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Impressions of Reality

by

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GRADUATE THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the

Degree of Master of Art with a Major in Art

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Introduction

Throughout my undergraduate studies, I was taught the foundations of how to be an artist – from value charts, blending stumps, turpentine and framing to attempts at conceptualizing and understanding art. It wasn't until I began my graduate work that I started to look within at what it meant to express myself visually. Initially, I was confused about the direction I wanted my art to take. I was having a hard time trying to figure out exactly what it was that I wanted to express. I wanted to say something that reflected the way I viewed my life, my values and the world around me.

My journey started with a haphazard expression of color and line using watercolor paint and a sewing machine. The idea of exploration and travel led me to topographical maps. I was inspired by the continuous, flowing lines that may have seemed somewhat chaotic to most, but when I looked at it, the chaos made me feel more content in the end. I also loved the way it felt to push my heavy paper through a sewing machine; the interaction and process of creating these works had sparked something inside of me. This is where my ideas of control versus chaos began. I had some control over where the lines would go, but the limits of my machine did not always allow for it, and sometimes the machine would take over and quickly pull my paper in unintended directions. This series did not last very long as I began to feel that I couldn't take it to the next level that I was looking for visually, and even though I felt a connection to the idea, I wasn't happy with what I was creating.

From there, I began paintings boats, which is what my undergraduate series consisted of. At that time we weren't pushed to develop a solid concept in our pieces so again I am struggling with why the boats attracted me so much. I wasn't sure why I loved painting them, but I felt that there was something pulling me in that direction. My previous boat paintings were just typical landscapes, but now I felt that I needed to develop a stronger concept regarding this theme, and also abstract the image to make it more impactful and interesting. I tried to incorporate the thread lines that I worked with in the previous series. I liked the textural quality it added to the typically flat surface of the paper. I also decided to remove the horizon line and background all together, in order to bring more focus and attention to the shape of the boat. I felt that it allowed the viewer to focus on the incredible qualities of the boat itself without distractions from a beautiful landscaped background or glistening blue water. But again, I didn't have the conceptual backup I was striving to find and therefore my ideas had begun to change yet again.

I started writing about who I am and what I stand for, and why. This deep exploration of myself proved to be the best thing that could have happened. I realized that who I am is simply a reflection of the experiences I've gone through in my life. Every person I encounter, every heartbreak and every joyful moment has all worked together to make me the person I am today. Some things in my life were good, others were bad; some I could control, some I could not. The power of opposites started to sink in and I started thinking that there cannot be

good without bad, happy without sad, right without wrong and so on. All of this was inside of me, but that wasn't necessarily who I stepped out into the world as.

I feel that most times I do wear my heart on my sleeve and say exactly what's on my mind as soon as it enters, but there is always this sense of control that one must have over their actions and emotions. So regardless of everything within that makes up *me*, my true self, there is always this protective shell that surrounds me. One day as I was doing some planting, I began examining the seeds like I examined myself. And in order to find out what was inside, I had to make them grow. What I discovered is that these tiny seeds contained so much -- inside was everything it needed to evolve into its "true self". The outside served as armor, safeguarding the ingredients it needed to grow and survive. Seeds don't have too many special experiences, but water and light provided exactly what it needed, to become exactly what it was intended to be.

Like my life, I saw that seeds also had this uncontrollable nature to them. The way they sporadically sprout out of the shell and grow in all sorts of directions. Yet at the same time, I knew that even though it seemed to grow in a chaotic way, there was consistency and control among the seeds. They were fighting for light and water, and their directions were caused by a struggle for survival. This correlation not only fascinated me, but it resonated within me and I knew that this is what I was supposed to express.

Impressions of Reality: Graduate Works and Development

Exploring the nature of growth within an individual has always interested me. My undergraduate degree was in Art Education, but I also received a minor in Psychology. I enjoyed learning about the many factors that affect the way a human being develops, and the different roles one may take on throughout their lifetime. I was fascinated by the way the mind worked and how it responded to so many different elements in our world. For me, Impressions of Reality has not only been an artistic journey, but a personal one as well. This series has allowed me to take a journey within myself and express on paper what I found along the way. It is a true testament to the paths I have taken in my life and the effects it has had on me.

