

*Claritas: Where Light Meets Form*

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By

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## ABSTRACT

### *CLARITAS: WHERE LIGHT MEETS FORM*

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This thesis describes how I came to create the body of work for *Claritas: An MFA Thesis Exhibition*, the culmination of my thesis project at George Mason University. I reflect on the journey that brought me to painting; my painting process; as well as the philosophical, spiritual, and aesthetic influences that led me to create the paintings in my exhibition. In the studio, I struggled to find light in my paintings, which mirrored my own inner process of stripping away the dark veil of ego to reveal the *claritas*, or the radiant brightness of light, that I discovered within myself. As I was working in the studio, I was only dimly aware of my unconscious motivations to paint. Through my overt exploration of the perceptual issues of color, light and form, I expressed my personal process of individuation. I propose that my paintings are metonyms of this inner experience, as evidenced by the formal qualities and documented responses to my work.

## 1. My History

When I was first born, I opened up my eyes and saw light. Since then, I have been struggling to make sense of that initial experience. The light that I see is of this world, yet it shines with radiance beyond it. In my art I explore this apparent duality of the nature of light: the phenomenal aspect of light as color and form, as well as the spiritual aspect of light in my personal readings and meditations. In my work, I aspire to convey the complex function of light, expressing both aspects of light and perception as one whole. This desire has pushed me to create.

### **Art and Spirit**

Spirituality and the soul are of great importance to me. After graduating with my BFA, I took my degree and my training back home with me and began a half-hearted search for a job in computer animation. I can still remember sitting on the floor, struggling against a flood of anxiety to assemble an application package, and hearing a voice that came to me unbidden. This voice pronounced, in no uncertain terms, “This is not the direction you should take.” The voice was my own, but it came to me from a place outside of my conscious mind.

I found many gifts in the midst of the depression that followed, but among the most significant to me was a stronger sense of my spirituality. I am the daughter of a priest and nun, the progeny of people who devoted their lives to pursuing the invisible intangibles. My parents handed down to me the deep faith given to them by the Roman Catholic Church, but my soul knew that it needed to find its own way. Pulling me in a new direction, outside the safe confines of Church dogma, my soul brought me to the very roots of Christianity. I became attracted to the esoteric roots of Christianity and began exploring Gnosticism. The early Gnostics were one group of many early Christian communities who advocated gnosis, or direct knowledge of the divine. I was drawn to texts such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, and other writings that advocate discovery of the eternal in the here and now, as opposed to the hereafter. In the *Gospel of Thomas*, Christ asserts, “The Kingdom of God is inside of you. And it is outside of you” (The Gospel According to Thomas 3). Christ, to the Gnostics, is a figure to find within oneself; he leads us to the “inner kingdom” (3).

When you become acquainted with yourselves, then you will be recognized. And you will understand that it is you who are children of the living father. But if you do not become acquainted with yourselves, then you are in poverty, and it is you who are the poverty (3).

In the Gnostic tradition, Christ teaches that the inner reality of the soul is as important as the outer reality of the phenomenal world, and to be without true knowledge of the soul is to be impoverished. He is understood as a “symbol of transformation,” not as a remote deity who has no bearing on the unfolding of the soul (Jung 437).

Through the Gnostics, I first explored the paradox of duality. The inner and the outer are two parts of one whole to the Gnostic, and the soul itself is comprised of pairs of opposites. Dualities are understood as inherent in this world, and, by transcending dualities, the Gnostic might enter the Kingdom of God: “When you make the two one and make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside and the above like the below, and that you might make the male and the female be one and the same. . . .then you will enter the kingdom” (The Gospel According to Thomas 22). Many Eastern philosophers share the Gnostics’ understanding of the play between opposites in this world and the ability to transcend them, so I was naturally pulled towards the East. I discovered Islamic mysticism, Sufism, which also stresses that the inherent holiness of life can only be perceived when the opposites are overcome. I collected works by both Rumi and Hafiz, two great Sufi saints, and I was drawn further east when I acquired a copy of the *Tao Te Ching*.

Through all of my readings, I began to see that there is a unifying thread through the multiplicity of faiths. The different religions and philosophies are each colored with a different hue of the truth, but before they spread out through the prism, all the hues came from one source of light. I began to explore this concept of a unifying truth as I read Joseph Campbell. Campbell stresses the importance of symbols, and how the different symbols from religions the world over resonate with the universal truth of the nature of reality and the human condition.

As I read the mythologies that Campbell described, I became particularly fond of the Hindu myths. Hinduism, with its pantheon of devas and devis, offers a wide variety of symbols to explain different aspects of the Absolute. The Absolute is one and transcendent, but it can be understood in its active roles as Creator, Sustainer, and Destroyer through the powerful symbols of the Hindu gods. Hinduism presents the complexity of the world in colorful symbols that I became even more attracted to when I started exploring paradox and contradictions in the paintings for my thesis exhibition. Dualism is key in Hindu philosophy, because the Absolute, Brahmin, is both infinite and formless as well as finite and contained by form. Contradictions and paradoxes are welcomed in the Hindu religion, as many of the Hindu gods embody both positive and negative characteristics. There is not one truth, and many Hindus worship their pantheon of gods in all of their myriad forms and shapes alongside the gods of other religious traditions.

As I explored spirituality in the form of Gnosticism and Eastern religions, a new way of seeing the world opened up to me. Exploring the dualities of body and spirit, I began on a new trajectory. I no longer believed that I should tread the known path and get a day job. I knew I wanted to unearth the latent potentialities within my soul and do that by exploring my passion: art. I put in applications to graduate school, and I was soon accepted for a program in digital art.



## **Returning to Painting**

Once I entered graduate school, I found that I was spending more time working on my painting than I was in the digital art class I enrolled in for my major. I had mastered computer animation, and, although I took pride in the work I created in that class, the possibility for discovery in painting enthralled me. Oil paint holds a certain prestige in art history, and I was both daunted by it and excited for the opportunity to explore it. I had been painting on the computer up until this point. Although painting on a physical surface offered me a new approach to creating art, the paintings I created were still strongly grounded in the digital language. Paula Crawford, my painting professor, took interest in how my digital work informed my paintings, which appeared to be digital because of their flatness and brightness. I continued to push both under her direction, laying the conceptual foundation of my later work: light and color.

During that first semester painting, Professor Paula Crawford had our class take a trip to New York City, and the experience left a profound mark on me. The pieces we saw in Chelsea were exciting, innovative, and playful. I always thought of oil painting as something that was very serious and intellectual. But the paintings I saw as I walked in and out of the small dodgy alleys in New York City told me a different story: paintings could be filled with a spirit of play and joy. There was one show in particular that really energized the way I saw paintings. The artist created huge, 5 feet by 8 feet oil paintings with exuberant colors that he layered with thick paint and then peeled away to show other colors dancing underneath. The effect was dazzling; the colors sparked and moved,

almost like a cascade of colorful confetti. I stood in front of each painting, completely lost in the play of colors that enveloped my visual field. I knew I wanted to make work that had that same impact on a viewer and, returning to school with that image, set forth on pushing the scale and color in my works.

I felt a tremendous amount of momentum leaving Professor Crawford's painting class and decided to take my second painting class the following semester. That second semester, I continued to explore light and color, but I worked on a more dramatic scale and added texture. I painted tall, 1 foot by 8 feet paintings on wood panels. The series I created lacked the focus of my earlier work, but embraced an ambitious scale and a looser way of working. At this point I had finished the classes for my digital concentration, but I was completely immersed in oil painting. The challenge of mastering the medium enticed me, and the impact of oil paintings became undeniable to me. It was becoming clear to me that digital art was a dead end for me artistically, and I saw oil painting opening up in front of me, offering me hundreds of exciting new directions to explore.

It was after the New York trip and during the second semester of painting that I became absorbed with exploring all aspects of oil paint, and I began to dream up my thesis exhibition as a series of colorful paintings, not digital prints. I knew I wanted to continue to paint, but I had not imagined that I would entirely abandon digital art. The change happened on the day I went to visit Crawford's painting studio. Leading up to that visit, I had a dream that I was in the studio painting airplanes taking flight. When I arrived at her

studio, the door marked the threshold between what was known in my life—my plans—and what I saw for myself, the hidden possibilities that lay beyond the reach of my conscious mind. As I passed over the threshold into the huge expanse of space beyond, I knew there was no returning to the digital work: I wanted the space and the freedom to paint. Gazing at Crawford's beautiful paintings, I felt overcome with emotion. I knew that I wanted to be a painter and that I had within me the same potential to create powerful and evocative works. On the drive home, the number of planes that I saw in flight struck me; each one resonated with me and told me voicelessly to trust my feelings and to pursue painting. That night I dreamed only of Crawford's studio, and I awoke with an image of Crawford inviting me into her studio to paint.

Some weeks passed until I voiced my intuitions to Crawford. I remember sitting in the studio next to her as I nervously played with the sleeves on my shirt and confided to her that I dreamed about painting all the time. She laughed and told me she did the same. Without thinking, I said that I was waiting for something to push me into painting. Paula physically pushed me out of my chair with two hands, saying, "Push." She told me I could be in the painting program the following fall and have my own studio. I dropped my digital art concentration, and turned, finally and officially, to painting.

The responsibility of being a painter and maintaining my own studio weighed me down and stifled my freedom to allow my authentic self to shine through my work. Although I was excited about painting, I was intimidated by the prospect of living up to the title of

Painter, and this confusion was reflected in the work I created. I lost the focus I had in my first paintings, and I became confused about what direction to take. As a result, I developed two styles: one that reflected the excitement I felt through an exploration of media in a series of long, textured colored paintings, and another that reflected my apprehension of the unknown through a thin application of paint in a series of dark paintings. The two series were so divergent in tone and technique that it was hard to see how they were from the same artist. I felt divided against myself and overwhelmed.

