

Echoes of Reality: Still Life and Drawings

Senior Honors Thesis of Kellie Marshall

I stumbled upon my love of creating beautiful things by accident, and with the help of my Grandparents. Interestingly enough, throughout high school, and even into my first year as an undergraduate, music was the vehicle for my creativity and what I turned to for that creative release. What I continually admired about music was its shape and the rhythm. It was not until later that my passion for art arose from the void that I realized was left behind when the music stopped; and without music, I knew that I had to find a more permanent way to express the form and pulse I had fallen in love with.

Since I decided to pursue art over music, I have been working hard to connect the lyricism of music to visual art. In that regard, it was the rhythm of music that became the all-encompassing direction that I wanted to pursue in art. It became my niche- or as much of a true niche as an artist can develop in her few years as an undergraduate. I have looked at many artists and many different styles, developing differing opinions of each artist. In the first half of my education at Rider, I studied under the direction of Deborah Rosenthal, who introduced me to Paul Cezanne, and encouraged me to understand his work through drawings of my own. We also looked at Piet Mondrian, who I took a great interest in, along with the artist that I have observed most in my career- Henri Matisse. In the second half of my education, I changed direction and began studying with Harry I. Naar, my current thesis advisor and mentor. Continuing to look at the works of Matisse and Mondrian, Dr. Naar presented the work of Mark Rothko, whose use of color I found very fascinating. Still, there was the challenge of taking these artists' work, understanding it all, and translating their ideas into my own work. Even more pressing, was an overwhelming absence of who I really was as an artist, who I really wanted to be, and how I could express my love of rhythm.

Head first, I dove into everything I could get my hands on: figure drawing, still-life painting, portrait sculpture, crafting, and even a little digital art. This continued for a few semesters until I took a moment to look back on my work, consider it against my research, and realized that there was a constant and recurring pattern – everything that I had done had inadvertently represented the same rhythms that were my passion in music. When I looked back over everything, including doodles in notebooks and lazy sketches on scrap paper, it all shared a common lifeline. The essence of this lifeline was bold and simplified shapes, dancing lines, and an attention to overall composition. Dr. Naar encouraged my newfound identity, and helped me to bridge the understanding between the work of Matisse, Mondrian, Rothko, and my own work. To aid in this burgeoning persona, he taught me how to incorporate aspects that I liked about each of these artists.

I have always admired Matisse for his translation of shape through both his paintings and collages. *The Snail*, for example, was revolutionary to me because with simplified shapes and vibrant colors, it still told a story. Also intriguing was *The Window (Interior with Forget-Me-Nots)*, in which I understood for the first time that a table will read as a table even in a simplified form; flowers can be flowers through gesture and rhythm alone. My interest in Matisse led me to appreciate Mondrian, who was a master of color. I pulled from his ideas of vibrant and crisp pigments, saturated and refined at the same time. Through Mondrian's use of primary colors, I began to focus my attention on complementary colors, a study that became very important in my overall work as an artist and in my thesis series. As color became more of a crucial element in my work, I did further research on Rothko. My piece titled *For Mom* came directly from Rothko's *Red, Orange, Tan, and Purple*. The paintings in which I show striped fabric, were affected by Rothko's green and blue field abstractions. However, I was not just looking at color and shape. More recently, I discovered the pop artist Roy Lichtenstein, whose use of line was of great interest to me because objects in his still lifes are almost always outlined in heavy black. As a result, I began to explore using crisp color contrasts as outlines for objects in my own still lifes.

Of course, it was not just color, shape, and line that were important to me; I still wanted to create an identity as an artist, put myself into my work, literally and metaphorically. Having acquired an understanding of the aforementioned qualities, I pursued them on a broad level, intentionally incorporating each characteristic in everything I did. Through this study, I realized something very important- art work can visually represent parts of the self that may go otherwise unnoticed. It is a platform for integrating who one is as an individual and as an artist at the same time. For example, *For Mom* represents who I am as an artist because it pulls directly from Rothko while still representing who I am as an individual because the flamingo (symbolic for her collection of flamingos) signifies the love I have for my mother.

Utilizing my research and personality, I began to compose and arrange still life paintings that incorporated a strong sense of design and composition through rhythm, and at the same time, objects that were personal to my environment and being. Though I have researched broadly to create this rhythmical body of work, it remains important to me to maintain a sense of wonder and lightheartedness in my paintings. I try to use colors that are pleasing or unexpected; complementary colors in particular because they help the eye move about the work. At the same time, I incorporate my identity by making sure that every object in each of my paintings has personal meaning.

A final component of my art work is texture, something that I have thought about quite extensively. I am frequently asked why I choose to use an oil-based pastel for my paintings instead of oil paint and a brush. This was actually one of my great challenges when starting and while working through my thesis series. Among other reasons, I concluded that sometimes brush work can disguise an artist's hand, and in turn hides their personality and intentions. I have used brush and oil paint before, but there was little control over the texture, depth, or sharpness of the final image. What was supposed to gain its mood through color, shape and form, instead was lost in the sea of brush strokes and varying textures. There is an inherent element of beauty in oil painting, but it does not ultimately allow me to show myself- rather, it shows my ability to manipulate and apply

paint. Oil pastel allows my hand to be closer to the canvas; it allows me to literally push the painting in the way I feel it should go, to put muscle and force into it, while keeping the weight of the color light. My personality is present in every line and every shape in all of my work.

A thesis, by definition, is the process of presenting a new idea and researching it to a point of understanding. Therefore, it was important to me to complete this thesis as a solitary appreciate and depiction of a very broad topic. Once I knew that it was the rhythms, shapes, and colors that I was most interested in, I began to pursue the single theme you see before you. Completing a thesis is hard work, and requires a great knowledge of oneself; as well as confidence in what she is trying to master. In the end, I believe it is not about producing a large amount of work; rather, a continuous body of work boldly and undoubtedly representing a single train of thought.

I want to transform the still life, considering less the actuality of the objects, and more the invention of the composition. My work comes from both a perceptual and conceptual experience, and in the end echoes reality without mimicking it. I have spent my senior honors thesis utilizing my research as an undergraduate, accepting the continuous pulse my work exudes, and trying to put myself and my studies into a single body of work. I want to better master rhythm, form, color, and line in order to represent each element in my own way. It is important to me to be distinct from other artists; I want to be unusual and captivating- even if that means breaking the shell of safety that has been previously established by the work of famous artists. An artist is never truly finished growing, looking, and learning, and it takes a long time to discover her niche- much longer than a semester. Ultimately, I have discovered that art, like its creator, is never a finished product – it is using education and a determined passion as a vehicle, continuously exploring and expanding the boundaries of the expected, and putting everything you are into what you do.