

Creature Alterations, Myth & Transformations

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

By

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ABSTRACT

CREATURE ALTERATIONS, MYTH & TRANSFORMATIONS

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George Mason University, 2009

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This thesis seeks to describe and illuminate the personal mythology in my work, from my own narrative to the cultural and historical references, pattern and design, ancient myth and legend that inhabit the work. The eight symbols used in my Graduate Thesis Exhibit, *Creature Alterations, Myth and Transformations*, and their association with the icon, fetish and totem will be discussed in depth. In the following pages I will also explore the impact of the printmaking process, materials and its lasting effect on my artistic sensibilities.

1. Why Animals?

“We patronize the animals for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate of having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein we err, and greatly err. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, congruent with ourselves in the net of life and time...”

— Henry Beston (Writer and Naturalist)

Animals become metaphors in my work, often used as self-portraiture or portraits of others or as symbols for a situation or human emotion. Many scholars have argued that animals were the first metaphors in human language, and as John Berger remarks, “the first subject matter for painting was animal. Probably the first paint was animal blood. Prior to that, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the first metaphor was animal” (Mitchell, p. 185). However, animals as subject matter are questioned in contemporary art and frequently overlooked.

Although animals are often found in artworks of the European masters, they likely play a secondary role or are in service to humans, such as the dog at the feet of the couple in

Van Eyck's *Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife, Giovanna Cenami*, or the horses ridden by Albrecht Dürer's *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. Non-western primitive cultures used the animal in conjunction with the human as in Egyptian, Indian and Native American art. These civilizations were eventually colonized by the West, leading to degradation of their artwork and the idolatrous branding of their animal gods. The Western influence subconsciously lurks in the heads of most Western critics, and my own professors often asked in critique sessions why I use animals as my subject matter. I found the question "Why animals?" ridiculous at first, why paint portraits, or print landscapes, or draw still lives? I was asked in a critique why I hadn't used the human figure, and I replied, "They are not interesting to me right now." This has been the same reason throughout history, from Aesop to the Ogallala, to Orwell, that "all these types of stories used animal characters as symbols of human behaviors and actions—either those to imitate or to avoid. The substitution of animals for humans often made the messages in the stories more palatable or, at the very least, more entertaining" (Morrison, p. 57).

In this tradition, my artwork revolves around a narrative that incorporates metaphor and symbol. The stereotypes that accompany animal characters in Aesop, Grimm, the Bible, and bestiary writings have influenced my own metaphors for the animals. However, when the animal enters my print, it takes on the meaning of the narrative I have given it. My work is quite different in its intentions than a traditional bestiary or "book of beasts," which "was a collection of stories about creatures both real and fanciful in which the characteristics seen as typical of a particular animal were ascribed moral or Christian

meaning” (Morrison, p. 64), and thus most read as parables, describing the animal and how it related to the way life should be lived, although some read as pseudo-scientific record of animal life. I have taken meaning from Aesop, Grimm, Anderson, and folk stories of other origins, adding layers of meaning to make the animal something new in my narratives.

2. Beginnings

I was fortunate as a child to be exposed to animals in literature at an early age. The tales of Aesop, James Herriot, Anna Sewell, Walter Farley and Jack London graced the “kids shelf” on our bookshelf. The tales were invigorating, and we let our imaginations go wild. My brothers and I would scan the pages of a *National Geographic* picture encyclopedia of mammals, pick out our animal, and then act the part. We wrestled each other to the ground, heads first like the elk; one of us would scamper up on a table as the other paced below like a monkey in a tree with a lion below; at top speed we dashed through the kitchen and into the yard as the fleet-footed gazelle outran the cheetah. Actual animals were overkill in a house with four kids with active imaginations. Nonetheless, my siblings and I constantly lobbied for pets, which came much later at an age of responsibility.

Perhaps due to my tomboyish attitude, I rejected dolls and cherished a collection of animals. I had many stuffed toys that I named and cared for as if they were real, hoping for a *Velveteen Rabbit* moment. My aunt made me a knick-knack shelf to display my small glass animals, plastic horses, onyx donkey and polar bear, flocked squirrel and cat with mirror eyes my grandmother gave me, and countless other treasures. Arranging the shelf was a ritual for me, calling each piece by name, dusting it off, and replacing it on

the shelf. I treated the animals in my collection with the reverence of an idol, and in this process the real animals they represented were becoming sacred in my mind as well. And yet they were not so sacred that I could not indulge in playing with them, or creating a life for them. I believed they wanted to be warm on snowy nights, or that I must rotate their position on the shelf so they could visit with their friends. These wants of the objects made them akin to fetish objects, but overall they were my friends and comforts, and because “the animal itself is also the totem” (Mitchell, p. 178), they became totemic objects, wanting to be my friend and companion (Mitchell, p. 194).

Having such an affinity for animals, they became my favorite subjects to draw. I copied them from photos, illustrations from my favorite books or popular “How to Draw...” manuals. I began combining animal types and decorating them with Technicolor pattern, such as a giraffe head and neck with the body of a lion, covered in spots and stripes of all colors. I was making work that resembled the “marginal hybrids” of medieval manuscripts, “referred to as ‘hybrids’ because they appear to have the features of two, three, or even more different animals” (Morrison, p. 71). These animals and the decorative look of manuscripts would prove a source of great inspiration in upcoming artworks.



Figure 1. Detail from childhood drawing of animal with pawed front feet, hooved back feet and wings. Crayon on construction paper, c. 1990.

As I became interested in art in high school and college, my subject matter was swayed by academia and I drew still lifes, portraits and other typical subject matter, trying to work in an animal whenever I could. During this early art school phase I made awful art, drawing what I thought the professor would want, or whatever the assignment was: fortune cookies, popcorn, still lifes straight from a box of junk in the art closet. My printmaking class was the first to allow open subject matter, because the technique alone was so demanding. My professor, E.C. Cunningham, suggested I look at literary themes such as fairy tales and myth. This opened up a door for me to use animals as characters and symbols in my work. Animals allowed me to be confident in my subject matter so that I could focus on technique. As I built my skill base, my work was becoming more

cohesive; concepts were building on animals as metaphors for personal situations and feelings.

3. Animals and Image as Metaphor and Symbol

The history of animals as metaphor is ancient, as seen in the early civilizations and numerous ancient myths, as well as storybooks of more recent eras, many of which I was exposed to as a child and had lasting impression upon the way I saw animals. My first cognizant use of animals as metaphor was in an early engraving. I paired an animal with a feeling in *Feet Eater*, where a little wombat-monkey is slinking down a hill to partake in the munching of the unsuspecting owner of the feet. This was an illustration of life after college, having moved out of my parents home and experienced freedom, I moved back in and had to re-acclimate myself to the questions of “Where are you going? With who? When will you be back?” etc. It was as if a little monster was nibbling away at me, not enough to provoke, but enough to annoy.

Metaphoric narrative is still a large part of the concept behind my work, although animal symbolism has begun to play a larger role. I have developed a linear map of animals, which also includes a variety of other natural symbols. I do not see these symbols having a rank or file, as each one has its positive and negative aspects that make it just as valid and potent as the next.

The work in my thesis exhibition revolves around eight of these symbolic images: The dog, the antelope or deer, the lioness, the cow, the tree, the jewels, the hand, and the bones. Each of the eight images becomes real in my artwork as they are transformed into images that inhabit the realm of the fetish, totem and idol. Before I speak about each symbol, allow me to define where they stand as fetish, idol and totem.

Idol

Growing up in the Roman Catholic faith led me to appropriately negative and polytheistic connotations of the word “idol”. Through art history, however, I grew to appreciate these depictions of gods lost to the modern world but forever remembered in gold, bronze and stone, very reminiscent of my own keepsakes growing up. Often these idols were animal, and so struck my interest with their preciousness and history. Perhaps most infamous idol is the “golden calf” that Aaron cast of Egyptian gold jewelry when Moses was atop Mt. Sinai (Exodus 32:1-35). The description of the calf demands to be represented as an image, and was by such artists as Poussin, Blake, and Tintoretto.

As beautiful as the calf was in bible study-books, I was captivated by Egyptian idols after seeing an exhibit on the tomb of Ramses II in kindergarten. Seeing depictions of Horus, Anubis, Thoth and the entire lineup of Egyptian animal/human deities on plaster walls and in small faience and precious metal sculptures excited my mind as I made the connection that these were the idols that Moses and the Israelites were so strongly opposed to worshipping. This realization in larger terms speaks to art as idol: that images

provoke as they “take of a life of their own, become idols, take the place of God, and thereby become offensive” (Mitchell, p. 134).

Animals may be overlooked as serious subject matter, but when used as idols they are elevated to mythic status as they assume the same power that inhabits idols of history, which required sacrifice and worship. As I began the body of work for my thesis I was aware of the demands of the creatures in my own work: their need to be seen, their stories told. The hours of creation, from the drawing to the carving to the printing were innumerable and physical, even to the point of injury. My time and body were sacrificed in the making of my work, adding to the verity of the images as idols.

Idols are accompanied by ritual, and for visual art in galleries and museums this is extremely present although tacit among most viewers, as “the visitor engages in an activity that is accurately described as ritual. Indeed, the museum experience bears striking resemblance to religious rituals in both form and content” (Preziosi and Farago, p. 483). People are directed through an art space by the work on the walls and follow the perimeter, pausing for seconds or minutes before each artwork in an act of viewing and contemplating. This act could easily be compared to ritual in a sacred space, such as the visitation of the Christian Stations of the Cross, or the circumambulation of a Buddhist stupa. I wanted the pieces in my exhibition to guide the viewers, and this sense of navigation through space inhabited by idols was very present in my work.

