9 Semesters

Amy Jean Dunham Shea

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9 Semesters

by

Amy Jean Dunham Shea

An Honors Capstone
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors Diploma
to

The Honors College

of

The University of Alabama in Huntsville

10 December 2018

Honors Capstone Director: Ms. Roxie Veasey
Instructor of Drawing and Web Design

Student  
Date

Director  
Date

Department Chair  
Date

Honors College Dean  
Date

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Abstract

The aim of the project is to exercise the diploma candidate’s skill in a non-major discipline in order to preserve her sanity as well as explore the opportunities while they are abundant. To that end, the diploma candidate brainstormed, crafted, and curated a small art collection for show at the end of the Fall 2018 semester which showcased her physical, mental, and emotional landscape throughout her collegiate experience. The report which follows details how and why the project came to be, as well as a visual record and verbal descriptions of the works as shown.
Introduction

Art is a way for me to express what I have a hard time expressing otherwise. I love to write; but it is difficult to find appropriate ways to share raw emotion and truth in words. Art is at once a veil and a conduit for what I wish to tell the world.

Given the requirement of an Honors Capstone Project, most engineers add to their senior design project or something similar and technical in style. However, what excites and intrigues me is making things. Engineering can be art, to be sure, and art can be engineering. They can both be technical, function, require skill, calculation and precision. A good part of my art tends towards the visceral, an element only seen in glimpses and shadows of finished and polished engineering projects.

The short story is the culture and my wise family told me I should finish my degree, but I wanted to do it my own way because frankly I am tired of engineering classes, so here we are.

The idea for the collection was to express my collegiate experience through artwork. There are nine pieces in total that do not necessarily match up neatly with each of my nine semesters of school (after all, there was technically a 10th summer semester when I took calculus online), but the hope is that the major events and emotional shifts are captured within the work.

Importance & Originality

The importance of the project may best seen from the end result. This is specific and kind of personal, but I asked my dad what he thought about the collection. He was a Marine for ten years and is an electrical engineer with a defense contractor here in Huntsville. He can be fun, but also a little no-nonsense. He is not what one would call “artsy.” However, he said that he empathized with not all, but most of the emotions in the work. It was a lot that he definitely felt throughout his life, but had never taken the time or had the opportunity to express. And then he wondered if my mother would say the same thing.

That is why this show is important. It has been an opportunity for the expression of my own emotions – a way to work through and cope with some of the harder experiences of the past few years, so that perhaps I do not get to fifty and wonder where my feelings are. But it has also been a way to speak to those around me and perhaps wake up a little something in them.

The originality of the project is that all artwork was created by myself from the ideas in my own head. The unoriginality is that I am a human and draw everything from my limited 22-year human experience with other humans.

Process

The idea was to create a small collection that walked through my college experience. There were several events or time spans which had developed into specific mental images or pictures of emotion and were asking to be presented visually.

Ideas were written for each span of time as I remembered them: the first lonely semester in Boston, the second lonely semester in Huntsville, Alabama which was not my home but was where my parents lived, the darkness of an unhealthy relationship, the light of friendship and purpose, the confusion of putting my broken self next to another broken self and asking it to work.
Each idea was written down in words and sketches, but there was little idea of how to execute. I asked Roxie to be my advisor because she was the only instructor I know in the art department, but as it turns out her experience making and instructing in mixed media proved extraordinarily helpful.

I began by experimenting with different materials to see what ideas would make it into the work. Pieces were completed in rounds as more experience with materials led to new ideas and ways to put things together.

The final step of the collection was installing in the gallery and hosting a reception to allow others to view the work. This is possibly the most important step: being vulnerable enough to present oneself to others through the work. The work was installed in the Union Grove Gallery at The University of Alabama in Huntsville from December 2-7, 2018.

Each piece in the collection is presented below in the order they were shown, along with dimensions, materials, brief process and concept behind the piece. Detailed images of some of the work follow. Additionally, the artist statement which hung with the show is given in the Appendix.
January

Acrylic and vine charcoal on wood panels. Three 12x12” panels.

“January” is a visualization of my first few months in Huntsville, Alabama. My parents had moved from my Virginia hometown to Huntsville the summer before my first semester, which I spent in Boston. When I decided to come home from Boston, home was not really home. The simplicity of “January” did not originally symbolize anything, but because of the way the miraculous human mind works, it just so happens meaning may be found.

