



## Undergraduate Review

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Volume 5

Article 15

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2009

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### Recommended Citation

Lawrence, Stephanie (2009). Painting the Words: Language and Literature in the Visual Arts. *Undergraduate Review*, 5, 71-77.  
Available at: [http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad\\_rev/vol5/iss1/15](http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol5/iss1/15)

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# Painting the Words: Language and Literature in the Visual Arts

STEPHANIE LAWRENCE

Stephanie Lawrence graduated from Bridgewater State College in January 2009 with a B.A. in English and a B.A. in Fine Arts. She conducted this research in the Summer of 2008 after receiving the Adrian Tinsley Program Summer Research Grant. Stephanie will be moving to Prague this summer to teach English and plans to attend Graduate School for Fine Arts.

**I**n his essay, *The Poet*, Ralph Waldo Emerson writes: “The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign and stands on the centre. For the world is not painted or adorned, but it is from the beginning beautiful; and God has not made some beautiful things, but Beauty is the creator of the universe” (1182). He goes on to say, “The poet has a new thought; he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be richer in his fortune. For, the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet” (1183). Throughout time, human kind has struggled to respond to a universal need to express their humanity and their places in the world. According to Emerson, it is the artist (the author, poet, painter, etc.) who is best able to express beauty and either verbally or visually represent the thoughts of others.

For centuries, artists have been building on the language, techniques, and ideas expressed by their predecessors, and from there, applying that knowledge to their own lives to find a unique perspective. That is precisely what I aimed to do with this research. Using the American Romantics as my springboard and experimenting with techniques used by visual artists before me, I absorbed their knowledge and ideas and responded to my own artistic need to express myself with language, paint, and found objects, and began to find my own artistic voice in the process.

My goal for this study was to incorporate both of my academic disciplines, Fine Arts and English. I began by studying the American Romantics, specifically Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. I wanted the poems and essays by these authors to be the inspiration for a cohesive body of artwork, with the content focusing on the themes from these texts, while exploring the idea of using text in my artwork.

In the work of each author I found a connection to the Divine and how they use language to reflect God’s presence in humanity and the environment. Through each author’s literary work I was able to make discoveries of language and content, while equally finding how I relate to the ideals and beliefs woven through the language. I began the project by reading several works by Thoreau and Emerson, including *Walden*, and *The Poet*, *Self-Reliance*, and *Nature*. Additionally, I read the poems of Walt Whitman. While reading a piece, I

made notations in my studio journal; I was most concerned with any ideas or lines I found inspirational and I spent hours each day journaling as to why specific ideas spoke to me the way they did. I wanted to take the fundamental beliefs of the Transcendentalists and apply them to my own life. It is through this reading that I began the visual structure of language as a point of origin for the artwork.

While conducting the research, the overall intent of the project transformed, allowing me to find a new visual direction. The result was an autobiographical body of work that drew inspiration from the texts of the American Romantics, but focused the content and language to those issues which are of most relevant to me at this point in life. In order to show how this progression happened, I have included in the following pages my most successful pieces or the works where I made the most discoveries. Using my studio journal as a guide, I will explain how the underlying content of the work transformed and what I learned while struggling through each piece.

## Sketchbook/Journal Entries



*Study 1*, Acrylic on canvas panel, 9×12 in

*Study 1* was my first piece and my first attempt to create work based on the Romantic texts. I was unsatisfied with this piece because it is too much like other work I have produced in the past and it just barely touches the surface of the deep issues I wanted to engage the viewer in. I think a huge obstacle that I needed to overcome was how to visually represent abstract

concepts, such as one's relationship with God and nature. I had been so focused on a representational painting style, that I did not realize that it was not the best way to approach this research. I could not simply illustrate what I was reading; the visual compositions became too predictable—a matter of fact approach. Needing to shift the conceptual approach became necessary, thereby, this crossroad led to a more abstracted style.



*Transcending Truth*, Acrylic on canvas, 22×16

Learning from my first painting, *Transcending Truth* focused on Walt Whitman's poem *Leaves of Grass*. I am most attracted to this poem because of Whitman's use of sensual language to describe the connection and unity between people, and an individual's personal relationship with God and the environment. I wanted the painting to have that same sensual feeling, as well as a unity within the composition of the piece to reflect the unity described in the poem. I began the piece breaking the picture plane into three vertical segments and from there built up layers of paint in vibrant, sensual colors.

This was the first time I was attempting to incorporate text in my artwork and struggled with how to make the transition from the text into the painting cohesive. I began by adding a stanza in the middle of the painting. After critiquing the piece with my mentor, I realized that the text was too dominant. The

lines of poetry were in the center of the piece, fixed on top of what was already painted. There was no transition between the text and paint. I also realized that if I wanted to use text in the work, I needed to use it throughout the piece rather than only in one place. I then went back in and added text in various sizes and colors throughout the painting. Then to keep the text from having a hierarchy over the rest of the piece, I went back in with paint and built up more layers, covering over some of what was written. Finally, I painted natural elements onto the canvas with India ink, allowing the ink to bleed into the paint and text. Allowing the text, ink, and paint to overlap and flow into each other gave the piece the consistent feeling of unity I had wanted. This piece taught me that in order to have unity in the piece, all the elements of the piece need to be planned out and put on the canvas at the beginning; the text needs to be put down on the picture plane before painting or before going back in with paint.