Fetish

In my life I have encountered many fetishes, in my travels to India where spirits are present in every altar in every room of the house, and are presented with gifts of food and drink, coins and incense to provide the adorer with certain strengths and virtues. In Mexico worry dolls are kept to ward off anxiety, and Milagros are placed at altars and tacked to frames of paintings of Mary and Jesus as reminders to the saints to help a worshipper with an ailment. Having lived in Colorado, my understanding of a fetish has been highly influenced by the Native American Indian fetish, which was my first encounter with the word¹, which carries the original definition of a fetish according to the *New Oxford American Dictionary*: inanimate object worshiped for its supposed magical powers or because it is considered to be inhabited by a spirit. The word has its roots in the French *fétiche* and Portuguese *feticho* or “made thing.” The word emerged during seventeenth century mercantilism and quickly became a degrading term for the worship of objects, which led to the derogatory secondary definitions of the word. Therefore, it is no surprise that the Native American Indian tradition carries the colonial name.

The Zuni Indians are credited with the fetish tradition, and continue to carve contemporary fetishes. The Zuni fetish tradition stems from a creation myth in which the animals were destroyed, either by flood or by being turned to stone. Any rock or bit of earth that resembled an animal was thought to be one of these casualties, however the

¹ I had a vague notion that the word also carried a negative connotation that was obsessive or sexual. *New Oxford American Dictionary* lists the secondary definitions of “Fetish” as: 2. A course of action to which one has an excessive and irrational commitment; 3. A form of sexual desire in which gratification is linked to an abnormal degree to a particular object, item of clothing, part of the body, etc.

heart of the animal was believed to be intact, and in this way its power could be harnessed (Cushing, p. 14).

One is able to access the power of the animal by putting his lips to the carvings mouth and inhaling the animal's spirit. The better treatment the fetish receives the better performance it is likely to give. Offerings of cornmeal, turquoise and other stones were given to the animal and kept with the stone carving in a small pouch, worn by the bearer when in need of the animal's power. These carvings were, and still are, known to heal both physical and psychological wounds, aid in the hunt or a journey, repair relationships and bring favorable weather (Cushing, p. 6).

Having discovered the ancient powers of the fetish as set forth by the Zuni, I was fascinated at the impact these small carving could have if the mind of the bearer was open to their powers and treated them with reverence. Once again, my own traditions as a child of keeping the animals on my shelf warm, clean, and happy came back to me, as I realized my participation with them as fetishes.

It is in this way that I say the animals I draw, carve, sculpt and paint are fetishes: they are inhabited by a spirit, quite possibly my own, however the spirit could also be seen as the "aura" that is so often talked about in art theory. Other artists subscribe to this way of thinking, notably feminist multi-media artist Kiki Smith, who said, " I believe objects hold power, that they retain the energy you put into making them" (Wye, *Artists and*

Prints, p. 256). My work attracts comparisons to Smith's, but only for the animals and nature that we both depict in our work, even though our mediums and sensibilities are quite different. Her early work dealt with the human body, and later her focus shifted to the natural world, "depicting birds, animals, and the cosmos in sculpture as well as prints and books." Like mine, her work also floats the line of the totem in this primary use of natural images.

Totem

The term "totem" is referred to objects that often possess animal attributes that are believed to have a certain spiritual significance for a particular society, and is used as a symbol by the society. According to eminent sociologist Emile Durkheim, "totemism, the transformation of the natural world into sacred animated images, is the earliest, most fundamental form of religious life" (Mitchell, p.). Humankind's history with the totem is deeply rooted in spiritual significance, and likewise, the creature characters in my own work develop a sacred bond with myself through their creation and begin to build significance to the viewer. As more proof of the totem's value in my work and in art in general, Mitchell writes, "totemism allows the image to assume a social, conversational, and dialectical relationship with the beholder, the way a doll or a stuffed animal does with children." (p. 106)

My work encompasses the fundamentals of the totem in the grounding of my images with animals and plants and the relationship to ancestors (especially matrilineal). My images

are made things, like the totem. I love dearly the actual animals in my work, but insofar as I do not own or tend to any of them on a daily basis, the animals themselves hold less power than the images they are converted into on paper or sculpted clay, and so, in accordance with Durkheim's philosophy, through my process "the images of the totemic being are more sacred than the totemic being itself" (Mitchell, p. 101).

The energy I instill in my own creations makes them versions of the icon, fetish and totem. It is possible that they exist as all three at once depending on the narrative around each piece, like the golden calf. "When the calf is seen as a miraculous image of God it is an idol; when it is seen as a self-consciously produced image of the tribe or nation, it is a totem; when its materiality is stressed, and it is seen as a molten conglomerate of the private 'part-objects,' the earrings and gold jewelry that the Israelites brought out of Egypt, it becomes a collective fetish." (Mitchell, pp. 188-189). My own magical belief system heavily influenced by history and literature is bestowed upon them, and it is in this world that they exist, and the myth begins.

4. The Myths

Bill Moyers asked Joseph Campbell an important question about modern mythology, in his interview recorded in the book *The Power of Myth*, “Who interprets the divinity inherent in nature for us today? Who are our shamans? Who interprets unseen things for us?” Campbell’s reply hit me in the chest, as I realized its gravity: “It is the function of the artist to do this. The artist is the one who communicates myth for today.” (Flowers, p. 121).

Campbell calls myth “literature for the spirit,” and rightly so as it feeds us with purpose, history and perspective. The creation of prints in my life has become necessary, my passion for creation needing to be realized in a finished product, a made image with the weight and complexity of myth. The finished product, my MFA Thesis Exhibition, *Creature Alterations, Myth & Transformations*, displays my creations as an interrelated narrative, each communicating with the next in sequence as well as to another form of itself across the room.

The dog, the antelope or deer, the lioness, the cow, in conjunction with the symbols of the tree, the jewels, the hand, and the bones were the eight central symbols in the body of work exhibited. They were born in prints, reproduced as editions, enlarged and painted

on canvas, projected with light, sculpted in gold and paired with poetry and prose in an artist book. Constant recognition of the image was achieved by repetition, just as one understands a character the more they hear of him in the pages of a book. My prints are personal, and stay true as they tell my own story encouraged by Campbell: “Put aside for awhile the myth of the origin of the world...and go back to the myth of what is the human quest, what are its stages of realization and what are the trials of the transition from childhood to maturity and what does maturity mean, the story is there, as it is in all the religions” (Flowers, p. 170). My artwork has an intricate history and narrative uniquely mine, which I will now illuminate.

The Dog

The dog, descended from wolves, is the animal I most identify with in my adult life. The wolf and the dog are interchangeable in my work as wolves can be domesticated, and dogs can run wild and feral. Humans project their emotions onto dogs, and we believe they can feel pain, remorse, pleasure, or compassion just as easily, and in the same way, that we do. In my mind, this makes dogs the most human of all animals, and therefore lowly, capable of fault in a Garden of Eden sort of way. This side of the dog is the negative, but dogs also have many positive characteristics influenced by history and traditional myths. According to the Greeks, the dog was a symbol of fidelity and a true companion as she joins Ares in combat (Whittlessey, p. 91). The dog is guardian, as Cerberus for the Greeks and Annubis for the Egyptians; the dog is mother of Mowgli, Romulus and Remus. The dog is forever faithful, even to a fault, as noted in bestiary

texts, “And hounds know their own names, and love their masters, and defend the houses of their masters, and put themselves willfully in peril of death for their masters, and run to take prey for their masters, and forsake not the dead bodies of their masters” (<http://www.bestiary.ca/beasts/beast181.htm>).

Piecing together the popular dogs in history and their roles as guardian, companion, and mother, the dog in my work is my loyal, assertive, aggressive female alter ego: always loyal to a man, a faithful companion; yet watchful, investigative, putting up barriers as guardian of inner feelings, a universal bitch. In 2007, I began working on a three interrelated prints, *The Jewel Tree*, *She Howls* and *Built Up, Build Out*. The series was about finding oneself and during my process of introspection, I began to associate myself with the dog as I was exhibiting many of her actions: loyalty, watchfulness, companion, and guardian to my inner self. *The Jewel Tree* was the first created, a small image of a flowering tree, rooted in a treasure chest, guarded on either side by a dog while the Egyptian hieroglyph “Ka” or soul, framed the top of the composition. The jewels in the chest grow into the tree as a metaphor for personality, something so unique and infinite as light from the facets of jewels. The dogs are witnesses, yet not participating, just as one can go through life never realizing their potential or never believing what others see in them. Despite this, the Ka overlooks the entire situation insuring peace in the long run.

The next piece in the series, *She Howls*, places the dog on top of the jewels, in another attempt to understand the wealth under her feet. She howls for understanding, searching

for something deep within, as deep as bones are imbedded in muscle. Her search is ongoing, represented by the row of trees at the top, taken from a Buddhist frieze. The search is disrupted at times, represented by the barbed wire in the background. *Built Up, Build Out*, deals with some of the same information and symbolism as *She Howls*, but it introduces the next animal, the antelope/deer.



Figure 2. *Jewel Tree*, 2007, plastic plate engraving.