This current series truly began when I observed the growth of a seed. Watching something so delicate transform each day into something new, and knowing the factors that caused it to happen had sparked many great ideas. I found myself investigating each tiny seed and searching for the visual qualities that I wanted to incorporate into my paintings. I loved the fat, little seed pods with the protruding delicate sprouts that seemed to come from nowhere. The relationship between the two captured my attention immediately. As the sprout grew, it created a sensual, flowing line as it gently split the casing of the seed and began revealing what it was to become. Though this birth of a sprout seemed sporadic, it still had one goal – survival. Isn't that what we as humans see as our goal as well? We strive to be strong in order to survive what life hands us and with each day we are offered new challenges that allow us to grow. These

delicate forms provide an environment in which new life begins to sprout and acquire an identity of its own. Like our bodies and our souls, the vessel of a seed is a necessary component, although what is protected inside is really most important.

I grew various types of seeds, but the cucumber was one of my favorites to observe. I loved the way the color evolved as it grew; it caused me to contemplate that moment when it shifted from white to a pale green and then to a dark green. What was it that made that happen? Was it the light, the water, a defect, a natural occurrence, a common outcome? It reminded me again of myself, and how certain experiences have affected who I am today. When were my moments of color change?

When I began the paintings, I was mostly concerned with replicating what I had seen as the seeds grew inside paper towels and plastic bags. I was attempting to represent this seed that correlated so much to my life, and yet expect people to understand *how* it was related to me, although I had done nothing to show that idea nor was I connecting with the process of creating the piece itself. Though I felt generally satisfied with the outcome, I hadn't visually expressed enough of the human side of the seed, and enough of myself as well. I decided that in order to make this truly an expression of my outlook on how I develop as a person, I needed to include the process of creating more than I was previously. It is more than rendering an imitation of seed growth, it is a therapeutic process of connecting ones self with the work that is being created. In making a painting, I am putting my true self into it and taking everything that I have inside and

attempting to put that on paper. How could the experience of painting *not* play a major role in this concept? Painting is an event that holds a vital position in my developmental journey.

Typically, before I start a painting I plan out what I want to do and then simply execute it. It doesn't always turn out exactly how I planned it in the beginning, but it evolves through instinctive decisions that I make along the way. I desired for more of my intuition to shine through and to be able to let go of conscious thinking and let myself pour out onto the paper. The abstract expressionist movement believes this process is the primary motivator when creating works of art. They valued art that was grounded in personal experience.

My life is generally organized and well planned out. I like to have control and know what I am expecting. But then there is this other part of me that strives to break free of that. Artists such as Jackson Pollock, who believed that control and chaos were harmonious, embraced this balance. Dripping paint onto a canvas was a means for him to harness his unconscious, "but like many others, Pollock also insisted on an element of control in his method - as he once said, "No chaos, damn it!" - and he believed that the "drips" were powerfully expressive, rather than being merely random accumulations of paint" (Wolf). My work follows that notion in the sense that I plan out exactly how I want the paint to fall onto the paper, but in reality once it leaves my hand I no longer have control over how it lands. There is a balance created by the amount of control I can consciously force upon my painting and the unconscious direction that it ultimately takes. "The

ambivalence in Pollock's attitude was shared by many Abstract Expressionists', whose embrace of chaos was balanced by an impulse towards control" (Wolf).

The process that I undergo is similar to the way Pollock approaches his canvases. I take the watercolor paint that I had typically applied with a paintbrush and instead, I put a diluted mixture of it into a small bottle. I mix up many different colors and proceed to pour, drip and splash them onto the paper. It is very liberating to be free from the preconceived notion of what the outcome should be. I am forced to let go and let the process take over. At times there would be incidents that would cause the paint to flow in a new direction or not release from the bottle properly, but all I can do is sit back and watch it all happen, knowing I can do nothing to change it. I have to allow the paint to be paint.