The two bodies of work eventually came together in the form of a paradox that I stumbled upon in my paintings for my thesis exhibition: dualism. The thought that I could be feeling two different things at once, and be two different artists, as well as two different people, became expressed in the work I created for my show. I painted with a new sense of focus and confidence the following fall. My voice became clear when I came to recognize that I was personally *in* both series of my work, and that both directions needed to be integrated so that I could reconnect myself as one whole person. I was able to bridge the perceived contradictions within myself in my thesis work. I found myself, as well as *claritas*—the Latin root of my name, Clarita, which means “the radiant brightness of light.”

### **Rediscovering Color**

I remember my fascination with computer screens in childhood: these intense impressions of color and light are one reason why I was drawn to digital art. Growing up

in the digital age it was impossible not to be influenced by computers and the ever-expanding mass media. I embraced the colorful images found on the computer screen, the video game screen, and the TV screen with the openness that only a child could have. Perhaps this is why, when I was an undergraduate, I focused on computer animation. The colors I saw there on the glittering screens became infused in my work, and as a child I was able to capture them with my media of choice: Crayola crayons. I preferred the bright, saturated colors with names such as Tremendously Tangerine to the dull, lifeless, muted hues of the other colors. Only the saturated colors ignited my imagination, and I was ecstatic when the synthetic neon colors were introduced to the Crayola palette. Finally I could capture the colors I experienced in my digital world.

The digital world came to influence how I see the world around me, as well as how I draw it. To me, the images on screen represent the fantastic; I connect those colors to the cartoon fairy tales I saw on TV as a child, and to the extraordinary adventures I played on my Nintendo. When I see those colors in the world around me, I gravitate towards them, seeing a window to the fantastical and otherworldly.

The greatest excitement comes to me when I see the bright colors of my fantasies in nature. Nature wears color like a jeweled crown, exalting it and lifting it up to levels of the sublime. Seeing colors in nature, I feel most connected to both a greater power and myself. No natural phenomena make me feel this more than rainbows. Rainbows bridge the space between the natural world and the world of fantasy. Within the natural

phenomena of refracted color, I apprehend the spiritual and magical. The rainbow, as purely refracted light, delivers color to the eye with more clarity than any other natural occurrence.

However, colors are found in a startling array in all forms of nature and wildlife. When I was a young child, I was particularly attracted to sea life and especially to the myriad of tropical fish found near coral reefs. I was astounded that colors that vivid and uncontaminated could be found in pools of water, where only diffused light could reach. I found the bright, tangerine orange that I loved from my crayon box in sea coral, as well as bright ultramarine blue in blue fish, and lemon yellow in a yellowtail fish. I discovered the neon pink I loved, not in the marine world, but in the avian world, in the feathers of a flamingo, which quickly became one of my favorite animals. I was delighted when the avian world revealed to me yet another colorful jewel, the hummingbird, with iridescent colors. At my childhood home my father planted a peach tree, and the nectar from the peach blossoms would often attract hummingbirds. The first one I saw felt like a visitation from the fairy realm; I could not believe that something that beautiful could belong to this world. Much like the rainbow, the hummingbird belongs to this world, yet reflects light from a world beyond to my innocent, open eyes.

The summer before I began preparing for my thesis show, I saw “Refract, Reflect, Project: Light Works from the Collection” at the Hirshhorn. The show featured artists who used light in differing ways in their work. The pieces that had the most profound

impact on me were the ones that used bright, neon colors to have an impact on space, particularly Joseph Kosuth's "Four Colors Four Words" and James Turrell's "Milk Run." In Kosuth's "Four Colors Four Words" four words are constructed out of neon tubes that shine brilliantly in a dimly lit room. The most spectacular part of the piece is how the colored light bounces off the walls and interacts with itself and with the space. I spent most of my time in the room examining the wall opposite the piece; I was mesmerized by the play of colors and how light could be used as a medium to paint.



Figure 1. Joseph Kosuth, *Four Colors Four Words*, 1966

Turrell pushes the concept of painting with light in his work "Milk Run," which was installed in a small room just beyond Kosuth's. Bands of bright neon yellow and pink light shine onto a wall and illuminate the space. It is unlike any work I have experienced before. I left the show feeling that I wanted to capture the effect of neon light within my work. I wanted to find an approach that would make the paint in my work just as radiant and powerful as these actual lights in an exhibition space.



Figure 2. James Turrell, *Milk Run*, 1996

The show at the Hirshhorn left a profound mark on me, and reminded me of what I had always loved as a child in art and in nature: light and color. Light and color were always what I was after in all of my art, but I had never pursued it with confidence. By the time I started painting seriously, I had repressed this love of pure color, feeling that such a bright palette was too naïve for a mature artist's work. My passion for bright color had never waned; I had only pushed it to other corners of my life, and out of my painting studio. I rediscovered my passion for color as I began working towards my thesis exhibition.



## 2. My Process

I returned to the studio with a new sense of purpose: I needed to become more familiar with painting as a process of responding to materials in order to effect the alchemy of turning reflected light into refracted light. I was no longer going to try to paint images that I thought were befitting to a “painter” and mimic the ways I thought a “painter” should paint; that approach stifled my voice and made my work weak as a result. I decided then to throw myself, heart and soul, into my work to see what would come out of it. I knew that I could only find out what might happen by surrendering fully to the painting process. The process, for the first time, was to become more important than the end result.

### **Connecting with My Unconscious**

With a newly-found sense of fearlessness, I came into my studio with a fire to paint. I found a poorly made frame that had been discarded by another graduate student, and I stretched canvas on it. The fact that the frame was more of a rhombus than a square helped me move beyond my fear of the final image, and its rough edges encouraged me to experiment within its perimeter. I squeezed several piles of color onto my palette paper, and I picked up the largest paintbrush I had to cover the surface with different colors and marks. I painted automatically, exploring the weight of the marks I made and

the transparency of the oil paints I applied to the canvas. Where I applied thin coats of paint I noted the transparency of the color, and where I had two colors touch I noted how they interacted. Next to a cadmium red shape, I painted green and experimented with how the two colors blended into each other. I left some edges of the amorphous form, and I responded to how the two complementary colors bounced off one another. After several hours of painting, I was shocked to see that I had covered the entire surface of the canvas, and that there was an image that seemed to have just appeared on its surface. The painting felt effortless to make, and I knew that if I continued painting in that way, I would pull out more of what I truly desired to paint from within myself.

When Crawford came into the studio, I was terrified to show her the work. She noted that it was very different from my earlier work, but there was still a searching for light that had characterized my dark paintings. She helped me understand how the light was working in my newest work: the transparent layers of saturated colors let light shine through to the canvas, which created a feeling that the light was coming from within the canvas itself, much like the way light shines through a monitor or television screen. Crawford encouraged me to continue with my new process, saying she could sense I was on the verge of discovering something. I was far from reaching my goal, but in my new painting process, I had begun to find light on the canvas—and I had begun to integrate my spiritual self in to my painting.

In this way I continued to paint for the next month, and I produced three more paintings with the momentum from that first breakthrough work. This work was very primitive, but the joy and liberation I felt making these pieces encouraged me that I was moving in the right direction. I loaded my palette with pure colors, and I set to paint with no goal in mind. I was painting with the freedom that a child feels, and I surrendered myself completely to the act of creating. I felt like I was watching the process of creation unfold before me, as form developed from the swirling mists of chaos.

The first in this pre-thesis series was a work of purely swirling colors. I painted analogous warm colors next to each other with a circular motion, which created the illusion of several gasses mixing together. To add some tension to the piece, I brought in cool blues and violets to collide with the warm colors, creating a sense of atmospheric tension. The areas where the cool and warm colors interacted were the most charged and electric within the piece; within the swirling colors, one could almost see gasses cooling and hardening, creating the sun and the planets in our solar system. The warm colors would create the bright stars, and the cool colors would harden to form the planets circling around the warm points of light. The creation of the painting mirrored the creation of the cosmos, as well as the formation of my identity as a painter.

### **The Power of Edges**

Responding to the energy I felt creating that piece, I stretched a new canvas that was 8 feet high and 6 feet across so that my colors could expand and move more freely over the

surface of the canvas. I started by applying warm yellows over the top half of the painting. Using varying shades of yellow, as well as colder and warmer hues, I modeled the yellow, pushing and pulling it as it floated on the top half of the canvas. The quiet beauty of the yellow satisfied me, but I felt that the work needed more tension. I added cool violets and blues at the bottom of the canvas, but I was unsure of how I could integrate it with the yellow that was above. By putting in the complement of yellow in the piece, I was forcing myself to confront the problem of edge and shape in my work. As I neared the hazy edge of the yellow amorphous form, I blended the purple into the yellow and was surprised that it created a desaturated green. In one area along the bottom edge of the yellow, I left a strong, purple mark. At first I felt obliged to blend it into the yellow, but I was taken by the play of the purple against the yellow. The edge of the purple was made sharp and clean by the yellow behind it, and it hummed with a given intensity. Finally, in my work, I had discovered the power of edges.