The Antelope/Deer

Built Up, Build Out, continues the theme of introspection and delving into what I am made of. I am a human; built of bones, and my most important bones are my hands, as they allow me to create. My personal history builds me up, personified by the bees, nature's architects and a symbol for home. The antelope becomes the feminine contractor who oversees the life in progress, wide eyes and large ears ready to watch and listen to the changes that will inevitably occur.

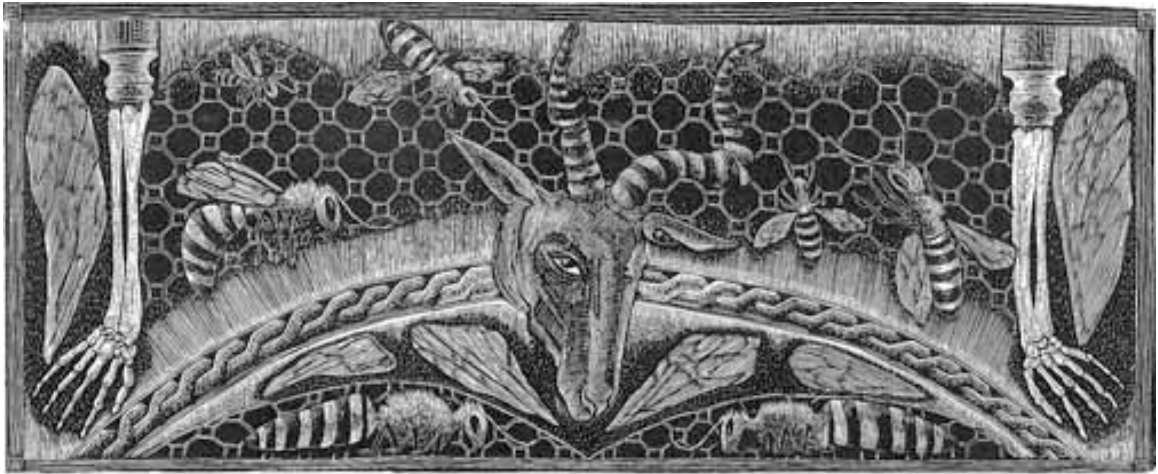


Figure 3. *Built Up, Build Out*, 2007, plastic plate engraving.

Members of the deer and antelope family are fascinating to me, as they are supermodels with potential superpowers in the animal world. They are animals of flight, quick to run to safety, difficult to catch and yet are imposing and dignified with horns or antlers that have potential to be filled with life-giving components. For these reasons, the deer/antelope is the alter ego to the dog. She is the passive escapist, yet hauntingly beautiful, long sleek legs, large wet eyes, with something to protect.

“In China the deer is a symbol of longevity, and is believed to be the only animal which can locate the sacred fungus of immortality. The tips of its horns are believed to contain the essence of this fungus, and medicinal pills compounded from the horns are believed to offer longevity, health, and vitality” (Beer, p. 83). Often the horns or antlers of the animals were ground up to be ingested to assume the powers of the animal. The Native American Indians would often attach antlers to headdresses to channel the spirits of the

deer. Similarly, the Egyptians believed that “through the placement of the animal’s horns on his/her head, the leader disguised himself and became the animal referred to and therefore possessed its power” (King, p. 222). In some of my early prints, I would use the horns in the same way, affixing them to another animal to raise the status of the animal to shaman or god, as in *War*.



Figure 4. *War*, 2004, plastic plate engraving.

Although antlers imply male when affixed to a deer, I associate them in my work with the female because of the animal’s elegant figure and its association with various goddesses, notably as “an attribute to the goddess Artemis” and she is often depicted wearing a deerskin (Whittlessey, p. 323). It is quite possible that the Greek Artemis, and Roman

Diana originated in the Egyptian Nieth who is depicted with a headdress of antelope horns and also governed the hunt (King, p. 211).

In the print *Diana*, an eastern version of the goddess is shown in a moment with her two dogs. A small antelope leaps from her hand as the greater totem figure rises behind her with the moon. This piece is in homage to the “Diana” goddesses in all cultures, goddess of the hunt, goddess of the moon, with sacred symbols the deer, dog, moon and cypress surrounding her. The goddess became a pivotal role in my work and I decided to instill the goddess powers directly into the next animals.

The Lioness

The *Bestiary Therouanne* tells of the lion, “When a lioness gives birth to her cubs, she produces them dead and watches over them for three days, until their father comes on the third day and breathes life into their faces and restores them to life. Thus the Almighty Father awakened out Lord Jesus Christ from the dead on the third day” (Morrison, p. 64).

The parallels with the lion and Christ are many, from the description of birth aforementioned, to “the lion erasing its tracks with its tail represents the way Jesus concealed his divinity, only revealing himself to his followers. The lion sleeping with its eyes open represents Jesus, physically dead after crucifixion, but still spiritually alive in his divine nature” (www.bestiary.ca/beasts/beast78.htm). These similarities with Christ

place the lion in the realms of the sacred, but the female lioness deserves more credit than the male.

Lions are sociable cats, living in prides, with the females as the majority. They are skilled huntresses, catching and killing prey for their male counterparts. The lionesses is mother not only to her own cubs, but all the cubs in the pride as the females enter estrus at the same time and are able to nurse their nieces and nephews (Coppard, p. 317). The lioness is regal, and quietly enlightened as she is the embodiment of the “Diana” goddess in animal form. She is creator, destroyer, wife and mother.

I first used the lioness as a stand-in for the Buddha in the print *Lioness Enlightened*. This piece is based on the Buddhist story of Muchalinda, a five-headed snake who came to guard the Buddha when he was trying to achieve enlightenment through meditation. The god Mara and his armies began taunting the Buddha and Muchalinda protected him by spreading his hoods and hissing at the onslaught (Menzies, p. 30). The notion that ugly and scary beings can guard the good against equally devious forces fascinates me.



Figure 5. *Lioness, Enlightened*, 2007, plastic plate engraving.

The lioness, became my symbol of strength and resolve in the feminine form, and takes the place of the Buddha under the Bodhi tree. She is guarded from any incoming harm by the menacing face, claws and teeth, yet the body of his creature becomes human, with feet in a lotus position at the bottom. The print is a metaphor for life as ugly and unfortunate moments as guides to revelation, but one must be strong and resolved to make it through these moments. After this piece I saw the lioness as having been enlightened and henceforth she appears as shamanistic, having access to the world of

greater knowledge from enlightenment. Her state of enlightened perfection allows her to sway to the side of the idol in following prints.

The Cow

In December of 2007, mid-way through the graduate program at George Mason University, I was fortunate to travel to southern India. India was a place that I had romanticized for its exotic, colorful deities, spices, streets, and countryside. Yet despite knowing it was a “third-world” country it was still on top of my travel list. After a long flight I stepped out into the air of Bangalore and all my senses were struck like lightning.

Diana Eck describes it accurately in her book *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*:

“India’s display of multi-armed images, its processions and pilgrimages, its beggars and kings, its street life and markets its diversity of peoples --all appear to the eye in a kaleidoscope of images. Much that is removed from public view in the modern West and taken into the privacy of rest homes, asylums, and institutions is open and visible in the life of an Indian city or village....One sees people at work and at prayer; one sees plump, well-endowed merchants, simple renouncers, fraudulent ‘holy’ men, frail widows, and emaciated lepers; one sees the festival procession, the marriage procession, and the funeral procession” (p.

11)

I traveled by plane, bus and car from Bangalore to Kerala to Hyderabad to Visac and everywhere I went, I was honored to see some of the most beautiful cows on the planet: bone-colored hide with large dark, kind eyes, painted horns with the tips snipped off and large gold rings in their noses. These were the cows of India, the very same whose milk was poured over the sacred *linga* (special stones devoted to Shiva) (Eck, p. 34). The expression “Holy Cow” originated in India meaning exactly what it says, and truthfully, for the cows in India were treated with reverence by all who came near them.

Despite the pollution, noise, starving children, trash, and scores of homeless, the cows became a symbol for the innate beauty of the country and the people there. I began to think of the cow as “Mother India” as she gives milk to mankind and the gods, and stirs the soil in the fields. The Cow is my symbol for mother earth, and yet her reputation as “golden calf” precedes her.²

² The cow along with the goat and snake, were animals associated with creation, the cow and goat for their milk and the snake for its ability to shed skin, and therefore were associated with goddess worship. As goddess worship was outlawed by early monotheistic religious powers, the animals attributed to the goddess were degraded to distance the public from their pagan goddess traditions. Satan’s appearance as goat and snake are a direct result of this change, as well as The Bible’s mention of the golden calf (Eisler, pp. 78-104).

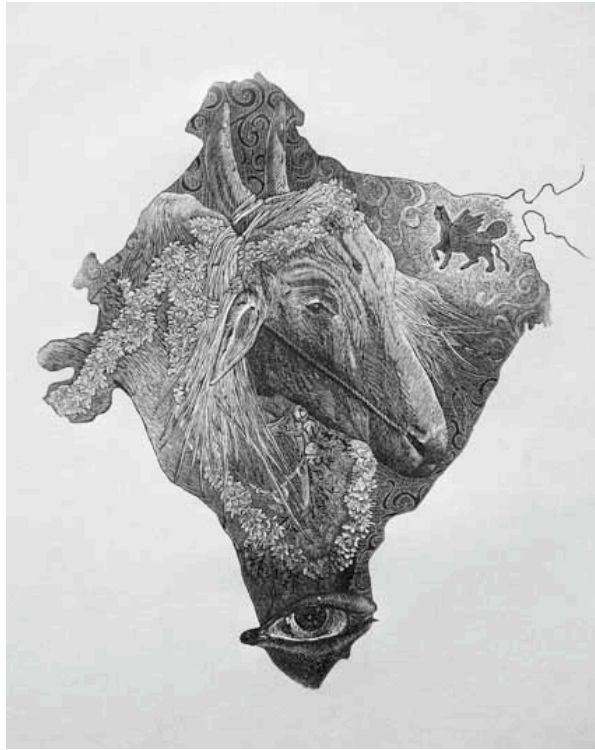


Figure 6. *Holy Cow, India*, 2007, plastic plate engraving.