While I thought this piece was very successful, I still felt like I needed to take the research a step further. I did not just want to paint images and use the Romantic's texts in each piece because I still felt as if I was simply illustrating their works and ideas. Unsure of how to proceed, I began journaling about what it was that attracted me to the works by these authors. As a Christian, I was drawn to how each author described his relationship with God. Additionally, I loved how each writer spoke about the importance of the individual and how writers and artists have a unique role because they are able to express what everyone is thinking. They are able to describe humanity and emotions in ways other people cannot. I was especially moved when I read Emerson's essay, *Self Reliance*. He explains:

Man is timid and apologetic. He is no longer upright. He dares not say 'I think,' 'I am,' but quotes some saint or sage. He is ashamed before the blade of grass or flowering rose. . . . But man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to forsee the future. He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present above time. (1172)

Once I read this, I immediately knew that I had been acting as the person he had described, always looking to the thoughts of past writers and painters rather than trusting my own voice. I realized there was so many things that I needed to say and that my art gave me a perfect outlet to do that. From that point on, I decided the body of work should be an autobiographical series that reflected my own interpretations of the themes described in the Romantic texts.



*The Christian Life*, Mixed Media on gesso board, 30x20

In order to experiment with different ways to incorporate text, I decided to begin exploring a mixed-media style. Mixed media refers to a work of visual art that uses a variety of materials: paper, wood, glass, paint, etc., combined to convey a unified concept/idea. This style is something I have always been curious about and drawn to, although I was never able to articulate what it was that was so fascinating about the style since it was so different from my own painting and aesthetic. After studying works by Robert Rauschenburg and other mixed-media artists, I decided to try and venture into this new style.

I began by making several stream of consciousness pieces; I would listen to music and apply swatches of color without planning a finished piece in my mind. Once the colors and different materials were on the canvas, I would allow myself to begin painting. I wanted to try and let the pieces dictate what they needed as they progressed rather than limit myself by sticking to a planned image. It was very difficult for me to do give up so much control over the piece, but it helped me to progress to my first group of mixed-media pieces.

I made these three pieces simultaneously. Before searching for materials, I wanted to be sure that I had a clear message that would be expressed in each piece (although I have coded the works so strongly that the message may be clear only to me and those who know me well). I decided to focus these pieces on

different aspects of my spirituality. *The Christian Life* was my first completed mixed-media piece. I wanted the theme of this piece to be my experience of the Christian faith, where life is romantic and adventurous. I struggled with this piece because I instinctively wanted to make representational images again, such as painting a rose to show romance. Instead, I decided to

evoke those emotions through color and through the text in the piece. Many of the collaged items are from my trip to Europe a few years ago when I first found interest in Christianity. The papers and items have extreme significance to me, although it is up to the viewer to piece together as much of the story as they can from the information provided.



*Contempt for the Wound*, Artist Book – Mixed Media, 7×5 (closed)



*A Beauty Revealed*, Artist Book- Mixed Media, 7×5 (closed)



The two artist books, *Contempt for the Wound* and *A Beauty Revealed* are meant to be viewed together because they represent pain and healing. I wanted these pieces to be artist books because they are meant to be held, inviting the viewer to engage in the context of the work, achieving a stronger connection. It seemed appropriate to make these more intimate pieces because of the transparent nature of the subject matter. Additionally, I liked the idea of artist books because it relates back to the beginning theme of finding inspiration from the texts of the Romantics.

When making these pieces, I wrestled with how much information I wanted to give the viewer. I have never been so transparent with my work before, and was not sure if I wanted the viewer to know everything, know some pieces and make their own assumptions about the rest, or reveal very little and let the viewer simply take what they wanted from the piece. I decided that I wanted the pieces to reveal small details about the content, but make it possible for the viewer to find a message if they looked hard enough. To do this, I would write something and then gesso over it so that the text was barely visible, I would collage just certain words, or even rip apart fragments from diary pages. I learned that covering up certain information makes the viewer want to look harder, which is something I continued to play with throughout the series.



*Untitled*, Mixed-media on canvas, 22x18

I struggled to resolve *Untitled* for several weeks because once again, I had a difficult time making all the elements in the piece work together cohesively. The segments in this piece are made of strips of raw canvas and pieces of torn up paper, so the elements in the piece were already strongly separated. I realized

that I was separating the areas further by adding paint in places that emphasized the separation rather than blending the areas together. Once I finally was comfortable with the mixed-media elements in the composition, I realized the palette was still too cool, which hindered the eye from moving around the picture plane. I countered this by adding the warmer orange-gold to the piece, which made the composition stronger.