Figure 3. *Untitled*, 2007, oil on canvas

## **The Tension of Complements**

Using this new discovery, I painted my next work with a palette that was both equally warm and cool, to force myself to create more collisions between warm and cool colors. I painted jagged shapes and allowed the edges to remain distinct. After painting a warm colored shape, I would paint a cool color next to it. I forced myself not to blend the wet paints together, to allow the edges to remain somewhat pronounced. Because of this approach, the edges were still soft and somewhat indistinct, which created an interesting tension within the work. I covered the whole surface of the painting, oscillating between warm and cool color, blending some of the analogous cool colors that sat next to each other, setting the stage for the collisions that happened between the cool and warm colors that remained sharp and edgy.

I had discovered the power of edge in my last painting, but I had an even greater breakthrough in this piece: the *edge* between two complementary colors vibrates greater than the actual colors that create it. At the bottom right hand corner of the painting, I had painted a brilliant, red form, and next to it, a saturated green form. The edge where the two met exploded and hummed unlike anything I had seen in my earlier pieces, and the colors glowed with a greater intensity as a result of the convergence at the edge with its complement. I knew I needed to explore the edges of form in my work to set up these points of collision between complements.



Figure 4. *Untitled*, 2007, oil on canvas

### **The Early Thesis Works: Discovering Color**

I decided to work on a square format at about the same scale, so that I could focus only on the image appearing within the perimeters of the canvas and not have my mark impacted by a vertical or horizontal space. I chose six feet square, since the size is small enough to sit comfortably within a viewer's vision, but large enough to become a field.

In *Claritas I*, I changed my approach to painting. Instead of painting all colors within one painting session, allowing the wet paint to mix at the edges of adjacent forms, I painted different colors during different painting sessions. By this time, I was in my studio every day, on a set schedule, so I used the time I had to intuit where I wanted to paint certain colors and explore how their edges would interact with the colors next to them. My approach was similar to putting a jigsaw puzzle together: I laid out the pieces I

wanted to work with first and then filled in the missing pieces, connecting one shape to the next. I began by painting ultramarine blue patches on the canvas. I would paint a blue shape on the canvas, and responding to its placement on the canvas, I intuitively decided where to paint the next shape. I worked in this manner until I had painted all of the blue shapes that I wanted in the painting; and when I stopped, I assessed the negative space.



Figure 5. *Claritas I*, 2007, oil on canvas

During the next painting session, I painted areas of green, which glowed brightly next to the cool blue patches of color because of their yellowish hue. I wanted to push the play between warm and cool in the painting, so the next day, after the patches were dry, I

painted warm patches of a rose-violet. I responded immediately to the interaction between the two complements, and I decided that I needed to add more tension to the work by adding orange to complement the blue in the painting. I mixed cadmium red with a little blue to bring down its intensity, but when I painted it on the canvas next to the blue, it came to life through its relationship to the blue and dominated the painting. The area of the painting where the blue met the orange was so overpowering that I decided to push the rest of the painting by building up the light as well as the dark in other areas of the painting. I also warmed up the rose-violet by adding more desaturated rose madder to some areas and, after assessing the effect of the warm violets that now glowed brightly, decided to boldly paint in more desaturated cadmium red to the glowing orange shape at the bottom right corner of the canvas. This caused the shape to pop even more in relationship to the blue, and the edge between it and its adjacent blue shapes became even more pronounced. Once again, in this painting, I found light through the relationship of brilliant, transparent complementary colors, and the edges where they met would prove to be the jumping-off place for the most exciting work in my thesis exhibition.

It was inevitable that my search for brilliant light would lead me to color, which took the form of shape with well-defined edges. In my earlier efforts leading up to this breakthrough piece, the edges were still somewhat dull because of my-wet-on wet method of painting, and the colors lacked the glowing digital quality found in this new work. Crawford was the first to remark that the piece looked digital: the pinks and



oranges glowed in their relationship to the cool blues in the painting, and it seemed to be backlit like a monitor screen. She remarked that the color palette was similar to the colors found in a movie or a video game, a fact which she thought was interesting and edgy. I could see this in the work as well, which is why I was excited about it. In this work, I found the digital, neon light I was seeking. The colors that I adored to watch dancing on a screen filled my painting, and they invited the viewer to compare the work to the world of digital art. However, I was somewhat nervous about the pieces of colors that appeared in the piece as pieces of a puzzle, but looked beyond it because of my joy in the color scheme of the work.

After creating *Claritas I*, the real turning point in my work, I felt anxiety, but my dreams encouraged me to continue to follow my feelings. I had one dream where I was sitting on the floor giggling like a child, with a childhood friend of mine. I had a bottle of Turpenoid that spilled over, and the mix of colors on the floor became *Claritas I*. We both laughed and clapped at the happy accident. Creating *Claritas I* felt accidental to me because it was effortless; it was a surprise even to me how the image appeared, and recaptured the joy of discovery I had in my childhood creating.



Figure 6. *Claritas 2*, 2007, oil on canvas

Continuing with the joy of a child, I began working on *Claritas 2* on a wet and stormy day. Mocking the grey gloom that tried to oppress my bright spirits, I squeezed piles of rose madder on my palette. Working in a similar manner as I had with *Claritas 1*, I painted areas of pink on the canvas and paused. The rain pattered on the window of my studio, and to spite it, I continued to work, refusing to let the grey take over. I created several piles of different colors of green, and I painted green between the pink forms, allowing them to fall together like the pieces of a puzzle. The edges blurred somewhat because of the wetness of the paint, but I did not attempt to blend any of the areas, leaving them as distinct forms instead. The greens made the pinks pop, much to my

delight, and desiring the painting to be brighter still, I added warm yellows in the piece between the green and pink puzzle pieces. Within four hours I completed the painting, and I was pleased that it took so little effort. Instead of fighting the puzzle pieces I embraced them, and I allowed the painting to be exactly what it wanted to be. When I shared this work, I got a lot of encouragement. Crawford called it “rad,” and a fellow student, Jessica, called me a “colorist.”

### **My Ego Fails Me Again**

I felt positive about my accomplishment, but also overly self-conscious. I stretched another canvas, only four feet by six feet, and began painting a new work that I hoped to show at the midterm critique. I mixed new, muted colors, because the label “colorist” moved my ego. I reasoned with the rest of my disapproving self that experimenting with muted colors would be what a true colorist would do in a painting. I started painting some of the areas and concentrated on the edges of where the collisions between colors took place. I became frustrated when the colors did not behave on canvas the way I wanted them to, and one area, where I discovered a very interesting edge, was nearly impossible to repeat in other areas of the painting. Discouraged, I stopped painting and asked Crawford for help, which was the first time since the beginning of that semester that I had looked to anyone outside of myself for guidance. She told me to not get discouraged and to continue to work, reminding me that a painting is a process. I tried to continue with the piece, but I had lost contact with my inner voice because pride and accomplishment invited my ego back into the studio. In a hasty attempt to finish the

piece for the critique, I painted over the work I had and laid out the familiar puzzle piece motif with a thick, clumsy application of paint that betrayed my anxiety and lack of conviction.

At critique the next week, I anxiously pulled four of the five works to the front of the paint studio where we were having the critique and awkwardly placed the last of my finished paintings behind the gathered assembly on the left. I stood in front of my paintings and said, very confidently, that my paintings represented an unfolding process of discovery that was evident in the evolution that could be seen from one painting to the next. I stopped my speech, but before doing so, stated that I had fun in my efforts, but was unclear about the results and invited their feedback.

The feedback, however, was not what I expected. Several of the professors were in shock from the color palette and each work's lack of refinement. There was a consensus that I had worked hard, which was commended, but few were able to look beyond the saturated colors I had used in my work. Professor Walter Kravitz drew the attention of my peers and faculty to the first of the *Claritas* painting, *Claritas 1*. He stated that he enjoyed the play between foreground and background and saw within it many possibilities. He was not as impressed with *Claritas 2*, and dismissed the final piece I created in my studio as awkward, which was more than true. Now that the attention of the critique was drawn to my final pieces, a visiting artist chimed in calling my latest work overly saturated, with the color scheme of a poorly done Technicolor movie. He then added that *Claritas 2*

could be used as camouflage in a tropical forest because it looked like a “parrot would mate with it.”

### **Discovering Wax Medium**

The critique had helped me form a better understanding of what I was pursuing in my paintings, and because of this, it was not an entirely negative experience. In my next work, I told myself, I would push the color more. Seeing where I was going in my art, and striving to steer the conversation about my work back to the sphere of the constructive, Crawford told me that I should try using a different vehicle with my oils than Turpenoid. I had used linseed oil for a short period of time when I first started to paint in the studio, but stopped after I found that it was too slow-drying. She suggested that I experiment with wax and buy Dorland’s Wax Medium, because it would allow my colors to appear more transparent on canvas and brighter as a result. Grateful for the advice and excited to try something new, I picked up Dorland’s Wax Medium from the local art store, hoping that it would help my colors sing.

Back in the studio, I experimented with the new medium by mixing it into my oils. Eager to find a surface for testing the new medium, I applied gesso over my last painting. I did not really care if the surface would become unstable as the oil paints continued to dry underneath. I grabbed the biggest brush I had and began to apply the paint with the new medium on the surface. I was shocked by how smooth the paint was and how easy it was to push along the surface of the canvas. I paused to mix more colors and quickly

applied them to the painting, blending the areas where analogous colors touched and experimenting with the flexibility of the paint. The paint had a wonderful waxy feel to it, and it reminded me of crayons. I applied colors to the surface absent-mindedly, as a child would make marks on a piece of paper, heedless of the final image. I painted in this way until the whole surface was covered, stopping only then to examine the painting.