In *Holy Cow, India* I used the cow face, adorned with floral wreaths and bells emerging from the shape of the sub-continent. The cow meets a small winged cow goddess like an angel on its shoulder, whispering into its ear. I added a scowling dog with mermaid's tail to the monoprint version *Holy Cow, Barking Dog*. The dog is a self-portrait, carved much tighter than the cow's face, representing myself as a westerner, having grown a mermaid's tail to cross the ocean and then scowling at the continent and the mother cow. This adjustment to a country that so badly wants to be Western, but is wrapped so heavily in its own traditions and history, and which deals with so many problems and is heaped with people, was stirring and upsetting, yet hope shone through on the faces of so many of those whom I met along the way.

Near the bottom tip of the subcontinent in the print is an eye. The eye's meaning is based on ritual in the Hindu religion in which "images are often striking for their large conspicuous eyes" (Eck, p. 7). The Hindu worshippers wish not only to see these images, but also to be seen by them, "the gaze of the huge eyes of the images meets that of the worshipper, and that exchange of vision lies at the heart of Hindu worship." I see a great connection to the fetish and totem here, as the eye begs to communicate, and I wanted to include that notion in this piece.

The cow, like the bison for the Native American Indian, is seen by the East Indians as a mother figure. In the September 15, 1940 issue of *Harijan: English Weekly Journal*, Gandhi remarked on the cow,

"Mother cow is in many ways better than the mother who gave us birth. Our mother gives us milk for a couple of years and then expects us to serve her when we grow up. Mother cow expects from us nothing but grass and grain. Our mother often falls ill and expects service from us. Mother cow rarely falls ill. Here is an unbroken record of service, which does not end with her death. Our mother, when she dies, means expenses of burial or cremation. Mother cow is as useful dead as when she is alive. We can make use of every part of her body-her flesh, her bones, her intestines, her horns and her skin" (p. 281 accessed online at <http://www.mkgandhi.org/gsr.htm>).

The statement from Gandhi reinforces animal as metaphor, and the way that Hindu's treat the cow proves this. The cow deserves the very best treatment, not simply because it is a cow, but because of the profound metaphor that surrounds the animal. Witnessing this metaphor take place in India impacted me greatly, and I felt validation in the themes of my work, especially in my investigation of animal as icon, fetish and totem. The realization of metaphor made me aware of the function of my work, and I was able to take leaps in directions that I might not have ventured before. *Holy Cow, India* is the beginning of this change, as for the first time the shaped plate is introduced. The plate takes the iconic shape of the country of India, in which resides the cow. The dualities of inner and outer, memory and experience, life and history are at work within this piece, making it a true milestone in my artistic career. When I look at this piece I can't help seeing a similarity in the gaze of the cow to the gaze of the Virgin Mary in many of her benevolent Latin American incarnations. The Virgin Mary was so readily accepted in Latin America because she paralleled the Aztec mother goddess. The title *Holy Cow, India* is completely appropriate, chosen with the revered creation goddesses in mind and my own sacred turning point reached from my extraordinary trip to India.

The Jewels, Bones, Tree and Hand

Surrounding each of the animals in the featured illustrations are other symbols, which I have touched on in the previous descriptions, notably the bones as a metaphor for structure and the jewels as a symbol for personality, talent or giftedness.

The tree is my symbol for the unknown and the natural world. Red Riding Hood was warned to “stay on the path” for fear if she ventured to the woods, something hidden would threaten her. The forest is where ascetics like Buddha and Jesus went to meditate and pray, and others venture to the woods for vision quests and coming of age rituals. And the tree of life in the Garden of Eden held the greatest of unknowns, now known thanks to Eve. Joseph Campbell supports the notion that “the tree is of course, the mythological world axis, at the point where time and eternity, movement and rest are at one, around which all things revolve. It is here represented only in its temporal aspect, as the tree of knowledge of good and evil, profit and loss, desire and fear” (Flowers, p. 172).

I was brought up with a reverence for trees instilled by my mother who missed the trees of her humid east coast youth in a dry, cracked Colorado. She planted three or four trees every year making our small plot the shadiest and most wooded on the block. My siblings and I had to be gentle to these little trees that were only as tall as we were. Once, my brothers and I ran into an aspen in our front yard with a sled, which peeled a swath of bark off. When my mother saw it, I saw tears in her eyes, and it was then that I realized the power of the tree as a living thing. Whether in the mountains of Colorado or forests of Virginia, when all is quiet, the woods feel as if they are capable of great, and grave, magic.

The tree provides a background in my artwork; it is the grounding element in my prints, both compositionally and contextually. The print *Own Two Feet* uses the tree as the

foundation of the composition, with the hand at the base, rooting it. The slit in the hand is an opening to the world beyond, full of heavy leafed branches.



Figure 7. *Own Two Feet*, 2008, plastic plate engraving.

Like the tree, the hand is of utmost importance to me. I thrive while working with my hands and am convinced that to be happy in this life, I must work with my hands. The hand has become for me a symbol for the artist.

The hand takes a major role in the print *Double Deer*; the same deer that is seen in *Own Two Feet*. The print illustrates a deer walking in opposite directions trying to create two paths. The animal is branded in the center with the hand, the mark of the artist; and it is to this center, to my passion to create, that I will always return. The hand on the head and neck are vital as well, as they seek to reign in the animal to return to this central point.

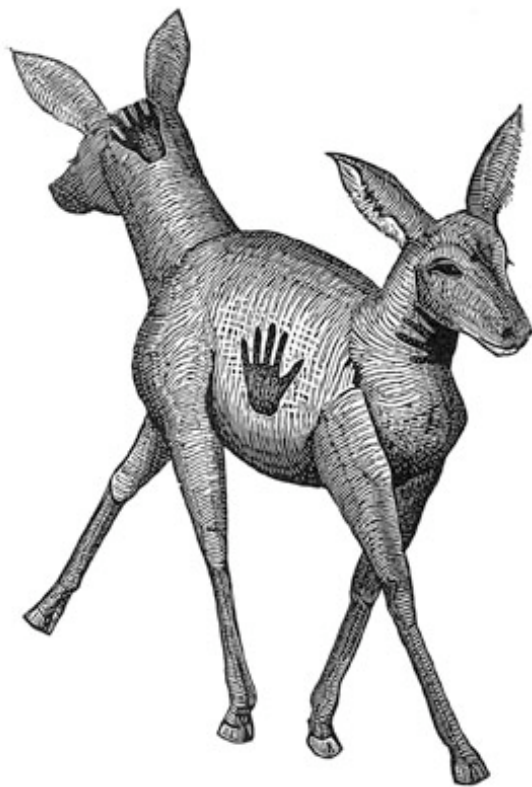


Figure 8. *Double Deer*, 2008, plastic plate engraving.

Each culture has a defined meaning for the hand, which can vary greatly depending on the motion or placement of the hand. For the Sioux Indians, a handprint on their horse

meant a scalp taken in battle; hands together show prayerful reverence in Western religions; and in the East the healing hand wards off the evil eye. But going back to the caves of Lascaux, where modern society considers the work inside to be some of the first “art” in the broadest sense, we find handprints. “Some are positive images made by simply coating the hand with color pigment and pressing against the wall. Others are negative images: the surrounding space rather than the hand shape itself is painted” (Stokstad, p. 50). Humans are unique in the animal kingdom for the usage of their hands to provide for themselves what nature has not, and in every act of the hand there is creation of some kind.

As idols, fetishes and totems, my symbolic creatures take on lives of their own. The animals and symbols drive the concepts in my work, but the process of printmaking and the physical work with my hands allows me to fully taste the experience I convey in my prints.

5. Printmaking: Discovery of Process

The handprints at Lascaux are just that: prints. They are often referred to as paintings, yet the hand is an object that can be reproduced, both in its positive and negative forms as mentioned above. So the history of printmaking begins.



Figure 9. The block (left) and the print (right) of my first relief print project, circa 1996.

Other than a potato stamps and a linoleum project in grade school, my history with printmaking began in college. I slipped into a printmaking class with E.C. Cunningham a semester before I should have, because my drawing teacher liked my pen and ink drawings and suggested I take printmaking. The first day of class the professor greeted the class saying, “Printmaking is the boot camp of art school.” And it was. I struggled through the semester, when a project that involved the history of printmaking turned me into a true budding printmaker.