I was an oil painter for a long time, but was always dabbling in watercolor. Soon enough, I was completely consumed by the beautiful qualities it held. I love the translucency and I love the way you can build up layer upon layer to achieve the opacity of oil paint. I even loved all the things people hated about watercolors. How the paint would pool up and create hard edges, or when the salt I sprinkled on top would soak up the color and leave a crystallized residue behind, or the way the colors would mix together unintentionally, or how one path would find another and fuse to become a new path together. I couldn't help but see this beautiful process occurring right in front of me and how humanized the paint was becoming. At this point I was feeling such an emotional connection to the actions of applying the paint on to the paper. It was so different than how I usually

worked and how I would normally interact with my pieces. I began to look more closely at the work of Helen Frankenthaler, an artist who worked in oils (and later with acrylic), yet strived to achieve the fluidity of watercolors. She was the pioneer of the soak stain method in which the unprimed canvas became part of the medium. Frankenthaler's work is strongly inspired by landscapes, yet she chooses to depict the non-representational qualities that nature holds. "Her paintings conveyed a tranquil experience of the natural world rather than an intermittently ominous sense of the sublime" (Shaffer). The interaction of the paint with the surface has created its own shapes and edges, becoming a metaphor for Frankenthaler of her experiences with nature. This abstraction is offering more pure emotion and direct connection than a realistic rendering could have ever achieved. My work reflects this concept in that the sprouting seed is merely a motivation for more internal reflections. It is used as a means to visually express a non-tangible feeling.

One of the first paintings I created was "Inspired" (image 1), titled so because of the amount of inspiration I felt as I began this series. After about a year of feeling so unsure about my work, this was definitely a turning point. Even though I was enjoying the freedom of chaos, I not only needed to bring in the idea of the seed, but also was desperately searching for a way to bring in some more control. What resulted was a change in the manner in which I rendered the actual seed pod. The seed itself is vital, but it is not what is most important. In order to portray this idea, my seed-like vessels are delicately drawn with graphite and seem to blend into the white background. The sprout of the seed contrasts with

the rest of the composition through its bold color and distinctive form, creating an emphasis on growth, change and evolution.

“Inquisitive” (image 2) is a piece that reflects a bit about my hesitation in my journey of reaching this point of the series. Being the second solid work created under this concept, I began to feel even more strongly about the parallel between the seed, the process and the development of a person. I was invested in this idea and was continuously digging deeper into the motivations behind it.

“Clarity” (image 3) is a great example of how my ideas were beginning to work together. The stark white background eliminates any distractions from the seed and sprout, forcing the viewer to be consumed by this form and its delicate lines and soothing colors. There is a strong contrast between the vessel and what is sprouting out from it, not only is this contrast made through the use of (and lack there of) color, but in style and technique as well. Obviously, the textural qualities of paint and graphite are very different, but the style in which both are done is what really exemplifies this strong contrast. The sprout is free flowing and chaotic, whereas the seed casing is rendered in a very controlled manner.

Now back to the chaos, which I feel that “Uncertainty” (image 6) is exemplifying. Creating this piece gave me a sense of freedom more so than the previous ones. I began to let go even more of my expectations and went in with no plan. There was even a point when I closed my eyes as the paint dripped out of the bottle. I decided that I couldn't control as much if I wasn't looking. My favorite part about creating this piece is when I decided to stop, but the paint did

not want to stop. The area under the seed has large drip marks, which is where I was turning the bottle away from the paper, but it still continued to dispense. I believe it successfully demonstrates the process of chaos; controlled chaos. I loved the way my chaotic drips turned into such controlled splashes as they hit the paper; the rhythmic pattern and movement that was created by these tiny drips of color. It reminds me of all the things in life we cannot control and how sometimes those things turn out even better when you just let go.