Figure 7, *Untitled*, 2007, oil on canvas

The first thing I noted was the improved color of the work. The colors seemed to be brighter and more pure than in my earlier painting. Before, I needed to apply the paint very thinly to achieve a bright color, and I had to avoid adding pigments that might make the color more opaque. In this work, even where I used tints of different colors, they lost none of their brilliance. The transparent wax allowed light to pass through the paint particles and bounce off the white canvas, returning to the eye and giving the work the feeling that it was being illuminated from behind. I was thrilled at this discovery. Wax

medium allowed me to get the brilliant effect of transparent, uncontaminated oils, and it allowed me to work in a more flexible manner. Even where complementary colors touched and mixed, the color was not muddy and had a quality of light that was missing in my previous work. The colors were so brilliant that I realized the thickness of the paint got in the way of the color. I knew I had to thin the wax medium the next time I made a painting, so that the luminosity would shine through without the distraction of the surface. Mark and texture stood in the way of the brilliant color that I had finally found in my work.

With the new freedom of wax medium, I began *Claritas 3*, the first painting in my show where color shone with the intensity of the neon light I saw in Turrell's and Kosuth's works. *Claritas 3* was the "a-ha" painting; it marked when I finally hit my stride in the studio. It is the painting where light was truly discovered in my work, and in turn, in myself as a painter.

All I knew before I started was that I wanted to use the color palette of a David Reed painting I had fallen in love with years before. #481 by David Reed struck me because of its unapologetic use of pink and purple. All of David Reed's work has a digital quality because of its bright colors, which was the reason I was drawn to his work. I had unconsciously borrowed the palette from #481 for *Claritas 1*, giving that work its distinctive digital feel, but I knew I could make the palette truly glow with the help of the wax medium.



Figure 8. David Reed, #481, 2001-2002, oil and alkyd on linen

I already had a canvas ready that was stretched and gessoed, the standard six-foot-square size I used for both *Claritas 1* and *Claritas 2*, so it was easy for me to just jump into my work on *Claritas 3*. I had developed a routine by this point of painting on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and building stretchers on Fridays that I would then stretch and prime on Mondays and Wednesdays after my teaching practicum. The routine helped create the momentum I needed to work in the studio; I would always have another canvas waiting for me when I completed a painting. I preferred to work on one painting at a time because it allowed me to pour my undivided energy into each work, so that I would not miss any discovery to be made on its surface. Each painting I made was one step I had to climb to lead to the next step, where I would discover more about my work and myself as a painter.

To begin, I mixed piles of rose madder along with piles of orange. Before adding the wax medium to the bright piles, I thinned it first by adding odorless mineral spirits until it had a smooth, liquid consistency. I knew that the thinner I worked, the more brilliant the color would be and the less the brushwork would show on the canvas. I had no idea about where I wanted to take the image when I started. Instead, I allowed the color to



direct me. The bright, warm colors on my palette wanted to have space to show their radiance on canvas, so I began by painting a fairly large amorphous shape in the top left corner of the canvas. To emphasize its size, I painted it larger and larger until it took over the whole corner and ran off its edges. This gave the appearance that the shape was too large to be contained within the painting—that there was more to it than what was seen, and that it was pushing aggressively forward. Working in the same puzzle piece method that I had used to paint *Claritas 1* and *Claritas 2*, I painted another shape in the top right corner of the canvas, which I also allowed to grow over the edges of the canvas and down towards the center of the piece. To balance the shapes I painted on the top of the canvas, I painted two more pieces of the warm pink and orange at the bottom of the canvas. Satisfied, I stopped painting and was pleased to see how brilliant the warm colors were and how much they glowed. As a final touch, I mixed violet, and worked it into the pink in each of the warm shapes to push the warm colors even more forward. The pink was fluorescent, and the orange, because it was mixed with some of the rose madder, was as neon as the pink. I had successfully pulled off David Reed's glowing color palette on canvas.



Figure 9. *Claritas 3*, 2007, oil on canvas

The space between the forms was too narrow to fit other pieces of color, but I resolved to work out that problem during my next painting session, confident that it would lead to a new discovery. When I returned to the studio to confront the negative space, it became apparent to me that the space had its own presence and form, and this needed to be emphasized. Knowing that I wanted to continue to explore the relationship between warm and cool colors, as well as the relationship between complementary colors, I decided that I would paint the remaining space with the complements of both orange and pink. I mixed piles of light blue, blue-green, green, and violet, and began to fill in the negative space. I allowed the analogous colors to mix together, so that the transition

from one color to the next was fluid. Playing up the relationship between complementary colors, I painted each of the blues and greens next to their complements in the warm-colored shapes that I had painted the session before. The light blues and light blue-greens I painted next to the edges of the oranges, and the greens I painted adjacent to the pinks. Where some of the complements met, I allowed the edges to remain sharp and crisp; other areas I blended together, using white to help soften the transition from the cool to the warm color. The areas where the complements met at a sharp edge hummed with a greater intensity than where they were blended together. Each color, as a result of the sharp edge, glowed equally intensely and fought for dominance. As a result of the collisions, the foreground fought against the background, the warm colors fought the cool, and the foreground and background flipped with just a shift of the eye. This created a unique tension in the work that, along with the brilliancy of the colors, overwhelmed the eye.

I ran off to find Crawford and show her what I had done. I practically skipped out of the studio with the charge of energy I felt. I knew I had come across a huge discovery in my work. I was nervous that the colors were too bold, but I did not care; the work invigorated me and I was eager to share it. As I pulled Crawford into the studio, I warned her that I did not know what to think of the work, and dismissed my palette as Lisa Frank colors. I should have had more faith in the work because, when Crawford saw it, she exclaimed that I finally found the light I was seeking. I was thrilled because I knew, as I listened to Crawford and reassessed my work, that I had finally made a successful painting that was closer to my goal of painting light.

## Foreground-Background Tension

Elated, I stretched another canvas and began work on *Claritas 5*, which earned its name because of the 5th position it took in my show<sup>1</sup>. The tension I was able to create by using complementary colors in *Claritas 3* was something that I wanted to repeat in this new painting, but I wanted to experiment with a different pair of complements. I decided that I wanted to use yellow along with yellow-orange and orange, so I determined that the complementary pair this painting would focus on would be yellow-orange and violet-blue. I began, much like I had *Claritas 3*, by painting the warm areas of yellow, yellow-orange, and orange first. To increase the tension between foreground and background, I included blue-green in the warm areas that I would repeat in the cool background. I painted four huge areas of the warm colors, and fearing that it looked too similar to the pattern in *Claritas 3*, I decided to connect the two shapes on the right half of the painting. I left the area that connected the two forms narrow, because I had learned from *Claritas 3* that the background shape was just as important as the foreground, and the narrow bridge would create a point of tension where the cool background would push on either side of it, fighting for visual dominance. As I had done with *Claritas 3*, I stopped painting after I finished the warm foreground.

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<sup>1</sup> When I started this body of work, I decided that I did not want to name each painting for the show individually—they are all a part of a collection of work embodying my pursuit of the radiance of light. So I named my show “Claritas” in honor of my quest and left the works untitled. I wanted the viewers to take in the presence of claritas as it evolved in each work and expressed itself in the entirety of the show. Along with my artist statement on *claritas*, I printed a gallery sheet labeling the works as untitled works of oil on six-foot-square canvas. After my show was finished, I titled each work with the name of the show and its ordinal position, clockwise from the entrance. Since the paintings were displayed loosely in chronological order, the numbering for some works is out of sequence with the order in which they were painted.



Figure 10. *Claritas 5*, 2007, oil on canvas

I put down the background colors of violet, blue-violet, and green-blue very quickly, when I returned to the work. I set the areas of blue-violet near the yellow orange areas, the violet near the yellow areas, and the green-blue next to the orange areas. Instead of blending the edges with white as I had done in *Claritas 3*, I kept all of the edges sharp, so that the complements would play off of each other more effectively. The most intense parts of the painting became where the blue-green met the orange; the orange blazed like fire against the coolness of the blue-green, which also held its ground with its ice-cold flame. The yellow areas pushed against the blue-violet into the foreground, and the blue-violet pushed right back where I had painted the narrow warm bridge. The cool

violet appeared as though it was on top of the warm shape at this juncture; the bridge seemed to have been created out of the force the blue-violet exerted on either side of it. Again, the foreground and background were twisting and reversing. The blue, cool shape, which looked like a broken x, appeared like it was the foreground; then it would move into the background when the eye caught the edges of the warm orange.

### **Movement**

The reversal between foreground and background was what interested me at this point in my process. The color was exciting, but it was this play in the space of the painting and its effect on the eye that dazzled me the most. I wanted to pursue this in my next work. Following the same formula of the previous two paintings, I chose my color palette first. I knew that to push the reversal between the foreground and background I would need colors that would be shared by both. I also wanted to exaggerate the overwhelming effect by including more colors in my palette, and with it, more pairs of complementary colors that would push along the edges between the forms. I decided that I would not limit my palette, and I would use each of the primary and secondary complementary color pairs in the painting: yellow and violet, orange and blue, and green and red.

I started what would be *Claritas 4* by painting the large foreground shapes. Although I used green and blue in these shapes, I kept them primarily warm by painting in more of the warm colors, and by excluding violet. Once again, I did not allow the warm and cool colors to mix, and I painted a transparent white between them to avoid adding any grays

to the painting. I felt that the forms looked too similar to the forms I had painted in my previous work, so I elongated them and left the edges sharp and angular. In the middle of the painting, I noted that the edges of the forms seemed to converge; I exaggerated this, anticipating the tension at this point when the background color was added. After the shapes were dry, I rapidly painted in the background, placing the complement along the edge of each foreground color. I pushed the sharpness of the edges in some areas so that there would be a stronger collision between complementary colors. In other areas of the work, I played down the tension set up between the complements and their shared edges by painting an analogous color instead.



