INTERPRETATIONS

A MULTI-MEDIA PRESENTATION
BASED UPON PERSONAL INTERPRETATION
OF SELECTED POETRY

A PAPER
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Proposal

The artist had found literature to be a determining influence in life and drew inspiration easily from the written word. The intent of this project was a marriage between art and literature, with the artist giving tangible form to her thoughts and feelings about a small selection of favorite poetry.

The artist wished to expand on already explored techniques by experimenting with a variety of media. She intended to use oil paints, watercolor, pastel, steel and stone. By using variations on traditional techniques, she hoped to capture the mood of the poetry.

The artist proposed to produce three 4’x4’ oil paintings, and three 24”x30” watercolors, and several drawings. Sculptures were also hoped to be included. The orientation of the works was to be primarily horizontal. These works were to be completed to partially fulfill requirements for undergraduate studies in drawing.
Background

In this project, the artist had hoped to join two areas which have been important to her life and personal growth, art and literature. The literature from which all of the artist’s images developed was a small collection of poetry gleaned from materials and texts used in two courses recently taken while here at Ball State University. The artist felt drawn to the images certain phrases conjured and continued to study the poems until they meant something to her on a deeper level. Most of the titles given to the works were lines taken directly from the poetry and clue asto where inspiration was derived.

_Gnat Psalm_, by Ted Hughes, became an obsession early in the semester. The artist first pictured the swarms of gnats remembered from the long summers when she lived at the lake. She rode her bike through their concentrated clouds frequently, sometimes inhaling a few of the insects by accident. If the artist happened to see them while walking in the evening, she wondered what brought them together. Their gatherings seemed to be small grey holes in space, so many, so madly circling about some secret the artist could not grasp. Hughes so accurately described the artist’s memory and made her question the secret those little insects had that she was not privy to. The pictures in her mind did not begin to express the deep sense of excitement she felt. Sitting in the sun one afternoon, the artist closed her eyes to the frustration she fought over finding an image that embodied “the gnats.” When she opened her eyes, she saw them dancing before her in a strange play of light off the glass of her watch’s face. Circling circles within circles,
which became frantic when the artist squinted against the glare. She thought this a very abstract representation and explored the symbolic meaning. A collective conscience (could there be?), mini-universes, atomic structure, raindrops in a puddle, cycles within cycles, eternal perpetuation, stars (suns), all of which the artist saw in the symbol which she had given the gnats, all of which were part of their secret.

Another poem by Ted Hughes, titled Song, intrigued the artist with its dark sense of mystery and loss. The artist recalled that the author had been married to Sylvia Plath and knew this was significant, possibly because of her obsession with suicide. The artist could not help but picture what their relationship must have been like and she thought of Plath as the "Lady."

This Be the Verse, a poem by Philip Larkin, was considered offensive and upsetting by the artist. Larkin’s language and advice go against desires of society in general. This poem showed an acid version of the advice the artist has had forced on her all her life. There are individuals not meant to be parents and there are children scarred by the treatment given to them. The cycle continues with each generation. Past examples are a strong influence, hard to break. Larkin lived his advice, never married and never had children. The artist wondered what it was like to live a lifetime alone. He seemed satisfied with his life and the lack of interruptions.

Louise Bogan’s poem, The Dream, embodied fear and self doubt. The use of the horse as a symbolic element appealed to the artist immensely.

The final poem, In the Night, by Elizabeth Jennings, deals with self
reflections and the thoughts that come before sleep. The revelations loomed near, but were still separated by walls. That time in bed, before sleep comes can be strange. The questions of the day reinstated and became more vivid in the dark.

The artist cited German expressionists as a major influence on her work. The works of Franz Marc, with his brilliant colors and shattered imagery, always intrigued her. His use of animals also was a drawing factor. Emil Nolde’s prints had a very poetic, other worldly haze. The sharp contrasting values and brilliant colors he used were very appealing. Vincent Van Gogh, has always been one the artist admired for his characteristic brush marks.
Evaluation

The watercolor image titled "Get Out", (24"x30") was the first one developed. The artist used traditional methods of watercolor, washes, backwashes and dry brush techniques. The washes in gray and subsequent backwashes created a somber tone. The prominent figure does represent Philip Larkin, but in actuality, this was an image developed from a glimpse caught of a car window by the artist on her way to work.

The children were happily playing on this moderate winter day (a younger version of the artist and her brother). The man walking down the street is aloof, not really paying attention to the world around him. So self-involved, he fails to notice the signs of a train coming.

The artist began work on a triptic in oils, each panel being (4'x4'). The first completed piece, titled "When They Dance", was a somewhat realistic painting of an old tree in the first pale light of dawn. The texture was created with woodshavings and gesso. Capturing the hazy quality of that time of day was most important.