After finishing “Uncertainty” I was eager to show off my instinctive way of painting. “Broken” (image 4), shows my intuitive process as I pour, drip and splash the paint onto the paper. There is a sense of directional control, but I allow the paint to find it’s own chaotic path. I also began working in layers more, letting the paint dry between each ‘session’. This allowed me to establish a stronger sense of depth and form within the sprout. Although, I still wanted to maintain the strong contrast between the softly rendered form of the seed and the colorful, irregular shape of the sprout. After allowing the paint to establish its place on the paper, it’s time for me to go back into the painting with graphite to define the pod in which the sprout is originating from. I search for natural areas that look like a starting point. I want the sprout seem as if it is naturally growing out of the crack in the seed. These deliberate choices are a way to balance the chaos I am seeing and to take back control. The delicate point at which opposing forces meet to create balance is what has fascinated me throughout this entire series.

“Anguish” (image 7) demonstrates how I began to incorporate more colors into my palette. I did not want to feel constricted to just using the traditional plant colors and decided to experiment more with reds and oranges. This allowed for more variety and interest in the sprouts. In addition to expanding my use of colors, I also began using more salt on top of the wet paint. What salt does is absorb color and leave behind crystallized edges, but what I did was build up so much salt that it not only absorbed the color, but it became permanently fused to the paper, giving even more texture and depth to the sprout.

In “Elated” (image 5), I am again starting with the free flow of paint, followed by the tight rendering of the seed pod causing me to take these deliberate choices and construct a way to balance the chaos I am seeing and to take back control. Ultimately, the sprout is unpredictable, yet still contains the underlying order of the vessel that produced it. Like the process of painting, in my own personal journey to discover my true self, I am again attempting to create a balanced relationship between the control and chaos that is ultimately inevitable.

“Grieve” (image 8) and “Release” (image 11) are similar pieces in that they both are representing a draining emotion. The seed pod is placed at the top of the paper and the sprout seems to fall out of the seed. This is an unnatural event for a seed since its main goal is to reach the sunlight above. In the same sense, when a tragic event causes a flood of emotions to build up and erupt, it can leave one with a feeling of emptiness. There are times when we are distracted from our ultimate goal by circumstances in our lives and we are left with feelings of uncertainty or disorientation.

As I continued to paint, I began to reflect upon specific instances in my life that were defining moments in my personal evolution. These were events that only in hindsight can one see the value and important role it played at the time. The instances themselves are not necessarily what I reflect upon, but more so the emotion that is attached to it and the how much it influenced me. Many of the pieces are a reflection of a broken relationship and the turmoil surrounding it. Those pieces are indicated by the addition of one or more seed pods.

“Interrupted” (image 9) demonstrates a second sprout entering the space of another and fusing to become one sprout. The color orange is introduced and it changes the dynamic of how the sprout is perceived. Previously, the non-traditional plant colors were gradually incorporated into the sprouts, but now the orange is bold and speaks louder than any of the other colors used. This is the only piece where such a vibrant color stands out so much on its own, reiterating the idea of a second influence entering the realm of an individual. In later pieces, the color becomes more absorbed and integrated into the individual sprout as the two become one.

The pieces that suggest a struggle demonstrate a force that is causing the seed and its sprout to resist a natural flow. “Tenacious” (image 12), “Overwhelmed” (image 14), “Desperate” (image 15) and “Determined” (image 16) are all examples of the strains that occur when the harmony of a relationship is disturbed. The tension that is depicted creates a feeling of uneasiness without the viewer even knowing what drove the creation of each piece in the first place. The seed pod in the final piece, “Determined” seems to be pulling on the sprout

and this is forcing the pod to stretch itself to the limit. The sprout is being pulled from one corner of the paper and initially that may seem to be where everything originates. In fact, it must be remembered that the seed pod is where everything is derived from.

Summary

It is difficult for me to separate my personal and artistic growth that originated from this series. I feel that I have gained a greater understanding of the conceptualism that occurs in my work not just with this series, but with my future work as well. I have found that becoming part of the process of creating is what instills a foundation of truth and exploration in my paintings. My work has evolved into a personal dialog with the viewer, allowing for intimate reflection to occur as one ponders each piece and translates the idea within his or her own self.

I am conscious of my influences and my personal sources of inspiration. Through all of my trials and errors in developing a visual expression, I have come to find that everything is part of the process and nothing is definite. I have considered adding more media to my approach such as building up plaster in the areas of the pod, or even bringing back the thread lines. I have also considered adjusting my color choices for more variety and as a way to create more of an emotional response to the color itself. This series has sparked an awareness that will be carried with me and serve as the foundation for more artwork in the future.