Figure 11. *Claritas 4*, 2007, oil on canvas

The result was dazzling. Where the complements met, they pushed against each other and created dramatic movement in the painting. There was the expected reversal between foreground and background, as well as a circular motion in the painting. The foreground shapes seemed to spin because the complements in the background were pushing on them; the effect was that of a pinwheel. Staring at the work after I finished it, I lost myself in the spinning motion of the shapes; it overtook my vision entirely by not allowing me to focus on any one point in the painting. This effect struck me, and I felt that I had made a new discovery. I pulled in another graduate student in the studio who was painting at the same time that I was, and the first thing she said when she saw the work was, “Whoa.” She exclaimed that it made her dizzy. I was pleased that the optical effect was not only experienced by me; it seemed to have a more dramatic impact on the other student because it took her by surprise. I knew then that I wanted my paintings to do just that to viewers: to take them by surprise and jostle them out of their comfort zone.

### **Edge: The Collision Between Two Colors**

I touched up *Claritas 4* and stretched a new six-foot-square canvas. While finishing work on *Claritas 4*, I realized that the forms in my work were becoming too repetitious. I wanted to explore the reversal of foreground and background differently. At a loss for what that that approach would be, I picked up my sketchbook and drew page after page of thumbnail sketches of forms and shapes to explore. I found myself comfortable working out my creative knots with a pen in my hand and a pad of paper in my lap. I had



discovered an exciting challenge in my painting, and in these sketches I played with solutions in an immediate fashion.

After a full day of sketching, I had several pages filled with curvilinear forms. Reacting against the organic shapes I had been painting, I saw myself reaching for clean, rounded lines. There were two sketches that caught my attention. One had several rounded forms that floated over the perimeters of the sketch, and the other one had several curved lines that moved horizontally over the sketch. I settled on the latter, deciding that the first sketch was too similar to my treatment of space and form in my previous work. I was attracted to the horizontal movement and the rhythm in the second sketch because I saw that it would set the stage for dramatic collisions between complementary colors.

The difficulty then was to decide how to transfer the sketch to the canvas. I knew I needed to have an outline on the canvas to follow as I painted the reversing colors along the edges of the forms, but I needed to make sure that any marks I made on canvas would not show through my transparent layers of paint. I walked around my studio looking for a solution and stumbled onto a small piece of light blue chalk. I picked it up and immediately began drawing the forms from my sketch on the canvas. To ensure that the sketch on the canvas was similar to the one on paper, I drew a loose grid that I then transferred to the canvas. Within an hour, I was ready to paint.

Taking a cue from the color scheme of *Claritas 4*, I made piles on my palette of two pairs of complementary colors: yellow and violet and blue-green and orange-red. I decided that I would distribute the colors equally in each shape, further eliminating any differences between foreground and background, and I began painting one of the horizontal, curvilinear forms with all of the colors on my palette. I limited the blending between adjacent colors, and I decided to blend all colors that were across from each other inside the form into an opaque white. After my first session of painting, I had painted one complete form. I knew that I needed the edges to remain sharp, so when I returned to the studio the next day to paint, I avoided painting near wet edges. Instead, I painted a form that had another form between it and the wet form. The following week, I painted the form between the two with the same color palette. I painted the complement to each color that sat along the shared edge of the middle form, which created sharp lines where the complementary color pairs pushed against each other, adding to the tension within the work. In this manner I continued to paint until the whole canvas was covered. It was a little slower than I was used to working, but within three weeks, *Claritas 9* was completed.



Figure 12. *Claritas 9*, 2008, oil on canvas

Stepping back from *Claritas 9*, I was pleased to see how the complements interacted along the shared edges. But the areas where one form cut into another were of particular interest to me, because these areas seemed to suggest that the forms were overlapping and creating an implied foreground and background space. The dizzying lines and complement-colored pairs that drew my eye back to the surface of the piece contradicted the suggestion of a foreground, flattening out the image and removing any sense of indicated space. The tension between foreground and background that I had discovered in my previous work played out in an interesting way in *Claritas 9*, because of the exaggerated movement created by the lines in the piece. The only elements that I felt

distracted from the piece were the quality of the brushwork and the thickness of the paint. I worked with thick paint that I did not blend smoothly inside each form. In my excitement over the line, I neglected the treatment of color and mark within each form. The white areas became too thick and made the colors they blended with opaque, causing them to lose their luminosity.

### **Brilliant Color**

Because of the problems I saw in *Claritas 9*, I immediately started *Claritas 8*. I wanted to continue to explore line in *Claritas 8*, so I drew several sketches until I had one that I responded to, and within minutes, I had it drawn on the canvas with a light-colored pastel. I was sure to include sharp points and curves in my sketch; these changes in the line cut into adjacent forms, playing up the tension between the suggested space and flatness of my last painting.

I wanted to recapture the brilliance of color that I had lost in *Claritas 9*, so I decided to use bright pink in my newest painting. I knew that I wanted to pair the brilliant rose madder pink with its true complement. This was not an easy color to mix. The viridian green that came out of the tube was much too blue, and even when yellow was added to it to make a true green, the green could not match the brilliance of the pink. I mixed several greens, some with more yellow, and found that the greens that had more yellow were more vibrant and appeared neon when painted on the white canvas. I mixed a large

pile of yellow-green to go with the bright pink, and responding to the vibrancy of the yellow in the green, I mixed a yellow-orange and its complement, violet-blue.

Since the thickness of the paint was a problem in *Claritas 9*, I was careful to apply only a small amount of paint to my brush when I began painting the first form on the new canvas. I began by painting along the edge with a small brush, and then took a large brush, with only a little bit of paint on the tip of the brush, to work color lightly into the form. With the same two brushes, I painted other areas within the same shape that I felt should be the same color, allowing space in between the patches for the other colors in my palette. Then, in the same way, I filled in the rest of the shape with the remaining colors, making sure that each color was painted in the form. I left space between adjacent colors. Colors that were sitting next to each other and across from each other in the form were left unblended. Only after I finished painting in all of the colors did I go back in to blend the colors and soften the transition between them within the same shape; I did this by painting in a small amount of white paint on top of the adjacent colors. I had mixed wax medium into all of my colors, but I had mixed even more of it into the white paint. The result was a very translucent white, which blended easily into all of the colors and did little to diminish each color's luminosity.

It took me only one session in the studio to complete the form. I had to work quickly so that I could, after applying all of the colors, blend them into each other with the white while they were all still wet. Although I blended adjacent colors together, each color

kept its integrity, creating none of the gray and muddy hues that troubled me in my last painting. The white, because it was thin, allowed the colors to remain transparent; and the entire shape glowed with the light that was reflected from the back of the white canvas. Finally, I had brought back into my work the intensity of the colors I had discovered before, and the relationship between the bright complements was even more charged because of their close proximity to each other. Within the one shape I had painted, the complements bounced off of each other, energizing the entire shape. I knew that this effect would only be heightened with the completion of the remaining forms. In addition to the play of colors within each form, there would be tension along the shared edges of all of the forms.

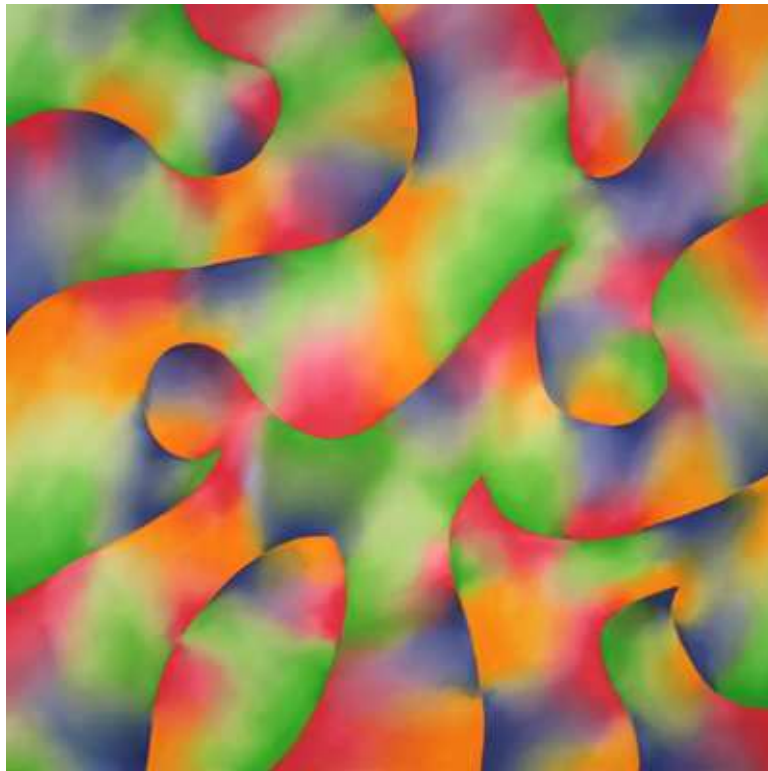


Figure 13. *Claritas 8*, 2008, oil on canvas

I was eager to see how the shared edges between forms would appear, but first I had to allow the initial form time to fully dry. So I chose to paint the forms that shared no edges with it, as well as the forms that did not share edges with each other. The remaining forms I left to paint during a later session. I worked quickly, employing the same method of painting along the edge of the form with a small brush and filling it in with a big brush for each color in the palette until each form was brimming over with neon green, pink, blue-violet, and yellow-orange. At this point in the painting, I had huge white areas of canvas still exposed, and none of the finished shapes were sharing an edge, so I still had yet to see how the forms would interact with each other.