The piece uses vine charcoal, my favorite medium from drawing class for its forgiveness and versatility. An original rubber stamp was carved for the bird, which resulted in a vein-like fractal pattern (this may be seen in the larger image attached after the appendices). The third panel uses a glossy gel medium to achieve the fading consistency of blue.
Please come home

Cement, plaster, ink, and acrylic on board. 14x30’’.

This piece represents a relationship that went sour. Actually, it is a much cleaned and neatened representation, because it was originally supposed to be a collage of trash. The piece is named for a text my mother sent me that helped me see that I was in a bad spot.

“Please come home” was the first finished piece. The texture was created using a putty knife and also a small toy tire, as well as scraps from a cork coaster. It is a leftovers piece.
Redemption

Acrylic on board. 15.5x20.5”

Imagine you believe in Jesus and you go on a spring break trip with your kind-of friends you just met and you are reminded of who Jesus is. It is fun, and also the best hit of Vitamin D you have gotten in four months despite it being cloudy on the beach because it is still early March. There you go. The piece also extends to incorporate the larger and often simplified idea of redemption in human culture.

This was originally supposed to be the practice sketch for this piece, but the colors and proportions turned out just right and the rough look (it’s nailed directly to the wall without a back frame) is accurate to the larger idea.
Charcoal and graphite on plywood. 32x36”.

This piece was not planned. This was an I’m-tired-and-need-more-art-for-the-show escape of fury at a piece of plywood. It fit.

You are welcome to make your own conclusions about why it is called “Messenger.” I enjoy that the piece embodies my late-night anger and confusion at life. Art is at once a veil and a conduit for what I want to tell the world – I do not have words for this. I want the world to be perfect and new but all that comes out is angry black marks in a hurry.
This was originally the Wedding Piece. I got married in December 2017. The couple of months leading up to my wedding were not fun. I failed a class. I got my wisdom teeth out in October. I cried a lot. I was worried – not that my marriage was a bad decision, but because I knew it was going to be hard and different and I really hate change, no matter how good it might end up being. I wore this giant ugly grey cardigan a lot because the sleeves were great at soaking up ugly-cry tears and I looked like panel 3 most of the time but with less determination.

I hate that I hung the piece crooked. It ended up that way when I first put them on the wall and I got lazy, and it did work in the way that making things crooked it is a cliché cop-out way to express topsy-turvy emotions and I hate it – but the fact that I hate it vibes excellently with the piece itself.

Functionally, the piece was made by using acrylic gel medium as an adhesive to attach basic printed images to canvas, and acrylic paint was used to fill in the edges and complete the images.
Did we begin broken?

China marker on board. Hanging piece measures 34x14”.

I occasionally use a website called Oblique Strategies to spur myself to create. This particular piece was formed from a strategy that said something like change your speed, so I tried to create faster, became impatient, and bent a piece of board until it broke. I then drew what I thought the energy from the break might have looked like.

About the name: original sin? I have not thought too much more about it and once again, art is at once a veil and a conduit for what I wish I had words for.
Vacancy (Bad Café Food)

Acrylic on canvas. 10x8” panel.

My dorm first semester freshman year at MIT is called Simmons. You could look it up on Google Images and see if there is a resemblance. The first semester was a terrible time. I was depressed and did not know what to do about it because I have never been so homesick and scared and lost in my life. This piece should have been first in the lineup, but it has taken me this long to come to mild peace about the whole thing (if I am really there) and express it cleanly. Also, I am sure the dining hall food there was not that bad, but depression makes everything taste like dust.

This piece began as sculpture, but I discovered that drywall plaster dust is not good for you, so the piece sat in my mind for a long time before I moved on to canvas. There is white acrylic on the canvas, though it is very difficult to tell even in person.
Redemption revisited

Acrylic on canvas panels. Piece measures 32x40”.

I think Christians who viewed this piece saw redemption rising out of the ashes or out of the shadows, but the important thing here is that it is surrounded by darkness. It is solid black paint. It is not going anywhere. It is not transparent, it is not see-through. It is there and it is scary. There is light and hope in the dark and it is okay to cling to that, but there is also so much that one person cannot understand. I get frustrated when people think they have it all figured out.

