

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:                   RESHAPING AND RECOVERING:  
  PAINTING AS AN EXISTENTIAL  
  MEDITATION

Susan Reynolds, Master of Fine Art, 2004

Thesis Directed By:              Professor Patrice Kehoe, Department of Art

My paintings evolve from a series of re-configurations. They develop through a system of painting and repainting, shaping and reshaping and coding and decoding. This system reflects not only my intention to develop meaningful, compelling work. My painting process reflects my determination to find purpose in life in general.

The spirit of the work is childlike. It is intentionally simple in its approach to abstraction. Children's toys and science textbook imagery are appropriated and playfully transformed into formal elements. A construct of layers and fragments, the work functions like a puzzle. It is my existence that I seek to understand, to piece together, and it is by painting and shaping the canvas that I make my findings visible.

Throughout this thesis, I intend to explain how my painting process mirrors the spiritual introspection I engage in both inside and outside the creative act. In order to shed light on how I make this connection, I describe the methods, the influences and the references that form and inform my paintings

RESHAPING AND RECOVERING:  
PAINTING AS AN EXISTENTIAL MEDITATION

By

Susan Reynolds

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Art  
2004

Advisory Committee:  
[Professor Patrice Kehoe], Chair  
[Professor Patrick Craig]  
[Professor Richard Klank]  
[Professor John McCarty]  
[Professor Foon Sham]

## Dedication

“...in him we live, and move and have our being.”  
-ACTS 17:28

This work is for him.

# Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i.
Title Page .....	ii.
Dedication.....	iii
Table of Contents .....	iv.
List of Slides .....	iv.
Chapter 1: Recover .....	1
Source Images .....	1
Paint .....	1
Effects .....	2
Chapter 2: Reshape.....	3
Effects .....	3
Influences .....	3
Construction and Installation.....	4
Conclusion.....	6
Slides .....	7

## List of Slides

	Title	Medium	Dimensions	Year
1, 2.)	Mosaic	Acrylic on Canvas on Luan	8' x 11'	2004
3.)	Mosaic, detail			
4-6.)	Image	Acrylic on Canvas, Luan Paddles Bread Balls	9' x 6'	2004
7.)	Image, detail			

## **Recover**

My paintings span representation and abstraction. The images I work from are chosen because they offer answers to existential questions. Taken from science textbooks and natural history museums these “icons of evolution” represent one explanation for human existence, for our origins and our purpose. Whether or not a viewer of my work recognizes this reference, though, is of little importance. It is a personally significant detail, a detail linked to my existential inquiries, but it may or may not be discernable through the levels of formalization

Other aspects of the decision-making process are similarly personal. While explanations are noteworthy here, several of these references are intentionally buried within the work.

Direct observation and representation serve as my starting place. To interpret the scientific, source images I have translated them into paint somewhat abstractly. In my translation, I want the photographic information to transcend its original, representational format and take on a new life as a painted, patterned surface. For this purpose I use a limited palette of muted tones and black, sometimes with the addition of charcoal. The paint is applied in layers of sloppy criss-crosses or scumbled square patches. It purposely does not smother the entire ground. (Areas of canvas as well as areas of the wall between shaped pieces are left bare.) Each time I cover and recover with paint I am deliberately crossing out or patching over the layer that came before. Through physical means, I inject what I am feeling, pondering, day dreaming or praying. My meditations become the work itself. With each new layer

mystery is simultaneously covered and uncovered. The paint is buried and revived. The surface is recovered.

The effect of this pixilated surface is to blur, and thereby diminish the presence of the representational image, placing the paint up front. Face to face with the painting and at arms length from the painting, the spatial effect is flat, a mosaic of overtones and undertones. Stepping back, modeling becomes more apparent and portions of the bigger picture, or source image, come into focus. There is a metaphor here. This spatial shift is akin to how I investigate patterns in my own life. Looking for patterns that might suggest meaning, I examine closely but also broadly.