The class was to make a book, “Sinner/Saint”, based on the origins of printmaking in gambling cards and religious cards. The dichotomy was fascinating as I learned about the history of the printing press: “the function of fifteenth century woodcuts throughout these developmental phases was overwhelmingly religious, although they were also used as playing cards, illustrations for secular books, and as political broadsheets” (Hults, p. 22). I chose a passage from Revelation about the four horsemen of the apocalypse, in homage to Albrecht Dürer, and his etching of the same name. Unfortunately, I printed it on the wrong side of the binding, and had to reattach a strip of paper to the other side so that it could be a part of the student book. My professor, E.C. Cunningham, was unimpressed with me up to that point, but he said he knew I was a printmaker after I had painstakingly reattached an inch wide sheet of paper to over thirty prints. I was falling in love with the craft and processes involved in printmaking, but my work had little focus and was in need of finding itself.

My professor encouraged me to look into literary themes and the work of those who used them. The engravings of Fritz Eichenberg were pivotal as he illustrated classics such as *Jane Eyre* and *Reynard the Fox*, as well as illustrations for *The Catholic Worker*.

Eichenberg’s early influences also spoke to me, as Goya, Bosh, and Hogarth served as guides for us both (Ellsberg, p. 15). I absorbed the illustrations of John Sloan who by “choosing ordinary people for his subjects he was following the example of artists he admired, including Goya, Dürer, Rembrandt, and Hogarth, as well as contemporary

illustrators” (Wye, *Artists and Prints*, p. 120). E.C. Cunningham also suggest I follow my passion and work from what I knew, animals and personal experience. I experimented with etchings, lithographs, lino-cuts and monoprints and with content from fractured fairy tales and trips abroad. I loved each of the processes but felt as if my full potential was still being kept inside.

E.C. Cunningham recommended a summer workshop in South Dakota to broaden my scope. I signed up for “Frogman’s” weeklong workshop on Wood Engraving and Letterpress taught by Jim Horton of Ann Arbor, MI, and Debra Mae Broad of Hawley, MI. The class objective was to produce a dos-si-dos book based on New Orleans folk songs, each student carving a block and setting type to his or her page. I mapped out a drawing of “Voodoo Queen Marie” dancing with her skeleton friends around a campfire, transferred it to the block and picked up a tool. The moment the burin hit the wood, something special happened; I had found the perfect medium.

6. The Method

The sense of discovery is very apparent in printmaking, as my discovery with the engraving burin, the discovery of pulling a plate out of the acid bath, and the discovery of lifting the paper from a pressed plate. Other artists are attuned to this same sense of discovery, such as Susan Rothenberg who in all the printmaking that she has attempted, “has approached the medium with an intensity that has resulted in works with richly activated surfaces. Whether from the painterly strokes of lithography, the hack marks of woodcut or the mysteriously articulated incisions of intaglio, her imagery emerges from an animated field, providing a kind of discovery” (Wye, *Thinking Print*, p. 17).

Relief printing relies on the discovery of white line emerging from a black ground. When a surface is carved in relief it is all or nothing, surface or incision, black or white. From such a simple decision comes infinite ways of managing space with mark, grayscale, negative space, decorative design and outline. Of all the compliments I have received about my prints, I am always excited when someone says the prints do not need color because the marks are the color! This means I have succeeded in rendering a world of black and white, vibrant enough to capture even color fanatics. I draw in line, often think in line, and can conjugate images to black and white. I have always been drawn to bold black and white pattern and illustration, and as I observe viewers of my work, it seems I

am one of many that enjoys the clean, graphic, black and white impression of relief prints. Knowing my penchant for all things small, combined with a love of graphics, the scale of wood engraving attracted me early on in bookplates and chapter headings. It was only natural to completely fall in love with the method at Frogman's, and to have a great interest in the history of this amazing printmaking method.

"Wood Engraving" is a strange misnomer in the print world, often confused with wood cut or traditional engravings on metal plates. Simply, it is a process accredited to Thomas Bewick of Newcastle, England, who in the late eighteenth century thought to use his metal engraving tools on the end grain of a wood block. The end grain, many times harder than the plank end of a block of wood, could retain the sharp, small cuts of the metal engraving burins and could be inked in relief alongside moveable type in books and newspapers.

In Bewick's time boxwood was favored for engraving, although it was slow growing and producing only a small diameter so that many small pieces made up one block. Today, other hardwoods are increasingly being used, such as maple, pear and holly, as boxwood is extremely expensive and hard to come by. Some of my first engravings were on *Resingrave*, a plastic substrate cast as a veneer on a plywood base, created as an alternative to hardwood. Great for beginners, it has also converted many wood engraving aficionados such as Barry Moser, who illustrated Thoreau's *Walden*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Melville's *Moby Dick* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

He “is the first artist since Gustav Doré to execute a comprehensive body of images for the Holy Bible,” complete with 233 engravings on Resingrave (<http://www.pennyroyal-caxton.com/moser.htm>).

Like Resingrave, plastics have also given way to exciting discoveries and are widely used in the academic realm as they are an economical option for students and school budgets. I was fortunate enough to return to Frogman’s workshop where Karla Hackenmiller of Ohio State University was giving a demonstration with High Impact Polystyrene (HIPS). This material could be carved with engraving burins and then inked intaglio for a fuzzy dry point look or rolled in relief for the same crisp look as a traditional wood engraving. Although it was more buttery than Resingrave, the price tag was a major selling point, and I have been using it almost exclusively. Another advantage that I eventually would exploit was the size and shaping capabilities of HIPS. Available in 4 by 8 ft sheets, HIPS allowed for dimensions never seen in older wood engravings.

7. Process

In the creation process, I first prepare my HIPS block, whose surface is glossy smooth and white all the way through. I darken the surface with red or other colored permanent marker. Next, by hand I transfer my drawing to the block using graphite or carbon paper.



Figure 10. Engraving materials: from top to bottom: engraving burin, HIPS plastic, end-grain maple, Resingrave with carving.

When my drawing is realized on the block I trace the graphite (which will come off with finger oil on the slick surface) with a black permanent marker. Now, when I begin carving I can see my drawing on the red surface and I know exactly where my tool has carved out, because those areas are now white, the core color of my block. This process is much the same as the traditional transfer used for centuries, and explained here by Elizabeth Seaton in reference to Grace Albee, one of the foremost female wood engravers of the early 1900's: "To prepare a wood engraving, Albee typically made a preliminary line drawing from life, with a few indications of light and shadow, which she transferred through tracing in red line onto a blackened block of boxwood. Using the same tools employed in metal engraving, she began her engraving in the area of the lightest tones and then worked into the darkest" (Seaton, p. 87).

If I were to carve around all my black drawn lines, this would be an example of "black line engraving," but if I were to use my tool as Bewick did, to draw with light, I would be employing "white line engraving." Simon Brett explains, "It is, of course, possible to use the engraving process to isolate the black into lines, in an imitation of pen, pencil, etc., but it is more natural, because it is more immediate, to draw with the marks of light." (Brett, p. 10). Like most artists, my work uses a combination of both to keep things interesting. The metal burins I use are unlike a brush or charcoal stick, not meant to be used fluidly, but in small quarter inch strokes or less. To me, this gives wood engraving a tight, cohesiveness that is seldom found in any other media.

I am still amazed at the transformation from drawing to print, especially in relief engraving, where the mark of the burin is vastly different from the pen or pencil marks of the original drawing. I love to see my pencil sketches change into engravings. As the lines give it new life, they become a new expression of my hand, and these lines are revealed in the final printing of the block. Art critic and chronicler Pat Gilmour describes the transformation of the mark: “the potential print has for multiplication is acquired at the expense of direct touch. There is no print process that does not place at one remove from the sheet of paper the hand that seeks to mark it...Once printed, the mark is not intrinsically better or worse than one drawn directly; it is simply different” (Tallman, p. 9).

I am constantly looking at engravings to invigorate my mark making. Collections of old engravings and works by master carvers are essential for gaining insight on how marks were used to create the illusion of a rounded surface, reflected surface, natural sky or plant life, fur, smoothness of human skin, and use of negative space among others. Artist and printmaker Elizabeth Catlett learned her unique mark making in Mexico City from Taller de Gráfica Popular (TPG), where “In carving the linoleum block for *Sharecropper*, Catlett utilized the stylistic approach she had learned from TPG—subtly varied, closely spaced hatchings to delineate contour, pattern, material and texture” (Seaton, p. 109). Each engraver has a unique way of handling the light and shade, the tool and the block, resulting in a unique style for every artist. Although wood engraving is easily identifiable, the variety within the medium is limitless.

Often I am asked what I do when I make a mistake in this seemingly unforgivable medium. Although there are ways to mend a block if a cut was taken out in error, I much prefer to work the “mistake” into the composition. I point to Rauschenberg for support, whose “mistake” led him to incredible recognition for his cleverly titled stone lithograph, *Accident*, 1963. I was fortunate to see this print in person at the Rauschenberg print retrospective at the National Gallery of Art in 2008.

“Rauschenberg redrew the image on a second stone, which also cracked...He then incorporated the disaster by having the lithograph printed from the two halves of the broken stone, employing the brilliant white fissure as a dramatic element, and coyly adding a second stone to print a pile of “debris” at the bottom. *Accident*, for all its jumble of disconnected pictorial references, is also a revelation of its own history” (Tallman, p. 35).

The look of a wood engraving is totally unique, and just as “painters, such as Motherwell and Newman, exploited the painterly liquidity of lithography...More draftsman-like artists, such as Jim Dine, reveled in the linear riches and tactility of etching, while sculptors such as Donald Judd or Joel Shapiro utilized the concrete materiality of woodblocks” (Tallman, p. 8). I believe the innate illustrative qualities of wood engraving called to me, and continue to incite a visceral reaction in those who see my prints. Throughout my time in graduate school I have seen how my sensibilities as a traditional printmaker have led me to relish in the time, effort, detail, and surface of relief engravings.