The two remaining pieces, titled "At Large in the Nothing" and "Beneath Leaf Shadow", were worked on simultaneously, but because of their textures, were very different. The first of these two exhibited a very dominant swirling texture created by cotton sheets adhered to the masonite board with gesso. It pictured the sky at night, done in deep shades of blue. The image was kept simple because of the overwhelming energy of the texture. The second texture was created by adhering strips of canvas to the board. The image was a slightly
unfocused glimpse through the branches of a tree. The sunlight sifted through, creating shadows. The tree branches were slightly reminiscent of blood veins, and the cool color choices lend this piece a death-like quality.

A multiple reprint of an embossment, (36"x36"), titled "Faintly", was the best example of the artist's abstract idea of gnats in their swarm---simple circles within circles, implying a mass vaguely there. The original plate was made with masonite and assorted fosner bits.

Made of steel and nylon, with a 30" circular hanging base and 48" dangling pieces, the sculpture titled "Dancing", was another representational piece. The artist had found the mobile pieces in a scrap yard and thought they had an energy much like the gnats in their frantic dance. The disk piece was worked with a grinder to remove rust, hangers were welded, and hundreds of holes were drilled for the filaments. The play of light was important for shadows created, which added depth. Each mobile piece was counter-ballanced, and positions could be altered to change the entire mass placement if necessary.

Two pastels, "Parents", (9"x19"), and "Fear", (20"x26"), were expressions captured quickly and executed in a loose handed manner. Parents was an image taken from Larkin's This Be the Verse. It is about adults of the 50's generation, and about my own grandparents----faceless and dressed in antique clothing, so far removed from myself. I found it necessary to lay a gray hued wash over this sketch to imply a somber tone. The women had been done in shades of pink which I found to be too happy for the true intentions of my image. "Fear" was
developed from Bogans poem, *The Dream*. I thought that the horse was a symbol of a fear that haunted the woman, one she had failed to face long ago. It comes back full of fury, and she can not hope for forgiveness now. A friend helped her deal with it by making her give up something of herself, trust, and let go of the fear.

Three watercolors, "Not There Entirely", (24"x30"), "Wings Blurring the Blaze", (20"x26"), and "The Sea Caressed You", were created using acrylics and traditional water color techniques. The first painting developed from the poem *In the Night*, a poem by Jennings. The window-like opening represented the portal through which we view ourselves. A hazy cloud poured through, a tumbling mass of thoughts, dreams, questions, and feelings. The dark of the night was penetrated by eyes which were not attached to a face. They seemed to regard the viewer in a slightly sycophatic manner, delivering a challenge to each. "Look deep inside, dare and see who you really are."

"Wings Blurring the Blaze", (24"x30"), was a non-objective painting about the gnats and their suns. Bright lights attract these tiny insects. Tantalizing, luring and damning them to die, burnt by their passions. Yellow and a brownish-red were color choices that conveyed best the feeling desired.

"The Sea Caressed You", (24"x30"), was about Sylvia Plath, modeled through the words of the poem by Hughes, titled *Song*. Here she was a marble of foam, green cast, sprawled lifelessly across the beach. The form was somewhat ambiguous, blending with the possessive waves that do not wish to give her up. The values in this painting were very close.
Two found objects were included because of their personal value, form and relevance to the poetry. They were presented in close proximity to the poetry piece, in hopes that their physical meaning at least could be grasped. The poetry piece which was untitled, was (32"x38"), consisted of the five poems, matted in a window-like format. In the lower left hand corner, a collage of sketch book pages gave some idea of process.

The first found piece, “You Made Him Music”, (9"x7"), was a large conch shell. It possessed a natural bearty and wonder at its creation. This piece was tied to the poem Song, and is representational of Sylvia Plath. The shell was beautiful, but hollow of life, empty. “The Charm”, (9"x5"), was taken from my own right hand, a well-worn leather glove. This piece was based on Bogan’s poem, The Dream, and by its implications, puts me in place of the frightened woman incapable of facing her own fears without help.
Summary

The artist found placing her interpretations of selected poetry into a tangible body of work was a difficult challenge to meet. She struggled with ideas that were either too literal or too abstract. Ideas changed daily. Commiting to one idea and following through on it was probably the hardest part. The artist wondered if there would be anything coherent to exhibit when it came time to put together a show. So many different pieces with entirely different concepts stretched the artist in new directions. If the artist were to be able to do this again, she would use only one poem and dissect it thoroughly. The media used would be limited and the work done on a identical, large format. The exhibition space was very important. An in depth study of the space early in the semester might have impressed upon the artist the problems and possibilities.