## **Reshape**

There is another way I manipulate space within the work. By reshaping the canvas, cutting it apart or pieces of it off, I reject the rectangular support and thereby emphasize the real, object-nature of the painting. By cutting the canvas apart, the rectangle, or rectangular window (and its illusion of depth) is shattered. This, in effect, reinforces the flatness of the picture plane. Sometimes reshaping is utilized for compositional elements within the perimeters of the painting. In either case, this spatial device of re-configuring the canvas parallels my own internal shaping. My own internal shaping and reshaping results from my existential contemplation. In seeking, as in painting, I graft in and prune away, growing in understanding and discernment.

The idea of shaping the work attracted me for several other reasons. Originally it was contemporary painters like Elizabeth Murray who made it legitimate in my mind. But as I began the meticulous process of cutting my paintings into shapes I realized it was the childlike art of untrained, folk artists that had the greatest influence on me in this regard. Themes similar to my own in concept are commonly painted on plywood cut outs by these outsider artists. Folk art cut outs influenced me, partly, because my father (a machinist by trade, but an artist at heart) made his own version of painted, wood shapes. I recall his rough, thickly textured paintings, cut outs of cathedrals and biblical figures which decorated my childhood home. The range of my artistic influences indicates the range of my life experience: the childlike and the sophisticated, the secular and the spiritual, the representational and the



abstract, the high and the low. In seeking to understand my own existence, I seek to integrate these paradoxical experiences in my thesis work.

For my own work, the paddle is the dominant shape I settled on. Repeated, distorted and overlapped my paddles are inspired by the wooden toys I played with as a child. These toy paddleball sets were printed on one side with imagery. This particular feature set the precedence for using paddles as a support for my own paintings. Unlike the slick, brightly colored commercial images of the toy paddles, my paddles are darker, more austere. I transfer my own expression onto the paddles by tracing a painted, unstretched canvas and cutting and gluing the pieces. The resulting negative spaces, or crevices, between these cut shapes disrupt the painted areas. Organic curvilinear spaces then contrast with the geometry of the canvas seams and masked edges. The purpose here is to break the painting up, or down, into elements the viewer can contemplate more intimately.

An important part of the work is the arrangement of the cut shapes. This is an important aspect because the shapes operate more or less effectively depending on their configuration. I found that the way they relate to one another and to the wall around them is a matter that must be considered. On the other hand, their arrangement should not be too tightly controlled. For one of my paintings I have arranged shapes to fill a gallery wall. Distorted paddle-like shapes of varying sizes ascend and descend the wall space. This gallery installation was hung following rather closely to the works' original configuration, but some adjustments had to be made on the spot. To achieve proper placement I used a clear plastic template, and each paddle was coded, decoded and arranged from this master plan. For the work to

be site specific I could not adhere strictly to this template. In places, I had to let the shapes interact with the space. For this particular painting, I fit the work snugly against two corners, where wall meets wall and wall meets ceiling. This horizontal and vertical alignment helped constrain the work on two sides. The two other sides, by contrast, were made to spill out of an implied rectangle and to form irregular borders. Throughout the piece, certain paddle shapes were placed to pinch together or balance upon one another, while others were left to float more freely, leaving more negative space in between.

Not all of my work consists of separate pieces, or requires such an installation. Some of my work is fully constructed in the studio before installation. Paddles are overlapped, then glued, nailed and braced together. Canvas is then attached. The effect of this work is quite different from the installation. Whereas shapes cling lightly to the wall installation, a compact piece is a solid, organic, heavy mass. In both instances, I am looking for order in the construction and arrangement of the work. In art as in life, there are times when I have to rely on my gut instincts, but then there are also times when I must rely on a guide.

As I have explained, my system of painting and shaping is highly personal. It is a process that is framed-by and is framing spiritual introspection. The act of painting and the work itself are places where I seek and discover meaning. In the layered depths of this painting process, in this meditation, I am coming to more fully comprehend the purpose of my actions, and ultimately find meaning in my day-to-day existence.

Having labored over the work intensively, it is difficult for me to know the full, visual impact it has on the viewer. I do know that it is big and for its scale alone commands attention, but it is not flashy or ultra-refined. Along with its large scale, rough quality and heavy conceptual content is a childlike directness and playfulness. I intend the work to have a strong presence, one that is a little familiar and fun, but one that is also darker, a bit mysterious.



Slide1



Slide2



Slide3



Slide 4



Slide 5





Slide 6



Slide 7