My mark making is labored, each image made up of thousands of carved lines, each print creating a miniscule universe of black and white. The detail and visible labor in this small universe attracted me, and continues to attract artists to printmaking mediums that involve so much labor and time, such as Vija Celmins and Chuck Close. “The visible labor in works like these is often astonishing—Celmins spent a year cutting the woodcut *Ocean* (1992)—but drudgery is not the point. The point is the visceral presence of what Close calls a “record of decisions having been made” (Tallman, p. 126). As I grew from experimental to expert wood engraver, I delighted in each decision and in the worlds I was creating, and continue to create in black and white.

The actual carving proved to be extremely Zen-like, as I was able to close out the world and focus on a single inch of block through my jewelers magnifying goggles. The artist’s relationship with the plate or block is sacred, and for some, like painter Chris Ofili, “nourishing.” Ofili has said about the printing process: “It can take me to places within myself that are unfamiliar.” “While his obsessively drawn, allover patterns are clearly analogous to the decorative fields in his paintings, the small format and spare repetitive black markings suggest a process that is more private and introspective” (Tallman, p. 258). I think about the image when I carve it, and subsequently become more comfortable with my concepts and narrative that surrounds the image, and all in all a truly cathartic and introspective experience results.

8. In the Studio: the Method at Work

My thesis show was the result of two and half years of work in the print shop and graduate studio at George Mason University. The myths and symbolism around my artwork arose consciously from my inner mind, sparked by comments from others, books I was reading or things I had seen. I searched for ideas everywhere, using my sketchbook as a compendium of images and ideas to defeat “artist block.” It is filled with images from life and from illustrated sources, excerpts from books, magazines, museum programs, quotes and more. It is a concrete shaping of my mind, always evolving and growing from volume to volume. The idea of cataloguing my symbols came from keeping a specific sketchbook as a visual dictionary of animals and objects that had meaning for me.

My work was challenged by my professor’s critiques in both concept and material. When I began graduate school, my primary goal was to learn to combine my engravings with other media, and these combinations led to scathing reviews at first, but through determination and experimentation, I successfully achieved more than one way to bring my engraved characters to life, both in combination with other media and in entirely new media.

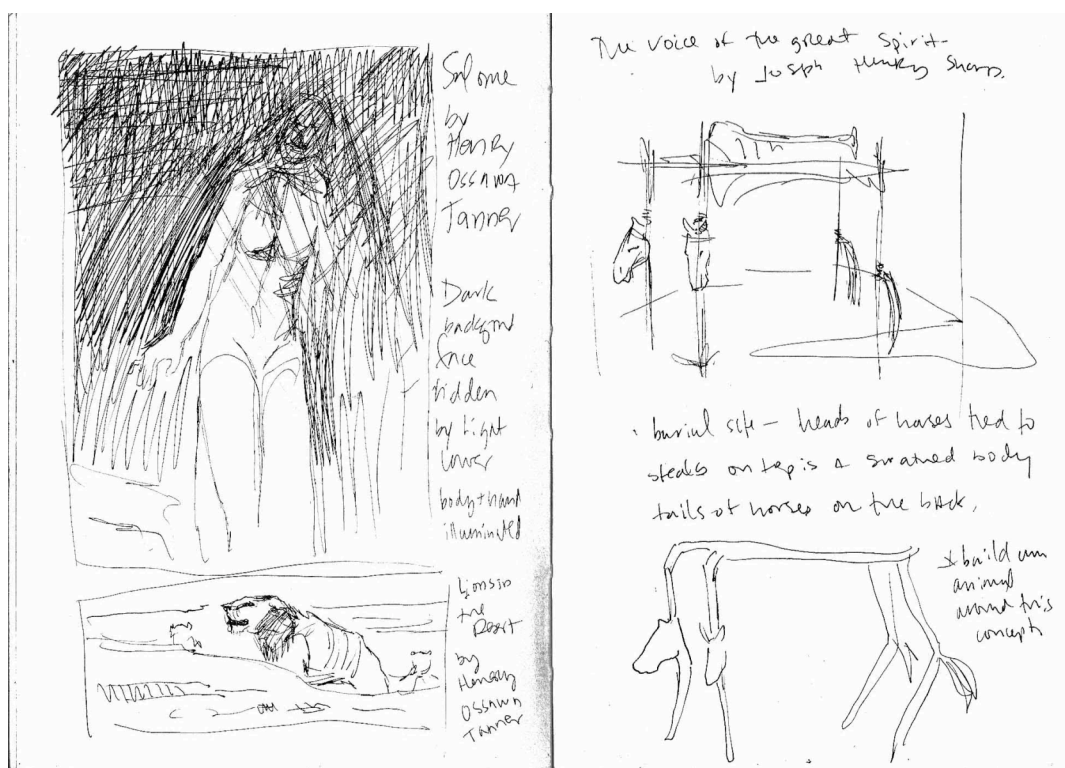


Figure 11. Page from personal sketchbook, 2007

I came to the program with a portfolio of editioned prints as a traditionally schooled printmaker. I soon realized that it was quality, not quantity that printmakers were interested in, as the status of editioned work had lost some of its allure. “Though the convention of the limited edition has become the de facto standard among printmakers, print shops, and print publishers, it is still just a convention—an arbitrary confinement of replication” (Tallman, p. 8). I thought that I needed to edition my work because of the time it took to carve each piece, and this is an advantage, but I began to discover numerous other ways to use each block for an even greater reward.

I had just finished *She Howls*, *Built Up*, *Build Out* and *The Jewel Tree* series. Susan Goldman commented on the series saying although beautifully framed, what would happen if one of the creatures broke free of the boarder, allowing white space into the image, and possibly opening up the picture plane to the whole of the paper? I was energized by the comment, and was hoping to try the method of shaping or stenciling to break from the confines of the plate. Breaking from the printers rectangle or square paper is an effort that many print artists have dealt with in most interesting ways. Karen Kunc, the George Mason's Navigation Press artist in 2008, touched on this in her artist talk, as she explained how she tacked together large sheets and tore others to form an asymmetric picture plane for her woodcuts. Other artists such as Lucian Freud shaped the plate in his prints, leading to "their penetrating psychological tension and radical compositional arrangements. Pairing down to essentials of line, he achieves a degree of abstraction by eliminating any background or context for his figures" (Wye, *Artists and Prints*, p. 227). Like Freud, my approach was to shape the plate, and HIPS resilient nature allowed it to be cut with ease.

Not only could I edition the shaped plate in black and white, I could use it like a puzzle piece alongside other plates, changing or enhancing the meaning behind it, in step with my concepts. After many failed attempts at painted prints and prints with solid blocks of color behind them, the first successful shaped plate combination was *Holy Cow, Barking Dog* (figure 12). *Holy Cow, India*, (figure 6) when paired with the barking dog takes on an additional meaning of communication, frustration and discovery. The dog is a self-

portrait, carved in a tighter, more graphic manner than the cow, in reference to the attitude of the West. The dog has grown a mermaid's tail to cross the ocean to the subcontinent and lines of communication are released from its mouth. First, I printed the shaped plates in black and experimented with dipped string and gold leaf as the line of communication. Although bold in black and white on a large sheet of crisp paper, I decided to experiment with color.

Color was added by using the monotype process, whereupon ink is applied by hand to a flat surface, paper is pressed on the surface and a unique print is pulled off (Lambert, p. 81). Translucent layers of monotype began to form a background as I stenciled around the places where I was planning on dropping the plates. By flicking solvent, using exaggerated brushstrokes and utilizing other textures, I was filling up the surface with interesting shapes and color interactions. I used a slightly transparent ink to coat the shaped plates and then dropped them in their assigned places. The results were stunning, and so different than in stark black and white. Knowing my inclination towards detail, I proceeded to draw small lines and circles following my original brushstrokes, and I experimented further by painting on top of the selected printed areas to pull them forward or push the detail back. The result was a one-of-a-kind multi media work of art. The piece was well received in my critique, as the addition of the transparent monotype colors and the composition of the two plates made the piece work cohesively.



Figure 12. *Holy Cow, Barking Dog*, 2008, mixed media monoprint.

9. The Books: Creature Alterations, Myth & Transformations

I went on to shape other plates for my Thesis exhibit, notably *Own Two Feet* and *Wisdom in the Bones*. The realization that came with shaping the plates also led to stenciling which enabled me to think of my plates in terms of sections of symbols which led to the development of the book, *Creature Alterations, Myth & Transformations*. As my concepts and stories for my graduate body of work were coming together, Helen Frederick suggested I create a glossary, possibly in book form to illuminate each symbol. I looked at the work of Nancy Spero who “developed a vocabulary of more than two hundred fifty female types, which she had made into separate letterpress plates. She composes her images by either stamping the plates directly onto the final work or printing them and treating them as collage elements” (Tallman, p. 214). From her work I took the iconic power that a single part of an image can contain, such as the disconnected hands, feet and head in her *Elegy*, 1983; as well as how the images interact with type as in *The Fifth Hour (Licit Exp Series)*, 1974, which features a body and separated head in the middle with text coming from the center point in an ‘X’ shape. By separating my printed compositions into selected symbols they became iconic on the pages of the book.



Figure 13. *Creature Alterations, Myth & Transformations*, 2008, artist book.