Works Cited

Shaffer, Jessica. "The Art Story: Artist -Helen Frankenthaler." *The Art Story: Modern Art Movements, Artists, Ideas and Topics*. The Art Story Foundation, 2010. Web. 01 May 2011. <<http://www.theartstory.org/artist-frankenthaler-helen.htm>>.

Wolf, Justin. "The Art Story: Abstract Expressionism Movement." *The Art Story: Modern Art Movements, Artists, Ideas and Topics*. The Art Story Foundation, 2010. Web. 01 May 2011. <<http://www.theartstory.org/movement-abstract-expressionism.htm>>.

Appendix

1. <i>Inspired</i>	watercolor & graphite	18" x 18 ¼" 2010
2. <i>Inquisitive</i>	watercolor and graphite	18" x 18 ¼" 2010
3. <i>Clarity</i>	watercolor and graphite	34 ¼" x 44 ¾" 2010
4. <i>Broken</i>	watercolor and graphite	45" x 36" 2010
5. <i>Elated</i>	watercolor and graphite	33" x 12" 2010
6. <i>Uncertainty</i>	watercolor and graphite	36 ½" x 45" 2010
7. <i>Anguish</i>	watercolor and graphite	15 ¾" x 45" 2010
8. <i>Grieve</i>	watercolor and graphite	24" x 21 ¾" 2011
9. <i>Interrupted</i>	watercolor and graphite	24" x 17 5/8" 2011
10. <i>Spirited</i>	watercolor and graphite	9 ½" x 44 ½" 2011
11. <i>Release</i>	watercolor and graphite	44 ¾" x 14 ¼" 2011
12. <i>Tenacious</i>	watercolor and graphite	32 ¾" x 33" 2011
13. <i>Fascinated</i>	watercolor and graphite	44 ½" x 11 3/8" 2011
14. <i>Overwhelmed</i>	watercolor and graphite	19 ¾" x 44 ¼" 2011

15. *Desperate* watercolor and graphite 44 ½" x 30 1/8"
2011

16. *Determined* watercolor and graphite 44 5/8" x 36
2011

IMAGE 1



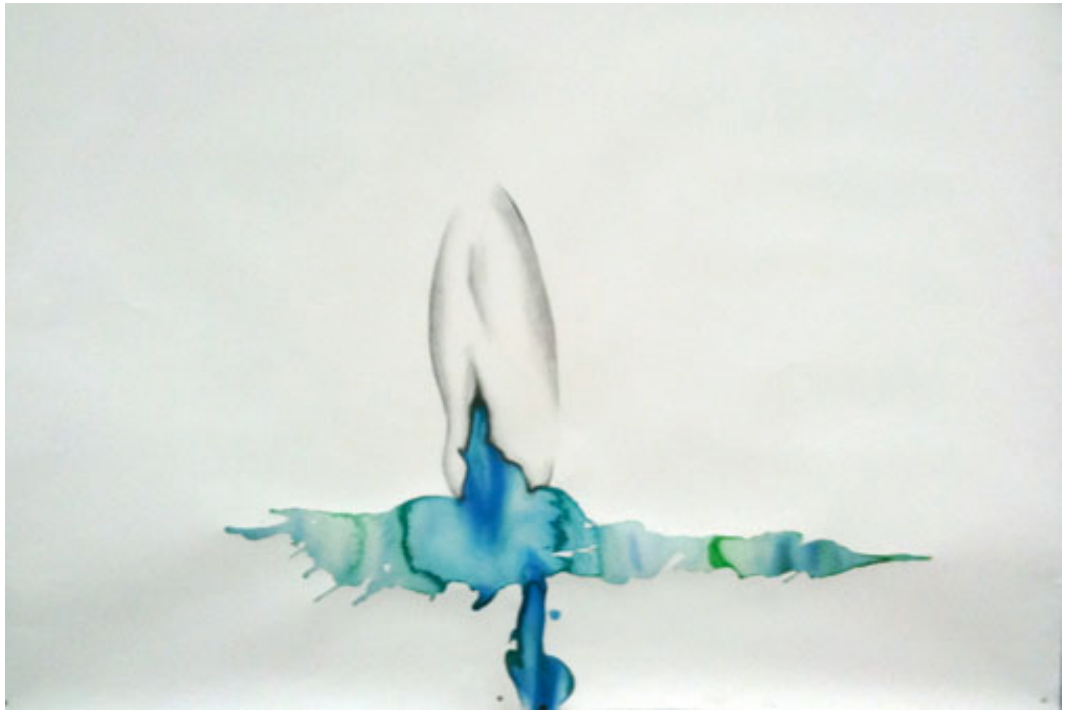
“Inspired” 18” x 18 ¼”