The next session, I quickly painted in the remaining forms. As I had done in *Claritas 9*, I painted the complement to each color along the shared edge of the remaining forms. Since the placement of the colors was already determined by the colors in the shapes that shared its edges, filling in each form took very little time. I was careful to paint the complementary colors along the edge of the finished forms with a fine brush, ensuring that the colors did not overlap and that the meeting between the complements was clean and sharp. Where the colors met, they exploded with energy, and the finished forms competed with each other for visual dominance. Although there were several places where an overlap was suggested, since the point of one form would cut into another, the overall result was a flattening of space; the colors danced on the surface and along the lines and denied any illusion of depth. My eyes were unable to focus on any one spot in the painting; they followed each line and around each form, never finding a spot to rest.

Staring at the painting after I was finished with it, I felt a sense of vertigo, which was a feeling I first discovered in the twirling colors of *Claritas 4*. In *Claritas 8*, line worked to create the twirling effect as much as color did.

### **Line**

The successful illusion of the lines in *Claritas 8* inspired me to explore curves more fully in *Claritas 6*. I quickly sketched several possible designs, and I stopped with one that had many linear elements that moved dramatically along a diagonal axis. I felt that the movement in the sketch would amplify the movement created by the complementary colors. I transferred the image to canvas and mixed my paint. I had already determined, even before the completion of the sketch, that the complementary color pairs in this painting would be orange and blue, and yellow and purple. I mixed a pile of ultramarine blue, adding to it only a touch of white; on the same palette, I mixed my purple. To achieve a true violet is difficult, so I used violet oil paint that I also lightened with white. On a separate palette, I mixed cadmium red and pale cadmium yellow to create a vivid orange. I found that the pale cadmium yellow was more brilliant and less orange than the standard cadmium yellow, so I had been using it in all of my paintings. I added an additional pile of the pale yellow to the palette with orange, and then began painting with the same system and approach that I had used to paint *Claritas 8*.



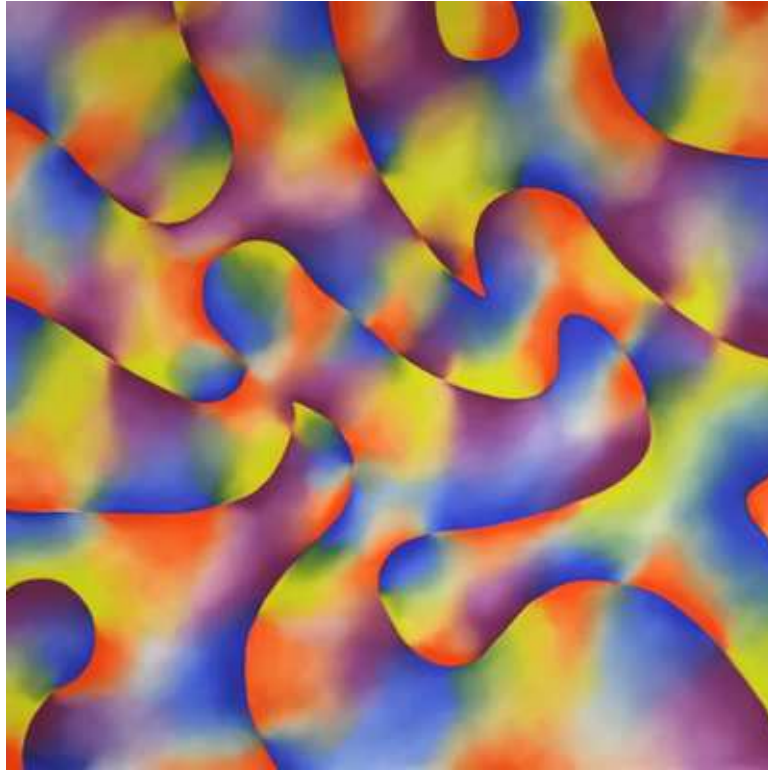


Figure 14. *Claritas 6*, 2008, oil on canvas

I had established my system of painting, so it was easy for me to work. I moved quickly, filling in one form at a time, while leaving space between drying forms to be painted in later. My technique had become refined, so my edges were crisper as a result. The areas of color were also sharper and more precise. Moving away from mixing the adjacent colors within a form as I had done in *Claritas 9*, I left the colors distinct and pure. Even when I went back in to soften color transitions with a transparent white, I avoided mixing the colors together to keep the complement color pairs more true and vivid. I had enjoyed the effect between the complements in the last painting, *Claritas 8*, and I wanted to push it in *Claritas 6*.

After I was finished with the painting, the colors were so distinct that Kravitz described the areas of colors as “blown up pixels.” Having embraced the digital quality in my work at the beginning of the school year, I was pleased to hear that Kravitz connected the painting back to the world of the digital. But I was also frustrated that my approach had become stymied by my obsessive need to keep colors pure and unmixed. I knew I needed to change the direction of my work, and I only had a few weeks before my thesis show to do so.

### **Form and Space**

Fearing that my paintings were becoming rigid from my increasingly-developed methodology, I looked for a way to push my work into new territory. I knew I needed to allow an opening in my work for some change. Once again, my frustration with where my work was pushed me forward into a new direction. The result of my pushing and the culmination of extensive hours of labor in my studio was *Claritas 7*, the final piece I painted for my thesis show. *Claritas 7* was unique because it explored form and space, which would prove to be areas I would push further in the work I would make after my thesis show.

Before I began work on *Claritas 7*, I created pages of sketches. My sketches were automatic; I wanted my unconscious to reveal to me new forms to explore. Forms are precisely what I discovered: I had page after page of undulating forms, and I particularly liked one of a tear-like form pushing into shapes that radiated around it. I transferred the

sketch to a new piece of paper, where I clarified the lines and rounded the forms.

Because the drawing was more complicated than the other ones I had been working with, I was concerned how the image would transfer. But I was pleased with the way the sketch looked on the canvas, and I was excited to see how the treatment of the colors would transform it.

My palette had become somewhat constricted in *Claritas 6* and *Claritas 8*, so I sought to expand it again by including an additional pair of complementary colors. By using more colors, I hoped to achieve greater freedom to mix color within the forms. Even before I began sketching for *Claritas 7*, I knew that I wanted to include rose madder in the painting. The bright pink had been a source of inspiration in my first real breakout piece, *Claritas 3*, and I was confident that it would again invite me to play and make new discoveries. Along with the pink I made from the rose madder, I added a bright green to my palette, and the two complementary color pairs of blue and orange and violet and yellow. The resulting color scheme pulled the strongest complements from both *Claritas 6* and *Claritas 8*, and it was more energized than the color schemes in either painting.



Figure 15. *Claritas 7*, 2008, oil on canvas

After mixing my colors, I began to paint with an approach that was quite different. *Claritas 6* and *Claritas 8* had no dominant form to paint, so it made no difference which form I painted first. However, *Claritas 7* had a dominant form: the teardrop. The teardrop impacted the space around it and was the focal point of the painting. It was clear that I had to paint that form first and then deal with the space around it, to further emphasize its weight in the painting. With a small brush, I painted along the inner edge of the teardrop, varying the colors as I did so, and then I pulled out a bigger brush to fill the color within the shape. Instead of treating each area of color as a flat form, I wrapped some of the colors around the imagined cross-contours of the teardrop to suggest its

roundness, as I allowed the colors to blend into each other. I further enhanced this effect when I mixed the colors with a translucent white. I rounded out the forms with the white so that the teardrop appeared to be three-dimensional.

By choosing to emphasize the form over the color, I was forced to blend the colors together. If I had left the colors as distinct shapes, uncontaminated by what sat next to them, the teardrop would have appeared very flat. The muted colors that I created by mixing adjacent colors together softened the form and created depth within it; they receded visually into the surface of the canvas. However, an interesting tension was created between the soft areas of color within the teardrop shape, and the sharp edges that were painted with fully saturated color. The bright edges pushed forward and emphasized the flatness of the surface of the canvas, as the muted hues retreated backward into space. I played up this tension in the rest of the piece by keeping the edges of the forms crisp and allowing the colors to blend together only in the middle of each form, so that each form indicated space at the same time that it denied space.

Using the same process as I had for my previous works, I painted one form and allowed it to dry as I worked on another form. When I painted the forms at the bottom of the canvas, I used more dark colors in an attempt to emphasize the weight in the painting and to ground the teardrop in space. After nearly three weeks of effort, and only a week before the opening of my show, *Claritas 7* was complete. I had no time to examine

*Claritas 7* and reflect on my discoveries in it; my mind was already moving forward to the opening of the show and the staging of what would be my first solo exhibition.

### 3. My Show

*Claritas: An MFA Thesis Exhibition*, was on exhibit from April 1 to April 15, 2008, at the Fine Arts Gallery at George Mason University.

#### **Hanging the Show**

Because of the scale of my work, I had never seen all of my paintings side by side, so I never knew how they would interact with each other. Looking at the work in that gallery transformed how I saw my paintings. They took on a life of their own. Once I saw them exhibited in chronological order, it became very clear to me then that a strictly chronological sequence would not work because the strongest pieces that were created last were lost on the least visible walls. We had to find a more intuitive approach to ordering them in the show. I wanted to maintain a sense of the order in which the works were created, but I also wanted to make use of the dominant showcase wall across from the gallery door.