This piece came in spurts. I was hoping for it to be just like “Redemption” but on a black background, but “Redemption” was not able to be duplicated, and it is difficult to get the acrylic to seem bright enough on the black. I began with just the colors, and later added the gel medium which covers the color and creates the “shadow” beneath. Finally, the white was eventually added which created the necessary layer to make the piece worthwhile.
Wire, coat hanger, and acrylic. Hanging piece measures 15.5x12”.

It says: SOS, help, I’m okay.

This piece is darker than the “hey mom, remind me how to cook/clean/fix this/I need X amount to pay rent this month,” but I cannot explain it to you at the moment. Please accept that it is one of the most heart-felt in the collection and that I really am okay.

I debated putting the piece in the show at all because I felt it was very dark and would raise questions, but most people viewing the show just said they related to it and really liked it. I am sure, however, that many have their own stories that they feel are too dark to tell. Putting on this show has reinforced more than anything the need to have more meaningful conversations with the people you love.
Challenges

Challenges to creating the collection existed in translating idea to physical form. The Oblique Strategies website by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt was used (stoney.sb.org/eno/oblique.html) and is responsible for the existence of “Did we begin broken?” This piece, as well as “Messenger,” which turned into the focal piece of the collection, was created from instinct more than logical ideation, but both ended up fitting in quite well. Some original ideas made it to the canvas, such as “Please Come Home,” and “Vacancy,” but in vastly different forms than perhaps first imagined. Other challenges included losing focus. Having an advisor who was encouraging and mindful was immensely helpful to staying on track.

Self-Assessment

Creating meaningful art that you also want to show people can be a frustrating process. Deep work is difficult to come by without practice. I am very pleased with how this show turned out, but I could certainly improve the rigor of my self-discipline and methods of work.

I love this show. I’m biased, to be sure. But the show did exactly what I hoped for: it gave the opportunity to show that I am not simply a cog in the system and let me relate to others. I am an engineering student but I do not want that to be the fullness of my definition. I am full of emotion and life (Note: Engineering students may be full of emotion and life, even if they do not put on art shows). People came to see my show and expressed empathy with my work – they too are full of emotion and life. They asked me questions and related their own lives to my work. I believe this was a success.
January. Note vine charcoal detail.
January, con’t. Note vein pattern from stamp, use of gel medium to suspend color in blue panel.
Please come home. Note use of texture.
Redemption. Note strokes, color blending, rough appearance of panel.
Messenger. Note layers (the white smudges the dark), velocity of marks.
November 2017. To show edge paint work.
November 2017, con’t. To show more paint work, use of vine charcoal in shading.
Did we begin broken? To show board edge and detail marks.
Redemption revisited. To show gel medium on color, to form shadow, and stray marks.
Appendix – Show Preface and Acknowledgements

The following paragraphs were posted with the collection to introduce the show to viewers.

**Artist Statement**

9 Semesters

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Art is a way for me to express what I have a hard time expressing otherwise. I love to write; but it’s hard to find appropriate ways to share raw emotion and truth in words. Art is at once a veil and a conduit for what I want to tell the world.

This collection in particular is a reflection of my past 4+ years as a college student. During that time I was alternately exhilarated at life, depressed, curious, a sloth. I didn’t intend to spend the extra semester in school. I didn’t initially intend to move to Alabama or get married so early or doubt what type of career I would have after college. As it turns out, I have done all of those things and I am still exploring, even more than freshman year, what faith and love mean to me.

The gallery is varied because my experience has been varied. I am not a detailed painter, so I utilize mixed media: stamps, broad brushstrokes, patterns, and brute force to get my emotions on to the piece.

I use a wide variety of materials - from traditional canvas and acrylic to masonite, graphite and charcoal, wood panels, wire, cement. I love materials that feel raw and that I can manipulate with force so that my actions are evidenced in the piece. Sometimes that means large or small or holes or breaking things.

**Acknowledgements**

Thanks to Roxie Veasey for being my advisor, keeping me on track, spurring me to more, guiding me through the world of art I decided to fall into.

There were several creatives whom I admire from afar who are responsible for the existence of this collection: Seth Godin, author of *Graceful*. Emily P. Freeman, author of *A Million Little Ways* and host of the podcast *The Next Right Thing*. Elise Joy, who makes stuff. That is her job. She inspired me to get to work.

Thanks to the Honors College for giving me a good excuse to put on a tiny art show as a part of getting an engineering degree. To everyone: you don’t need a good excuse, really. You just need to do it.