IMAGE 2



“Inquisitive” 18” x 18 ¼”

IMAGE 3



“Clarity” 34 1/4” x 44 3/4”

IMAGE 4



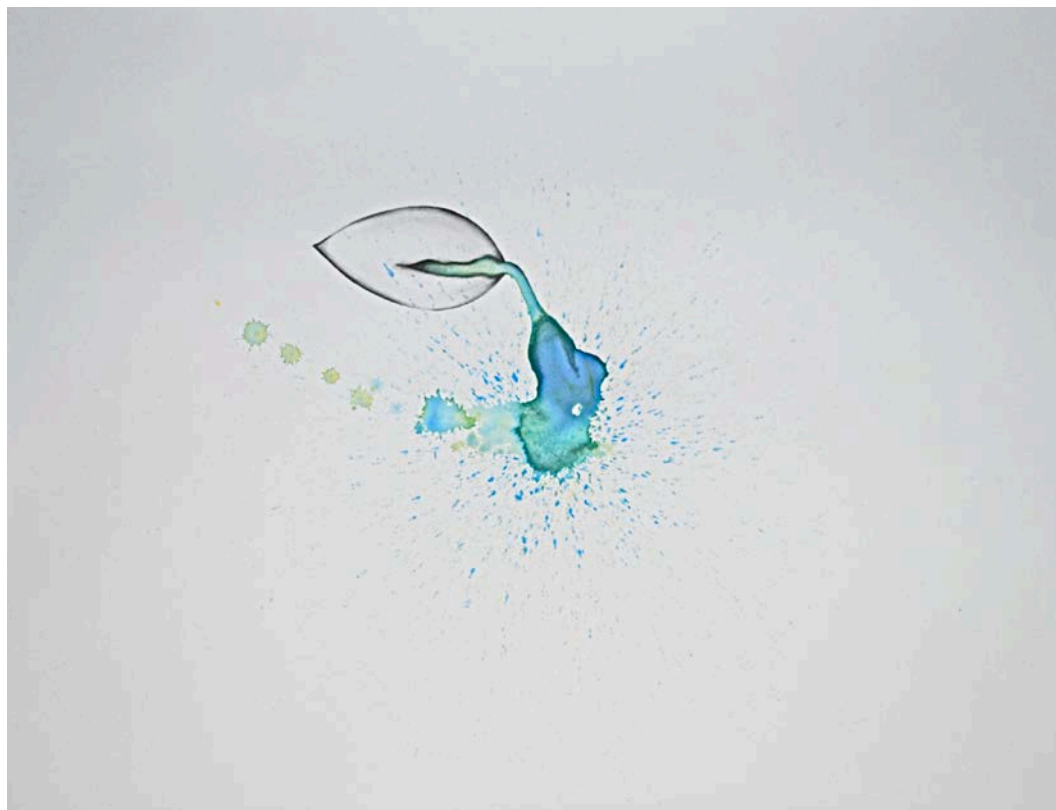
“Broken” 45” x 36”

IMAGE 5



“Elated” 33” x 12”

IMAGE 6



“Uncertainty” 36 ¼” x 45”

IMAGE 7



“Anguish” 15 ¾” x 45”

IMAGE 8



“Grieve” 24” x 21 ¾”

IMAGE 9



“Interrupted” 24” x 17 5/8”