The books take a symbol and pair it with simple prose, just enough for my overall meaning to come through, but not so much that the viewer is unable to bring meaning to it. This was a delicate balance to achieve, as I began with pages of explanation and paired it down until the pages breathed comfortably through the letterpress type. What I chose to reveal in words was a fine line speaking to the archetypal and universal which inhabits my work, “this premise is inherent in the print, with its dual role as intimate treasure and public spectacle, and it was knowingly exploited by Winters (Terry Winters) and Borofsky (Jonathan Borofsky) who used prints to create a ricochet between private and public experience; between massed images and isolated ones; between essentially, social relationships and individual identities” (Tallman, p. 190). My artist books serve as a guide to the prints, where symbols can be reexamined on their selected page and then seen anew with greater understanding. The repetition from the prints to the books was intriguing and I sought to energize the thesis exhibition with other forms of repetition, which led to even more ways of working with my set of animal symbols.



Figure 14. Altar with books, votives and gold symbols, 2008.

10. The True Icon, Fetish, and Totem: Gold Heads

After the conception of the book, I thought I would construct a formal box to house the edition. I came to sculpture class with sketches of a jeweled box, which opened from the top, enclosing the books but also contained many pieces, heads and bodies of animals, that like a child's game, could be fitted together in different configurations. The box turned into an altar of sorts after my art theory class read the article "The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual: An Iconographic Analysis," by Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach. The altar configuration was also a nod to my upbringing in the Catholic Church and to the tabernacle, the sacred storage place for the Holy Communion hosts and repository for other sacred objects. The altar and shrine traditions I had witnessed in India and Mexico both in households and religious institutions also drove my fascination of object worship. The books would sit in individual upright pockets, and atop them was a platform for votives and above that, a platform for the small animal pieces. Initially, I made stands for the animal bodies, which encouraged interaction with the heads on the altar. This idea was panned in critique, passed off as too gimmicky, and totally out of step with the rest of my work. Such negative feedback caused me to reexamine the entire piece, and Susan Goldman advised interacting with the piece every day to allow it to tell me how to proceed.

I followed her advice but the daily interaction became time spent in front of the heads, in admiration, and awe, with little to no inclination to play with the heads and bodies together. I had experienced the object as what W.J.T. Mitchell calls “the Other,...when the mute idol speaks” (Mitchell, p. 156). I edited the bodies from the installation and proceeded to focus on making each of the eight symbols correspond with the eight in the book, knowing that their representations in gold were to have “some kind of religious or magical aura and a living, animated character,” and therefore given the name of icon, fetish or totem (Mitchell, p.158).



Figure 15. Gold heads on wall mountings, 2008.

11. Paintings: The Macro World

The gold heads became precious symbols in miniature and in the round. The engravings were micro worlds, akin to looking through a peephole and experiencing a small universe of emotion in every line. The macro, which allowed one to step directly into the world of my prints, came in the form of large-scale paintings.

During my first semester of graduate school I took a painting class with Paula Crawford, who encouraged me to “go big,” and having wanted a chance to experiment on a larger surface, I took the plunge. I projected one of my prints on a six-foot square canvas, ground in black. I traced every line of the projected print with a paint pen and I couldn’t help feeling like I was cheating by tracing the lines. Fortunately, evidence from as early as the 1400s has surfaced to support the use of lenses and early cameras as means of projection to aid the artist. According to David Hockney, who conducted extensive research for his book *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters*, has discovered that lenses and mirrors begin to appear in paintings around 1400. Hockney discovered that artists were aware of the new technology, which accounted for the increasing exactness of perspective in painting and could only be responsible for the perfectly reversed room in Van Eyck’s *Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife*, *Giovanna Cenami* and the perfectly rendered rounded glove and flawlessly foreshortened

instrument (not to mention the elongated skull in the foreground) in *The French Ambassadors* by Hans Holbein the Younger.

Although I was using my own prints to make the paintings, I decided to view them the same way I view appropriation. My philosophy is that I am able to borrow images but when combined with other images and elements in a composition, they become something new entirely, and in a new medium. The illustrations that I sketch from books and magazines are undecipherable when transferred to the engraving process and combined with multiple symbols and exaggerated features. Further, I support Stanley William Hayter's belief that the artist must be able to improvise and collaborate with an image and the material to form a sort of conversation between the work of art and the artist's impulses. In short, "If you know what it is going to look like," Hayter asked, "why bother making it?" (Tallman, p. 16).

The first paintings were in black and white and mimicked the print entirely. I painted a cropped version of *War* (figure 4) on a 6' x 6' canvas, and it proved to be wondrous in the larger size. With mouth open, it was as if the viewer were at risk of being swallowed by the beast. I used a black ground and with a white oil paint-pen to trace the lines of the print from an overhead projector. Some areas of white were difficult to fill with the small markers, so I filled them with pattern. The white field of light behind the trees was full of small circles; the white of the tongue was layered in tattoo-like designs. Although the piece could be viewed from across the room, the viewer was rewarded upon closer inspection of these areas.

I left painting for a while until further on in the program after I felt more comfortable with the true painting medium. I wanted to inject color and detail into the paintings to make them even more divergent than the prints that gave them birth. *Preparation, Investigation* was the first painting in the latter series. I painted the image in tones of charcoal and black, greenish umbers with punches of bright yellow outline to give light and life to stones and trees. Although dark overall, the animal stood out in surprising contrast in traditional black and white. Having the effect of a gigantic woodcut in somber tones, the piece served as an anchor to my thesis show.

I added small details in the rocks and sky, making large flat areas alive with tiny brushstrokes. The print (figure 11) is now sold out, so all that remains is the block. For this image to live on and be re-created in a painting is another reward for the labor and process that went into the original piece. I also used the block as one of my “dog” images in the artist books, stenciling out everything but the dog on the page in the book.

Artists recycle imagery until it is explored to the fullest, and students do not always have the opportunity to see an image through multiple incarnations. I felt lucky to have the time and necessary means to experiment with the same images in multiple medias. Jasper Johns was known for his repetitive images in his early prints; “But to dismiss these works as ‘reproductive,’ which many print connoisseurs did at first, is to ignore the fact that Johns habitually re-uses his images: drawings become prints, sculptures become

drawings, prints occasionally become paintings. Instead of fading into the shades of once interesting ideas, John's images seem to grow in weight and resonance with each repetition. By changing the physical form, but repeating the image, Johns can elucidate 'what it is that connects them and what separates them'" (Tallman, p. 36).

I created *Preparation Investigation* in response to moving to Washington, DC in 2005.

The dog is looking into the unknown, the new, the uncertain with interest, and yet a hand is pulling the tail, holding it back. I was ready for an adventure but afraid to change my life. This theme circles back, accurately describing my serious feeling as I was preparing for my Thesis show, ready to leave the safety of a university setting, and plunge into the working world as an artist in a time of unforeseen financial woe, economic trouble, and piles of student loans.

The painting is a step forward from the black and white paint-pen image of *War*. Because the dog figure is in black and white it stands out against the background, recalling the print, yet fading away from it into the colored background. Many have asked what the piece is made from, print or painting? This is positive as it encourages people to approach and examine the piece.



Figure 16. *Preparation, Investigation*, 2008, acrylic on canvas.



Figure 17. *Preparation, Investigation*, 2005, wood engraving.

The next painting I approached with a bold and hot palette, inspired by the fiery curry and fuchsia tones of India and the rich pinks of Mexican stucco. I painted *Vessel* on a 5' x 4' canvas in hand tinted acrylics. The bright colors were a major leap for me, but I

turned drastically from the somber tones of *Preparation, Investigation*, and brought the colors I had seen in my recent travels into the piece.



Figure 18. *Vessel*, 2008, acrylic on canvas.

Vessel features the Annubis dog as a symbol for the East and a stylized version of the Turkey, which to me is a symbol for the West as it was supposed to be America's national bird, and is one that the natives were very fond of. The two are connected in some intrinsic way, and yet face opposite directions. I felt this piece was important to include in my thesis, aesthetically, as it reflected the scale of the other painting and framed the smaller prints; and conceptually as it begins to delve into political/social

territory in which I plan to explore next. It still functions on a personal level, as I am a western woman attached to an eastern man.

The joining of East and West is apparent in my work, and the influence of Hindu miniature paintings can be seen even in the larger works, with my added decorative details. I looked at the work of Shazia Sikander who “began integrating personal and contemporary symbols outside customary miniature painting, while also giving this centuries-old tradition renewed relevance. Varying greatly in scale and medium, Sikander’s work emphasizes its physical, often labor-intensive formats, from jewel-like paintings and narrative scrolls to wall-size installations and digital montages. Her work continually challenges convention in both formal structure and content, crossing artistic and cultural boundaries—Hindu and Muslim, East and West, past and present, handicraft and digitization.” (Wye, *Artists and Prints*, p. 223) *Vessel* especially embodies the East/West conundrum, its relevance even more striking in a time of such upheaval in the Middle Eastern region and in an America whose view of immigrants is rapidly changing.

12. Shadow of the Icon: Projection

While in the studio painting, the lights low and a soothing hum from the overhead projector, I began to enjoy the feel of my prints as projected images. Moving the transparency around the projector allowed me to see my prints wrap themselves around walls and objects and become larger than the canvas I was working on at the time. My mind reeled with possibilities and I decided to incorporate projection in my thesis exhibit.