*Someday...But Not Yet*, Mixed-media on canvas, 22x20

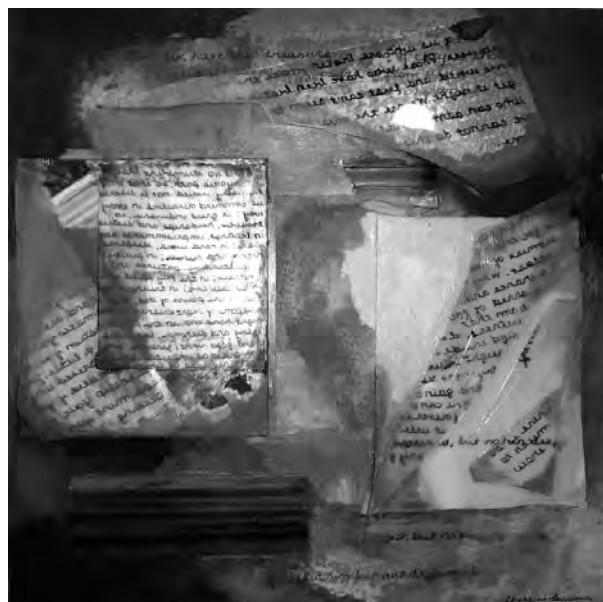
*Someday...But Not Yet* is another example of one of the mixed media pieces where I tried to apply some of the lessons from the previous piece. In this painting, natural segments were created by canvas string which I adhered onto the canvas with gel medium. In this case, I wanted to use the string as a natural barrier to separate color, but tried to allow blending in some areas in order to keep the eye moving.

At this point in the research, I shifted my focus back to working with acrylic paint. When I first began *Encountering Mystery*, one of my poems appeared on the picture plane, but as I built up colors, I allowed much of the words to be covered up in order to unify and harmonize the overall composition. I am very pleased with this painting because of the palette. When I begin to paint, there are colors that I naturally tend to use far more often than others, but this piece allowed me to spend time experimenting with the palette, building up colors and adding glazes. In this painting, I think the message in the text becomes less important and instead the words act as an element of design.



*Encountering Mystery*, Acrylic on canvas, 20x20

over the words keep the text from distracting from the rest of the piece.



*More Useful When Broken*, Mixed-media on steel, 16x16



*Caught In Transition*, Acrylic on canvas, 24x20

The final two pieces are some of my favorites because they show how far my style has changed through the course of this research. I chose primary colors for these pieces because I wanted to do something else that was out of my comfort zone. I have always been too unsure of primaries since it is impossible to blend them without adding secondary colors into the palette, but I have since realized that it is not always necessary to have smooth, blended color transitions in order to make a piece successful.



*Primary Color Study*, Mixed-media

Towards the end of the research, I was finally able to implement text with ease without the words being too dominant. In *Caught in Transition*, even though there is an entire paragraph at the bottom of the canvas, the thin layers of color built up

In *More Useful When Broken*, the glass and cardboard is adhered to a piece of steel. The text is written on the glass and then attached to the steel backwards, making the words appear inverted. Once again, most of the information is provided for the viewer to read the words, but he/she would have to go through the trouble of doing so.

### **What I've Learned from This Research**

The Adrian Tinsley Program has allowed me to have an eye-opening and completely rewarding experience. With this grant, I was able to develop a cohesive and focused body of work, where I experimented with new styles and media, texture, palette, and the inclusion of text. Additionally, I have a better understanding of the importance of the content behind a piece and how to formally design a work so that the content and visual image form a unified visual statement. This body of work allowed me to be transparent with the content, enabling me to grow in confidence as an artist and scholar and to express my own creative voice.

Participating in the Adrian Tinsley Program has drastically changed my experience and outlook on art. While working with mixed-media, my aesthetic has completely changed. I now go into museums and galleries and am drawn to vibrant, abstracted works with varying textures and layers rather than photorealist works. This new perspective has given me an appreciation for pieces I had previously paid little attention. In addition to a changed aesthetic, working as an artist this summer made me realize how passionate I am about making and being surrounded by art. I have been unsure whether to

pursue Art or English in the future since I love both fields, but after working this summer I know that I need to have a profession that allows me to be surrounded by the visual arts.

I am so grateful for this opportunity because I had the chance to experiment and “play” and in doing so, made abounding discoveries. I know I will continue to work with mixed-media, and will move onto assemblage pieces and larger sculptural pieces incorporating found objects. For the first time, I am excited to experiment rather than being intimidated by it and I know this is only the beginning of the many areas I will explore in my artwork.

### **Artist Statement**

My main goal as an artist is simply to grow as an individual. I paint because I have to. What I learn about myself from creating a piece is far more valuable than the visual outcome, although I strive to push myself into new territory with each new piece. I hope to never lose the hunger to learn and grow.

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