IMAGE 10



“Spirited” 9 ½” x 44 ½”

IMAGE 11



“Release” 44 ¾” x 14 ¼”

IMAGE 12



“Tenacious” 32 ¾” x 33”

IMAGE 13



“Fascinated” 44 ½” x 11 3/8”

IMAGE 14



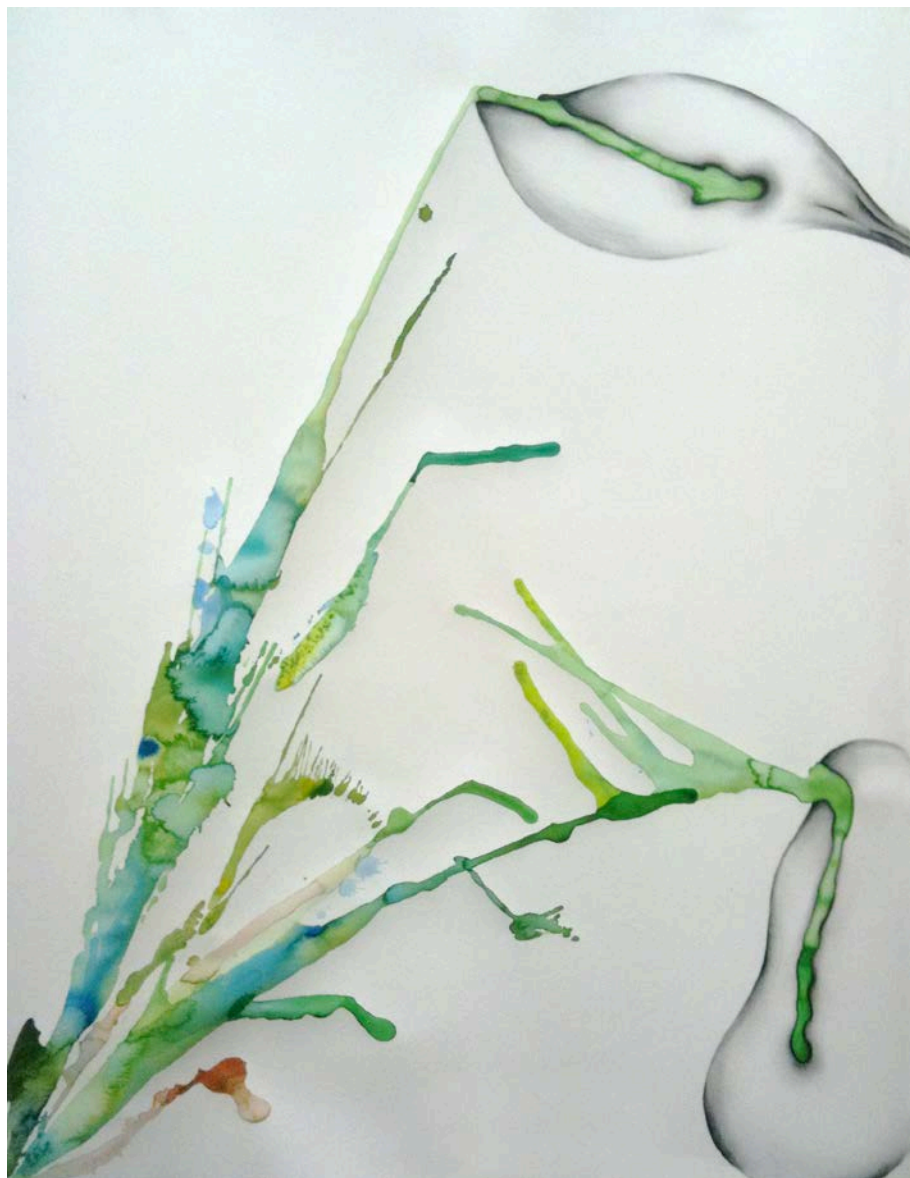
“Overwhelmed” 44 ¼” x 19 ¾”

IMAGE 15



“Desperate” 44 ½” x 30 1/8”

IMAGE 16



“Determined” 44 5/8” x 36”