I had plans to construct a curtain in the gallery to separate the space and make it more intimate for the small-scale work, and to aid in the sense of ritual which I touched on before. The curtain was meant to be an afterthought, so I draped a plain white cotton cloth over a bar suspended from the ceiling, with air above it and below it, enough for the viewer to question what might be on the other side. The lighting in the gallery was dim, with only small spotlights on each print or painting, ideal for a projection.

Helen and I brought a projector into the space and immediately were awed with the projection of the print on the flat white surfaces, but also in corners and objects within the room. Due to the lighting, the curtain turned out to be the ideal projection spot, as the framed pieces could still be seen in the spotlights. The scale of the projection was as large as the paintings and the connotation of “the shadow of the idol” was apparent. The

images in the projection were on a constant loop and faded out after about 30 seconds to reveal another image. The timing was perfect, not fast enough to be overwhelming, or too slow to recognize a change.

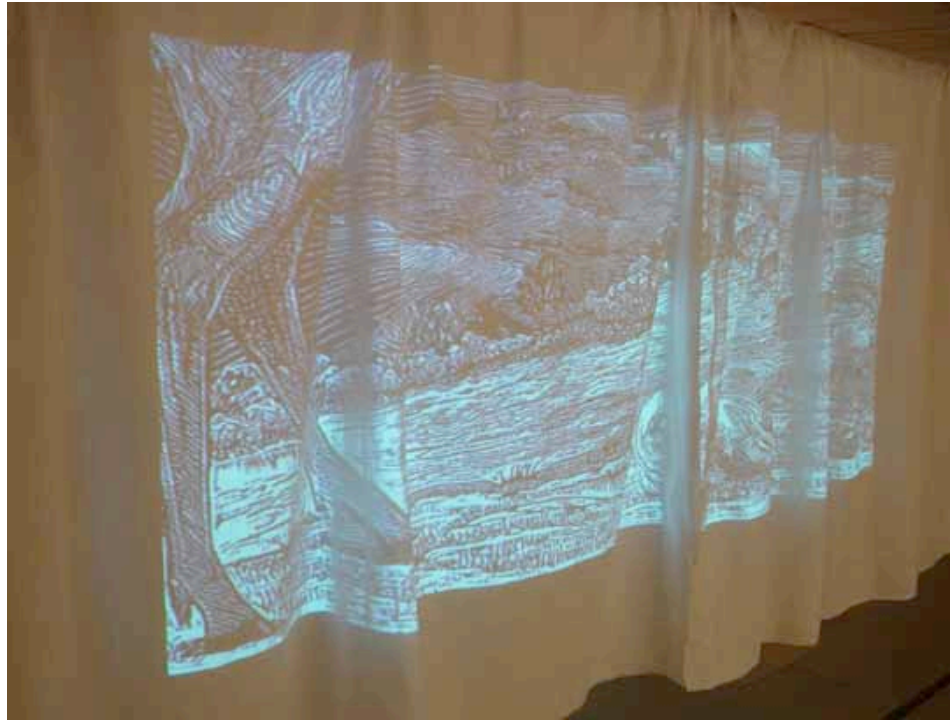


Figure 19. Projection still from MFA Thesis Exhibit, 2009.

In the chapter “Drawing Desire,” from W.J.T. Mitchell’s book *What Do Pictures Want?* he examines a scene of a woman with pen in hand, and a man, seated with a cherub on his lap holding a torch which supplies a perfect silhouette shadow of the man’s head on the wall, which she will trace. The woman is the maid of Corinth, who is in love with the man, and draws his head to remember him as he leaves her for a journey. In this case, and in the gallery setting of my thesis “The shadow is not itself a living thing, but its likeness and projection of the young man are both metaphoric and metonymic, icon and

index” (Mitchell, p. 66). The animals projected are one step away from being forever captured on the fabric, they are ghostly and elegant reminders of process and play with scale, for they are still prints, enlarged and illuminated, not yet paintings. The prints chosen for the curtain were all in the exhibit and most showed up in the artist book. The constant repetition of image from projection, to painting, to print, to sculpture, to book page leads to recognition of each symbol as the metaphor and metonym, the icon, fetish, and totem.

13. Transformation into Lion

Joseph Campbell has been an inspiration to me, and a comfort especially in validating my choice to be an artist. He said in his conversations with Bill Moyers,

“the period of truth is the period of self-discovery and transformation into a lion....Something of this kind has to be recognized and dealt with by any serious student of art. If you go to a master to study and learn the techniques, you diligently follow all the instructions the master puts upon you. But then comes the time for using the rules in your own way and not being bound by them. That is the time for the lion-deed. You can actually forget the rules because they have been assimilated. You are an artist. Your own innocence now is of one who has become an artist, who has been, as it were, transmuted. You don’t behave as the person behaves who has never mastered an art” (Flowers, pp. 191-192).

Although there will always be parts of my life that I will struggle with, art included, I can find comfort in knowing that I am doing an important human act in creating art. One might use the word “chosen” but that implies divine intervention. More likely, instead of wanting or having been chosen to be an artist, I have always been an artist. And yet, I do feel that perseverance trumps talent. For every artist that is insanely talented there are ten more who are trying their hardest to produce meaningful artwork for a living.

Throughout my graduate studies at George Mason University, I have worked diligently, been witness to changes in my printmaking, drawing and painting skills and come to realize the concepts in my work as valid and necessary. Through tear-streaked critiques I have taken criticism and learned to face and accept it, while editing the words of others to fit my end goal. Having experienced these critiques, taken comments and engaged in conversation with students and professors I can truly appreciate the moment of elation in knowing completion and total immersion of oneself in their craft has taken place. Bill Moyers believes “There comes a moment when they have learned what the artist can teach them. They have assimilated the craft, and they are ready for their own flight....The students I know, the ones who are really valid as students, know when it is time to push off” (Flowers, p. 192).

Through teaching others, I have learned that teaching art is not clean cut. It is about introducing ideas, grains of sand that later become pearls in the student artist’s hands. I look back at the time with my professors and it is difficult to pinpoint moments of “teaching,” but their suggestions and concepts were incorporated into my work. Every time Helen or Susan suggested I look at another artist’s work, I did. I saw museum exhibitions and read books on their recommendations, and when presented with one of my pieces I always received honest feedback, encouragement, and a desire from both of them to see more. I have always been a self-starter, a goal-oriented person, and this proved to be to my advantage in an academic setting. But as much as I could push myself in isolation, the need to be pushed by those I respect is greater and beyond comparison.

My personality fits printmaking like a glove. I am a person that is fascinated with craft and the hand wrought. Detail is my muse, process is my love. A graduate degree in fine art was a gift to myself: two years of classes and concentration on my craft and a chance to better understand myself through my art. Creating art is so much more than simple therapy. Every piece is a reflection of the artist, a self-portrait injected with soul, instilled with feelings, stories, and knowledge. When the artist can say “I am my work,” she has witnessed her own metaphor. Every work of art produced reflects back on the artist, and I have enjoyed the process of finding myself (in all my various animal forms) in my work.

Upon completion of the body of work featured in Creature Alterations, Myth & Transformations, I will embark on the art world as a professional artist. I see my specialization in engraving as a means forward in this world of multi-media and ever growing conceptual art, and yet it is only a starting place. The human connection to prints, especially engravings, gives me insight to the memories that our society shares. Taking this information into account, I also realize I am much more than ‘engraver’ or ‘printmaker.’ I am an artist capable of combining many methods and using concepts to guide the chosen media, branching from printmaking or combining it with non-traditional media to reach the same visceral end point that the brings forth in the viewer.

As I prepare to sever myself from the title of “graduate student,” I hope to maintain relationships with my professors and fellow graduates, as well as build new connections with the arts community in the greater DC area and the printmaking community

worldwide. Having a web of support and structure will feed me as an artist and promote new opportunities for myself. With a network, skills of my craft, and concepts fueled by the way the world views objects in terms of icon, fetish and totem, an ever growing need to explore my life and social position, and a love for living things, I will continue life as an artist.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Johanna Mueller is a native of Denver, Colorado where she attended The Metropolitan State College of Denver and received a BFA in 2004. Moving east in 2005, Johanna pursued her love of art at George Mason University, and currently resides in the DC metro area.

Solo Exhibitions

2009 *Creature Alterations, Myth & Transformations*
Reyes+Davis Independent Exhibitions, Washington, DC

Creature Alterations, Myth & Transformations
MFA Thesis Exhibition, Fine Arts Gallery, George Mason University,
Fairfax, VA

Frogman's Graduate Student Scholarship Show,
Warren M. Lee Center for Fine Arts, University of South Dakota,
Vermillion, SD

Awards and Honors

2009 Center for Visual and Performing Arts Artistic Excellence Scholarship
Recipient, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA
Frogman's Graduate Student Scholarship Show Recipient, University of
South Dakota, Vermillion, SD

2008 Purchase Award, 21st Parkside National Small Print Exhibition, University
of Wisconsin-Parkside, Kenosha, WI

2007 Participant, Student Critique with C.W. Richardson, GMU, Fairfax, VA
Participant, Student Critique with Tom Green, GMU, Fairfax, VA

Collections

Eastern Oregon University, La Grande, OR
Frogman's Press and Gallery, Beresford, SD
Iowa State University, Ames, IA
University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE
University of South Dakota, Vermillion, SD
University of Wisconsin-Parkside, Kenosha, WI
Vicious Dog Press, MSCD, Denver, CO