The artist concluded that the overall experience was extremely valuable. In the future, the artists hopes to be exhibiting her work and because of this, will be more aware of what goes into an exhibition from start to finish. The artist believes that the exhibit was a well-rounded view of the media and techniques she was primarily interested in and was comfortable with. The sucess of her interpretations was questionable because she felt there were too many pieces missing. One or two image for each poem was not enough. The artist would like to continue to explore and interpret on her own, and possibly, in time, answer her own questions.
Bibliography


Gnat-Psalm

"The Gnat is of more ancient lineage than man." Proverb.

When the gnats dance at evening
Scribbling on the air, sparring sparely,
Scrambling their crazy lexicon,
Shuffling their dumb Cabala,
Under leaf shadow

Leaves only leaves
Between them and the broad swipes of the sun
Leaves muffling the dusty stats of the late sun
From their frail eyes and crepuscular temperaments

Dancing
Dancing
Writing on the air, rubbing out everything they write
Jerking their letters into knots, into tangles
Everybody everybody else's yoyo

Immense magnets fighting around a center

Not writing and not fighting but singing
That the cycles of this Universe are no matter
That they are not afraid of the sun
That the one sun is too near
It blasts their song, which is of all the suns
That they are their own sun
Their own brimming over
At large in the nothing
Their wings blurring the blaze
Singing

That they are the nails
In the dancing hands and feet of the gnat-god
That they hear the wind suffering
Through the grass
And the evening tree suffering
The wind bowing with long cat-gut cries
And the long roads of dust
Dancing in the wind
The wind's dance, the death-dance, entering the mountain
And the cowdung villages huddling to dust

But not the gnats, their agility
Has outleaped that threshold
And hangs them a little above the claws of the grass
Dancing
Dancing

In the glove shadows of the sycamore

A dance never to be altered
A dance giving their bodies to be burned

And their mummy faces will never be used

Their little bearded faces
Weaving and bobbing on the nothing
Shaken in the air, shaken, shaken
And their feet dangling like the feet of victims

O little Hasids
Ridden to death by your own bodies
Riding your bodies to death
You are the angels of the only heaven!

And God is an Almighty Gnat!
You are the greatest of all the galaxies!
My hands fly in the air, they are follies
My tongue hangs up in the leaves
My thoughts have crept into crannies

Your dancing

Your dancing

Rolls my staring skull slowly away into outer space.

----Ted Hughes
Song

O lady, when the tipped cup of the moon blessed you
You became soft fire with a cloud’s grace;
The difficult stars swam for eyes in your face;
You stood, and your shadow was my place:
You turned, your shadow turned to ice
                      O my lady.

O lady, when the sea caressed you
You were a marble of foam, but dumb.
When will the stone open its tomb?
When will the waves give over their foam?
You will not die, nor come home,
                      O my lady.

O lady, when the wind kissed you
You made him music for you were a shaped shell.
I follow the waters and the wind still
Since my heart heard it and all to pieces fell
Which your lovers stole, meaning ill,
                      O my lady.

O lady, consider when I shall have lost you
The moon’s full hands, scattering waste,
The sea’s hands, dark from the world’s breast,
The world’s decay where the wind’s hands have passed,
In my hands, and my hands full of dust,
                      O my lady.

----------Ted Hughes
The Dream

O God, in the dream the terrible horse began
To paw at the air, and make for me with his blows.
Fear kept for thirty-five years poured through his mane,
And retribution equally old, or nearly, breathed through his nose.

Coward complete, I lay and wept on the ground
When some strong creature appeared, and leapt for the rein.
Another woman, as I lay half in a swound,
Leapt in the air, and clutched at the leather and chain.

Give him, she said, something of yours as a charm.
Throw him, she said, some poor thing you alone claim.
No, no, I cried, he hates me; he's out for harm,
And whether I yield or not, it is all the same.

But, like a lion in a legend, when I flung the glove
Pulled from my sweating, my cold right hand,
The terrible beast, that no one may understand,
Came to my side, and put down his head in love.

———Louise Bogan
This Be the Verse

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
    They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
    And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn
    By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were sappy-stern
    And half at one another’s throats.

Man hands on misery to man.
    It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
    And don’t have any kids yourself.

--------Philip Larkin
In the Night

Out of my window late at night I gape
And see the stars but do not watch them really.
And hear the trains but do not listen clearly;
Inside my mind I turn about to keep
Myself awake, yet am not there entirely.
Something of me is out in the dark landscape.

How much am I then what I think, how much what I feel?
How much the eye that seems to keep stars straight?
Do I control what I can contemplate
Or is it my vision that’s amenable?
I turn in my mind, my mind is a room whose wall
I can see the top of but never completely scale.

All that I love is, like the night, outside,
Good to be gazed at, looking as if it could
With a simple gesture be brought inside my head
Or in my heart. But my thoughts about it divide
Me from my object. Now deep in my bed
I turn and the world turns on the other side.

-- -- -- --Elizabeth Jennings