I moved *Claritas 6* and *Claritas 7* down to the wall across from the door, right next to the short wall on the far end of the gallery, to ensure they would be the first works someone casually passing the gallery would see. The weakest work, *Claritas 9*, was moved to the least visible wall in the gallery, the small space on the rear wall next to the gallery office

door. I moved the earliest works, *Claritas 1*, *Claritas 2*, and *Claritas 3*, to the wall adjacent to the gallery door, and placed them in chronological order. *Claritas 5* and *Claritas 4* were then placed on the short, front wall at the far end of the gallery. Since *Claritas 5* has a color scheme dominated by orange, yellow, and blue-violet, it worked best visually next to the predominately blue and orange *Claritas 6*. So I switched the order of my fourth and fifth paintings and titled them accordingly.



Figure 16. Gallery Door Wall and Front Wall





Figure 17. Gallery Door Wall, Front Wall, and Wall Opposite Gallery Door



Figure 18. Wall Opposite Gallery Door and Rear Wall

Once I hung the works, I had to design lighting for the show. I knew that I wanted the works to feel they were shining from within, so I decided to keep the lighting low, with only two lights pointing at each work. The result was dazzling: each work glowed, and colors spilled into the space, reflecting off of the floor and the walls. By lowering the

light and allowing the space to remain relatively dark, the paintings dominated the gallery and appeared to shine like monitors in a low-lit room. The lighting amplified the intensity of the work and unified it as well. Before closing the door to the gallery, my friends and I took in the complete show. Standing there, I felt a swell of pride and confidence that carried me to the opening reception of my show. I had put together my first solo exhibition; I was a gallery artist and an exhibiting painter.

### **The Opening of *Claritas: An MFA Thesis Exhibition***

The morning of April 2<sup>nd</sup>, the day of the reception for my show, I awoke feeling confident. I felt an eagerness to share my work with my faculty and peers. I knew I had poured my heart into this work, and I was eager to have people see what I had accomplished. I felt that the reception was my coming-of-age party as a painter, and I wanted everyone to meet Clarita, the painter. In my last dream that morning, I saw Crawford say to me simply, “Bravo.” She could not be present at the reception, yet I felt her presence with me that day.

Within a few hours, I had all of the food and supplies in the gallery. An hour before the opening itself, a few of my friends joined me to set up the table. Although the show was about my paintings and my work, I felt that the presentation of the food was almost as important. My show was about abundance in color and in spirit, and I wanted my reception to reflect this with an abundance of food.



Figure 19. Food at the Reception

As people trickled in, I greeted them and invited them into my show. I spoke to a few students about my work for some time before friends and family arrived. Before long, a good portion of the faculty was at my show, and I lost sense of time as professors complimented me on my show and talked to my parents. I was having such a good time and was so lost in conversation that I was surprised when Kravitz told me that it was time to talk about my work. Clutching a stuffed rabbit that a friend had given to me, I walked to the front of the gallery and introduced myself to all of the guests. I first thanked everyone for attending my opening, and then I talked about my journey as an artist and the process in the studio that led to these paintings. I found that it was easy for me to speak about my work, because my work was an extension of myself.



Figure 20. Opening Reception

Before I finished my talk, I thanked everyone who was a part of my show, from its inception in my studio. My paintings are a product of all of the advice and input I have received from my professors as well as my peers. Although I respond to their input with my own intuitions, I know that my work is the product of outer impulses as well as inner ones. Both the outer and the inner were in a continuous dialogue with each other. My professors provided me the space and the time to explore this dialogue and to watch it play out on canvas. Without their support, or the support of the university, my thesis exhibition would not have happened. I became quite emotional as I honestly told my faculty and friends, “I couldn’t do any of this without your support.”

### **Reactions to My Show**

When I put up my work in the gallery, I invited people into dialogue with it. Although I created my work intending to share my voice, each viewer had a unique reaction to it and

helped me see more clearly what I had done. I derived the great satisfaction during my exhibition from watching people walk in and around the gallery, taking in my work and responding to it, sometimes quietly with a gesture or a look, or sometimes out loud to a friend, or even to me, when I revealed that I was the artist. I heard “amazing” and “awesome” many times, and I watched as people walking by the gallery door were pulled in by the intense colors in my work. In the comments book, one visitor wrote, “It’s a pleasure to walk into this dark hallway and be stabbed by the color of your art; [it’s a] wonderful surprise.” Many others echoed this sentiment, writing that they loved the “vibrant” and “beautiful colors” within my work, and one person further complimented my choice in color by writing, “I like the bright colors of your paintings. [It’s] a change from the usually depressing colors used to arouse feelings. You use bright colors to accomplish that!”

To some, the feelings I was arousing were of ecstasy and joy, which were certainly feelings I was trying to convey in my work. To others, my colors invited meditation and reflection. But some found confusion and uncertainty looking at the bright pairs of complements. In my artist statement, I had said that I wanted the bright colors to “arrest the mind” and “silence the ego” so that a person could surrender to “*claritas*” or “presence.” I wrote about the experience as somewhat jarring, which I perceived visually while I worked on my paintings in the studio, but I had not thought that I was painting uncertainty, which I judged to be a negative emotion. However, viewers, in their dialogue with my work, felt that emotion and brought my attention to it. In a

conversation with a professor who felt anxiety and unease in my work and who described my work as “difficult,” I came to understand that the process of stripping away the ego begins not only with beauty, but with uncertainty as well. I was feeling anxiety within myself during the time in the studio because I was letting go of certainty and fixed beliefs, and my work reflected that. It was only through that conversation that I became aware of the challenging and ambiguous quality within my work because of its unsettling foreground and background shifts, as well as its multiple focal points. These all contributed to the feeling of unease that the paintings evoked for some.

Some feedback offered illumination into the motivation behind my work and the reality of what my work was. A student, perhaps meaning to be critical, wrote in my book, “Oh please. A kid can draw that.” At first, I took the smarmy comment at face value and was hurt when I read it. However, on reflection, I realized that the comment was inadvertently right-on: my studio process is one of surrendering to my inner child, whose voice was coming through in my work. My work was the act of bringing out the child, a little girl who wanted to play with color. Of course my work could seem naïve; it was being made from a desire to recapture and reclaim the power of naiveté by my own inner child. The child’s play was apparent to another student who viewed the naiveté as a favorable quality in my work, and he remarked that he saw colorful toys and childhood play things when he looked at it. He felt that the paintings were calling him to remember his own childhood through my use of bright and simple colors.

At the end of my exhibition, I received the most powerful feedback from a visitor to the Fine Arts Building who was taken by surprise by both my show and my impetus for creating the works within it. He was so affected that he felt that he needed to contact me personally, and I found an email waiting from him in my inbox the day before I had to take it all down. In the email, he first explained that he was moved by the color within my work, and he found it “enlightening to stand in the middle of the gallery awash in all the bright and beautiful color.” Although he was moved by the color, he was more deeply impressed with my motivation that I touched on in my artist statement, that I was seeking to let go of the ego and surrender to being. He said this idea to “be and experience life without judgment” affected him profoundly, and that my name, which I explained in the statement is derived from *claritas*, is well suited.

#### 4. Reflecting on My Work

In the studio, I was not fully aware of all of the motivations pushing me to create besides the desire to play and explore with color with a spirit of joy. I was so busy working and creating in the studio that I did not pause to reflect on my intentions until I wrote my artist statement for my show. I was always pursuing *claritas* in my work, but the deeper personal implication of that pursuit was something I had not fully recognized. When I wrote in my statement, “I’m seeking light within my work and within myself,” it was a moment of revelation. I had not realized that the transformation that I was seeking personally, I was also exploring in my work. Before that moment, I had always thought of searching for light as a metaphysical experience of revealing divine illumination. As it happens, by searching for the divine light on my canvas, I was also searching for and discovering the divine light within myself.

#### **Body-Spirit Duality**

Light functions as both a tool for sensory perception and as a means of spiritual perception. Everything of this world shares this duality: in my work, light is merely a metaphor to express the greater duality found in this nature. This world is both physical as well as spiritual; it has both visible and invisible dimensions. The spiritual aspect of



this world has been overlooked in this age of empirical rationalism, and as a result, the mystery of the soul has been lost.

Duality drives the world, and in the tension between the two we are all caught.

Ironically, while each entity in a duality seemingly work against its opposite as though to extinguish it, the underlying truth is quite different: one extreme cannot exist without its opposite, and both are part of one larger whole. It is this whole that the dualities indicate, and it is this whole that I hope my paintings illuminate. My work seeks to reintegrate the body and spirit, both on the canvas and within myself.

### **Alchemy**

So my painting process was one of alchemy<sup>2</sup>. I wanted to transform the physical paint on the canvas to a physical and spiritual representation of light. The alchemists, though, wanted more than to transform baser metals into gold. As they did their work, alchemists believed that they underwent a parallel inner transformation of their souls, which became closer in nature to God. I, likewise, was undergoing an inner transformation. Much is written about the philosophical implications of the alchemists' spiritual transformation.

Carl Jung, in particular, was fascinated with the philosophy of alchemy and wrote extensively on the alchemy of the soul. According to Jung, alchemy deals with

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<sup>2</sup> During the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Friar Roger Bacon describes alchemy in his work "The Mirror of Alchemy." Alchemy, he writes, is the "science" that teaches how "to transform any kind of metal into another" through the creation of an "elixir" (Bacon). He describes the perfect metal as gold and explains that all nature "strives for the perfection of Gold" (Bacon). The alchemist, according to Bacon, simply helps the transformation along.

“something resembling psychic processes expressed in pseudochemical language” (qtd. in Brown 2). An alchemist projects his inner process of transformation onto his materials; the chemical processes mirror the interior processes and symbolize the transmutation of the soul.

