All Saints and All Souls liturgy, both with a long tradition in Christianity was introduced by the Spanish. The Pagan holiday Samhain dates back to the ancient Celts who lived 2,000 years ago. This Celtic word means "summer's end." The Celts believed that summer came to an end on October 31st and the New Year began on November 1st with the start of winter. At sunset on October 31, clans or local villages begin the formal ceremonies of Samhain by

lighting a giant bonfire. The people would gather around the fire to burn crops and animals as sacrifices to the Celtic deities. The first was to honor the dead who were allowed to rise from the Otherworld. The Celts believed that souls were set free from the land of the dead during the eve of Samhain. Those that had been trapped in the bodies of animals were released by the Lord of the Dead and sent to their new incarnations. The wearing of these costumes signified the release of these souls into the physical world.

***Personal Series.*** 2013 I began a Triptych about my mother who passed the previous year (Fig 2). The ashtray was to symbolize her death from lung cancer and my father still smoking despite this fact (shown in the first panel on the left). The ashtray is shown with a totem pole of turtles, as my mother loved them (in the middle panel shown on the top right). The coffee cup represents where she used to sit drinking black coffee and smoking cigarettes as far back as I can remember (shown in the bottom right side).

***Vida y Muerte Process****.* It first begins with sketches to solidify the idea (Fig3). This also included (for this particular series) researching flowers, their traditional meanings and associations. The painting itself starts as an outline called an underpainting which is built up in layers. The focus is on the light and dark shapes in the piece. The layers are built in gradual steps that lead to the final painting (Fig 4).

The flowers were chosen to represent those important to me, starting at the bottom left, the four major past relationships that have since withered and died. On the bottom right, those important family members and loved ones who have not made the journey this far (my mother in the bottom center). In the center at the top, myself as the orchid which represents love, magnificence, strength, and artful delicate beauty. As you can see I worked from life so this is a still life painting (fig 3). The flowers in very center including the orchid are fake. As the real flowers (those on the bottom) die off the remaining three stay strong. They represent a lifelong bond with my two best friends on either side of me (Fig. 5). To my left a Rose for my friend Arielle. The rose is a symbol of love and color purple signifies enchantment. To my right is my friend Genna symbolized by the yellow alstroemeria which signifies friendship.

***Grave Expressions.*** Cemeteries are places rich in history, architecture, peace, beauty and a place to honor the past. I can say I have had a fascination with them for a long time. I would take walks through cemeteries while snapping photos while in high school. Once my mother passed away in 2012, my interests only grew. I hear people say ‘I won’t step foot in a cemetery’; I wonder who will visit these lonely souls when they pass? Who do they know that is left alone with no one to visit them and grieve their loss?

With this series I attempt as best I can, to render what I feel when I come across a cemetery. The colorful landscapes, the statues, the stained glass, and even the flora (Fig. 7) and fauna (Fig. 6) that inhabit the grounds. It’s a contemplative setting in a way libraries and study areas are not. I began with 28 small painting studies or thumbnails (Fig 8). All from photos I have taken from over a dozen or more cemeteries I’ve visited throughout my life.

***Pins and Needles*** My mother was 64 when she left me. Lung cancer, she had smoked since age 10. She was diagnosed in the first week of July and was gone the second week of August. This was a week before my birthday and about a month before hers. I am sure to most of my family and the average person it was strange that I brought my camera to a funeral. But having seen my mother before she died in the hospital and not looking in any way a child would want to

see their parent... I experienced my first moment of comfort seeing her in the casket. It was to convince myself she was just asleep, as I’m sure parents tell themselves when their child passes away (Fig. 9). Funerary art was a very big movement in the neolithic and metal age and persisted even after the camera was invented. It has become a lost art at this point. I also want to take a moment and point out that in Dark Tourist the host travels to South East Asia and witnesses the cleaning of a mummified corpse and the gathering of friends and family. Who take out their cell phones and start taking selfies with the corpse (Horan). What I am trying to say, is that out of most cultures, America seems to have the biggest fear of death and the dead.

I began with a small quick study (Fig. 9). I then created the final painting that is the smallest painting I have done at just under five by seven inches (Figure 10). When painting the portrait of my mother I went through a lot of the same emotions I experienced when she left me in the hospital that night. It reminded of the feeling of pins and needles in my heart. I have expressed my feelings in the only way I know how, through the strokes of my brush. I do not know for sure if I am fully successful in portraying my feelings as well as paying homage to a white woman who dared to love a black man in the 60's, raised 3 children, and taught for 30+ years. What I am trying to accomplish is the selfish act of putting this painful experience behind me so I can begin to move on.

***From idea to installation.*** My installation included five of my ten final cemetery paintings, the painting of my mother, and artifacts from her life (Fig 11). Before the viewer is the life of a woman on an altar. Many of the items were left decomposing in an attic; open to the destruction of nesting squirrels and mice. (Also, not to mention the influence of New York weather). These artifacts are all I have left to supplement the memories I have. Memories from when my parents first moved into the home. Putting together this installation I had my first glimpse of what her life was like before myself and my two brothers were born. My grandmother’s quilt, my mother’s own poetry, photos, yearbooks, her love of Noah's Ark and turtles, also her communion dress and so much more (Fig. 12)

**Conclusion**

We think we know everything there is to know about someone, but in death I am still learning about my mother. In a way it keeps me close to her and helps me heal from the loss. Self expression has been one of the best forms of release and understanding oneself, unfortunately in the modern age art is becoming a lost form. Arts organizations and funding are under constant attack and some people believe that art is not necessary. I wonder if we supported the arts as much as or more than football and STEM, how much the rate of suicide might drop? How many more people would be employed? As one of the top complaints employers have is the lack of creative job seekers.

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