Much like the alchemists, I use the manipulation of physical materials in my painting to mirror the alchemy of my own soul. Instead of transforming the basest metal into gold, I strive to transform oil and pigment into beauty that reveals God’s radiance. Likewise, as the alchemists transformed the impure soul into a Godly one, I integrated my ego-driven self and my unconscious, freeing my spiritual self for conscious expression. The manipulation of paint is, for me, an outward expression of the process of using my basest self to reach the truth of my soul.

### **Jung, Archetypes, and Individuation**

In their work, alchemists devised symbols to express the process of inner transformation. Likewise, my own paintings have become symbols to express my experience as I struggled to purify my soul. The work was an unconscious, archetypal symbol of my own inner processes. It is an embodiment of paradox, as Jung finds in the old religious archetypes<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Archetypes, to Jung, are “genuine symbols precisely because they are ambiguous” and are “in principle paradoxical” (Jung 322). He describes Jesus as a prime example of paradox, because He represents the embodied spirit. Likewise, metal in alchemy comes to symbolize both physical and spiritual purity. It is significant that in each case, both potentialities physically exist within the same space (including the spiritual).

Especially in the later *Claritas* works, there is a profound instability between foreground and background. Each apparent form in the work defies definition as either “foreground” or “background.” Each form has the potential to be either. This visual paradox carries the same symbolic potency as the image of Christ as both human and divine. *Claritas 3*, in particular, creates a paradoxical visual experience, by presenting two conflicting opposites—warm and cool, background and foreground—that have to be experienced on a different, less rational level. The goal of the painting is to get the viewer caught in an “impossible situation” that can only be understood and overcome on a “higher level,” as Jung wrote regarding some passages of the *I Ching* (Jung 323). The later *Claritas* pieces share more than the structure of a Jungian archetype. They share, also, the goal: to compel a person to “escape from conscious control” (325).

Through contrasting colors and destabilizing the viewer’s sense of foreground and background, I created a symbol that had archetypal urgency<sup>4</sup>. So, in the studio I was working out an internal drama through the physical media of paint. By projecting my internal process on canvas, I became consciously aware of it. Archetypes emerge from the dark inner space of the soul, from what Jung calls the “collective unconsciousness” (288). Through a process Jung labeled as “individuation,” a person begins the process of “integrating the unconscious into consciousness” through “recognition” (324). In my work, I was seeking to recognize the opposing forces within myself by using the

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<sup>4</sup> To Jung, the archetypes are “symbolic expressions of the inner, unconscious drama of the psyche which become accessible to man’s consciousness by way of projection” (Jung 289).

symbolic potency found in color and shape. The opposite, complementary colors, represent the opposite forces within me that exist behind my conscious thought, and when I used them to create forms that reverse and shift in space, I created a symbol that has helped me come to recognize the paradoxical nature of the archetypes that existed within my unconscious mind. In the studio, I was not merely painting (if painting is ever “merely” painting): I was experiencing the process of individuation.

Ultimately all of the elements within the unconscious point to one united unconsciousness. The unconscious embraces all opposites and elements because of its paradoxical nature: it is many, but it is one. Within the unconscious, the “two spheres,” good and evil, light and darkness, are “brought together” (120). Even the seemingly multiple nature of the unconscious has a “uniting character” (70). How suiting it is then, Jung notes, that God has been described as light, and light can be perceived both as a series of individual luminosities, like the stars in the sky, and as one uniting light, as the sun in the heavens (Jung 69). The Lord Krishna reveals to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita* that he is one but many; in his god form he has multiple arms, and multiple heads with thousands of eyes and mouths (Bhagavad Gita 11:10). Like Jung’s other Cosmic Man figures, Krishna is “indivisible” as well as “composed and divisible” (Jung 69). Jung attributes the multiple “luminosities” and “consciousnesses” that lie within the unconscious to the “quasi-conscious state of unconscious contents” (60). The conscious mind divides the whole, undivided content of the unconscious into parts as it nears the shore of the conscious mind. Digging deeper into the unconscious unites all perceived

contradictions and multiplicities; all is but one, as Atman, the universal soul. Jung writes, “After considerable resistance has been overcome, the union of opposites is successfully achieved” (120).

In light of this, it is interesting to note that my work in my thesis exhibition started out as an exploration of multiple forms. In both *Claritas 1* and *Claritas 2*, I was piecing together individual colored pieces to create one work. On an unconscious level, I was recognizing that the elements of the soul I was experiencing had multiple dimensions, and I was painting that as multiple pieces of what could be seen as a puzzle. As I continued on the path of individuation, I came to understand that all the pieces were part of one whole, undivided form. In the last pieces, I further blurred the separation between the forms by incorporating the same colors into each form, so that one form had shared elements with the other form: uniting them as part of one full shape with contradictory edges in an impossible space.

The process of individuation is especially jarring to the ego, which seeks differentiation and labels. Jung describes the ego as a “hard-and-fast complex, which cannot easily be altered,” and trying to alter the ego, Jung warns, can “bring on pathological disturbances” (94). However, in order for a person to come into their true Self, a person must undergo the disturbing process of individuation to unseat the ego from its central position of control. The ego is “merely a complex among other complexes” and a “subject” of “consciousness,” so it must become subordinated to the Self and the “subject” of a

person's "totality" (247). The Self incorporates aspects of a person's soul into the conscious mind. In the presence of the unconscious material brought to the surface through individuation, the ego "cannot help" but feel dwarfed (94). The new totality of the Self "somehow dwarfs the ego in scope and intensity" (94). The will of the ego is now within the scope of the Self, which moves with the power of the archetypes. The process of individuation is ongoing because the Self always remains somewhat out of reach and thus takes on a "superordinate quality" (148). Individuation "follows the natural course of life," making a person into "what he always was," which Jung stresses is a very difficult process that "does not run smoothly" (234).

During the process of individuation, the conscious mind encounters elements of the soul that are in opposition with its thinking; and ultimately, to reach the Self, there needs to be a "synthesis of the two positions" (234). To every conscious position, there exists an unconscious opposite, which will always reveal itself as it seeks unity with the new Self (247). One can see this process in my paintings, where the complementary colors show the discord between the unconscious and the conscious. As my series (and my individuation) progresses, I begin to emphasize the unity of the forms through shared colors. In fact, my progress in the studio reflects the process of individuation, as I grew into my life as an artist and actively sought the truth of my being through prayer and meditation.

## **Painting as Metonym**

The way that painting has externalized internal processes is not unique to me. All painting, according to Denise Green, “functions as a direct and tangible manifestation of inner consciousness” (Green 11). In her book *Metonymy in Contemporary Art: A New Paradigm*, she asserts that all art acts as a metonym for an artist’s inner life, a transference of meaning from the artist’s internal world onto a symbolic object. A work of art is a product of an artist’s emotional state, and can therefore metonymically stand for the artist because of its contiguous relationship with the artist. All artists come up with their own visual language to convey inner realities, consciously or unconsciously (12). Each brush stroke and gesture is a direct manifestation of the inner reality of the artist, and because of this, a painting is never just pure form, as “Greenbergian” thought would suggest (12). Even if a painter paints an image of a lake, or of a landscape, the painter’s feelings of each are imprinted in the painting (Martin 67). A painting, because it acts as an opening into an inner world, takes on energy and life in and of itself (Green 41).

As I was working to unite the opposing forces within me by bringing to surface my unconscious mind, I was devising abstract symbols that expressed my inner experiences onto canvases that became metonyms of those experiences. The early pieces are symbolic of my first encounters with my multiple consciousnesses, and my later work embodies the process of synthesizing these multiple identities and opposing polarities into my ideal self. As such, all of the work vibrates with the intensity of these

psychological processes, which, in turn, invite viewers into a direct experience of what I was going through internally as I was creating the work. Viewers were overwhelmed and disoriented, as well as moved to feel joy and even the sublime.

For some viewers, the work didn't seem to evoke this process. Perhaps viewers who dismissed the work as juvenile were expressing their ego's attempts to repress the rebellion of the unconscious. After all, the forms that I created were rough and unpolished because they were metonyms for my own unfinished individuation, the tumultuous confrontation of unseating the ego. Unlike traditional religious symbolism, which Jung says has "evolved and been handed down by tradition," the symbols I devised were from the "immediate original experience," and appear more primitive and childlike (Jung 291). The symbols that come from the depths of the unconscious are much more disruptive to the ego, which would seek to dismiss their raw impact to avoid any feeling of discomfort<sup>5</sup>. My work seeks to keep the immediate experience alive by using the forms and the colors that were born from my unconscious without much interference from my ego. I followed my intuition, which is, according to Jung, a "characteristic of infantile and primitive psychology," and allowed it to direct me in every piece I created to keep my connection to the unconscious alive in my work (263).

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<sup>5</sup> The Swiss mystic, Brother Klaus, had an experience that came from the depths of his unconscious that terrified him. He saw a piercing light "resembling a human face" that made him feel that his "heart world burst into little pieces" (Jung 293). His experience was unconventional and jarring, so to make it fit into the religious model at the time, it was later described as a "vision of the trinity" (292). The translation of the profound experience into known forms diluted its potency.



At the end of the process of individuation, the ego finds its subordinate place to the Self by unearthing the inner, unconscious materials: the soul. The ultimate fruit of this process, according to Robert A. Johnson, is “joy and ecstasy, wholeness and divinity” (Johnson 68). My paintings, by being the fruit of my own efforts both inside myself and inside the studio, embody the “joy and ecstasy” and the “wholeness and divinity” that Johnson describes.

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

Clarita M. Herce graduated from C.D. Hylton High School, Woodbridge, Virginia, in 1999. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from James Madison University in 2003. She received her Master of Fine Arts in Art and Visual Technology with a concentration in painting from George Mason University in 2009.