

Herstory

A Supporting Paper for a Graduate Exhibition

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Introduction

When I was young I dreamed of becoming an artist. I would sometimes rise early in the morning, before anyone else was awake. I tip-toed out of the house, carrying paints and paper in hand. The neighborhood park was my destination. Countless childhood hours were spent exploring, pretending, drawing and painting just like a “real” artist. During these developing years, play was my teacher. Play unlocked the door to my imagination and fed the creative spirit in me. Many years later, my childhood dream of becoming an artist came true. Now, as an adult, I hold a strong belief in the value of play for people of all ages. Play is important to our well being no matter how old we are. Abraham Maslow said, “Almost all creativity involves purposeful play”. Creative activity is a form of playful discovery.

This supporting paper will discuss how art has been a vehicle that has led me down a road of personal and artistic discovery. I will explain how my attraction to and experience in narrative art has furthered my development as an artist today. I will also discuss the body of work, represented in this exhibit, which records this time of artistic growth.

One of my earliest memories is an experience, a place, which was transformed by my imagination. At three years of age, my curious imagination was fully alive. I often played in a group of trees that grew close to our house and the neighbor's fence. Pine trees planted so close together that only a petite toddler could squeeze between them. Needles carpeted the floor of my imaginary place. Being completely immersed in play, I began to dig under the thick layer of pine needles, only to discover a small red pencil. I then proudly pronounced the official name of my imaginary place, "Pencilvania". I can still manage to recapture the wonder and awe of that discovery. Curiosity and imagination are unadulterated in the life of a small, playful child.

Creativity can be defined as an experience that combines reality with ones imagination. My "Pencilvania" moment was clearly an act of creativity. Picasso said, "All children are born artists. The problem is to remain an artist as we grow up." Somehow, during my years of formal education I was able to cling to the notion that creativity lived in me. Though I have gained technical skill in various art media, at times, I have had to fight to keep my creativity alive.

Today, drawing is one of my greatest pleasures. I eventually learned how to break old habits of seeing and see the way an artist sees. Exercising my drawing skills makes me feel courageous, even powerful. Yet, it is only the proof of the development of a technical skill. Drawing is like learning to ride a bike. You practice and practice until

you have mastered the skill. Many people don't learn to draw because they are unwilling to fail. Failure is part of learning any new skill. Numerous wipe-outs and skinned knees are part of learning. People who draw are brave. They risk failure every time they put a pencil to paper. Albert Einstein is quoted as saying, "Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new". I felt that the development of my drawing skills had proven that the dream of becoming a "real artist" was no longer just a dream.

My involvement in creative activity has varied from local exhibits and competitions, to teaching art at many levels. For some years, time and other responsibilities limited my commitment to further developing my artistic self. As resources became available, the time was right to focus on my increasing desire to expand as an artist. To cease growing is equal to being dead.

Conversations and discoveries about narrative art began to dominate my thoughts and motivations for taking part in creative activity. Why am I doing this? Why do I desire to take part in the creative process? Do I have a message to communicate through my art? These questions have resurfaced numerous times in my journey as an artist. I think these could, or should, be questions that all artists ask. I sensed a growing desire to investigate the role of narrative in my own art.

During my graduate studies, I took part in a collaboration with several other students that I had not met, and was challenged to create portraits of them, sight unseen. It was, at first, a puzzling task. We each shared a series of short, written answers to eight questions about ourselves. This was all we had to go on. With so little

information to work from and none of it visual, I wondered if I would I succumb to short-sighted judgment or enter into complete freedom. I wrestled with the first portrait, but each time I participated in an exchange of portraits with other artists, the excitement grew and I felt freer to be expressive and take risks. Portraits are not confined to representing only likeness. Likeness is merely a record of ones DNA. Portraits that go beyond likeness speak of an inner reality. It has caused me to focus on who and what we are. We are the sum of our experiences, some ordinary and some extraordinary. The hidden possibilities of this approach to portrait drawing are daring and exciting.

Through challenges like this, I encountered the personal and compelling impact of narrative art. It was challenging to capture a thought or a message that had value, through images. These successes added to the momentum that was pushing me to further explore narrative art.

I find it impossible to separate the act of art making from art history. Artists past and present have so much to tell us, if we are willing to listen. The narrative work of women artists is especially intriguing to me. Many seemed convinced that they had a story, but struggled to have their voice heard. Some of these women told their story regardless of the personal or social risk involved. Kathe Kollwitz, along with many other German artists, was banned from creating art and deemed “degenerate” by Hitler, during WW II. Artists responded in various ways to the conditions of their times. Some artists left Germany and became exiles. They sought to secure the freedom to continue their creative work and distance themselves from the constraints Hitler attempted to place on them. Kollwitz chose to stay in Germany with her husband, who was a doctor, during the darkest days of German history. She bravely told the story of people who lived in the poorest parts of Berlin, where she also lived. Her prints and drawings document the social conditions in Germany at the time. Suffering mothers and their children were common subjects for Kollwitz. She was horrified by these familiar but desperate scenes, played out in daily life. Her images are chilling, but so full of meaning. Kollwitz said, “I would like to exert influence in the times when human beings are so perplexed and in need of help.” She told the truth through her work. Kollwitz risked so much more than failure. She risked her life. Her story helped me to begin to see more clearly the value of taking risks.

Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, an accomplished artist herself, was deported to a concentration camp in 1942. Prior to her arrest, she established a philosophy that art had power to improve the conditions of the world. Her career is marked by extensive studies in art and the founding of a Visual Arts design studio. Her social conscience is exhibited through her work in teaching the unemployed how to produce furniture and household goods. Upon entering the concentration camp, her life changed dramatically, but not her mission. There she continued to paint landscapes, still lifes and portraits. She also taught art classes to children in the camp. She worked to help the victims of these camps to deal with the traumatic conditions they found themselves in. Many of her ideas are thought to have helped develop techniques of modern art therapy. In 1944 she died in the gas chamber in Auschwitz. She lived what she believed. Her life is proof of the healing power of art. I was aware that my own narrative would surely expose some of my brokenness and need for healing. I believed that art can and has functioned in the same healing manner in my life.

Emil Nolde, like Kollwitz, was banned by the German government to create or display his artwork. Nolde's paintings cover a variety of subjects and stress bold outlines and strong colors. He was a leader in German Expressionism. I am attracted to Nolde's primitive style and uncompromising colors. After having his studio bombed, he moved to northern Germany and painted in secret. He painted exclusively in watercolor to avoid being detected by the German police. The smell of oil paint would be a dead give away. He painted over 1,300 small watercolors during this time. He called them his "unpainted pictures", originally meant as studies for future oil paintings. His work

conveys a sense of freedom and is somehow removed from the constraints placed on him. An exhibit, sponsored by the Emil Nolde Foundation, was held in Berlin in 2009. This exhibit of many of Nolde's small watercolors bears a most appropriate title, "With Tied Hands – Unpainted Paintings". All artists face conditions of various kinds that play a significant part in shaping them and their work. Nolde's story caused me to identify the events that have shaped me. What kind of constraints might be attempting to hold me back? These were important questions to answer. My narrative was beginning to take shape.

Ta-coumba Aiken, a Minneapolis artist, calls himself "the people's artist". While experiencing Aiken's artwork, the viewer is drawn into the piece. Many of his paintings appear to be images inside of images. The longer the viewer commits to the encounter, the more is revealed. Images share sides and combine to form more images. Aiken's creative process is a spiritual exercise. The process of creating is as much an art itself, as the final result is. The creative process is the art. The finished work is just a record of the creative activity. Aiken is a strong advocate for using art as a means of healing. Aiken states, "I create my art to heal the hearts and souls of people by creating positive energy". He strives to communicate the healing experience to the viewer. Healing is available to anyone willing to find it in his art. Finding healing is a universal need. Though everyone needs it, not all are open to finding it. Aiken sees his art as a tool that he offers his viewers. Like many before him he believes that art can make this world a better place. In my work as an artist, I am convinced that art has strong healing properties. But I have always thought that I, myself, am the sole recipient of that

healing. I am beginning to believe that sharing my narrative may offer credible hope of comfort and understanding for others.

I am captivated by the art of Faith Ringgold, whose work is rooted in the task of storytelling. I became curious about what I might learn from her work and that might further free me to find my own direction. Like Ringgold, I also spend some of my creative efforts working with textiles, quilting and weaving. I am drawn to the boldness that she conveys with her story quilts. Through story quilts, Faith successfully combines quilting, painting and storytelling. Her paintings in the form of quilts make her work a little more approachable and less intimidating to viewers. Ringgold says, “When they’re looking at my work, they’re looking at a painting and they’re able to accept it better because it is also a quilt”. She must have faced some criticism for using a medium which has at times been deemed unacceptable in Fine Art circles. The work of storytelling seems well suited to quilting. Storytelling is an old tradition that honors our past experiences. Quilting is also an old tradition, often experienced in the company of others. Her work has caused me to rethink the title I have used to identify myself as an artist. A more appropriate title for me might be “maker”. My interests in creative activity are varied and cannot be categorized as one or the other. Faith has proven that these two, craft and art, can exist together. Ringgold’s life and work are together a story of “being set free”. She tells her story with candor, grace and quilts.

Wing Young Huie is an American, born of Asian immigrant parents. His unique approach to photography inspires me. He brings his perspective of living as a minority in an ethnically diverse culture, to his work. His photographs are a narrative that

communicates the common struggle to survive in this world. They also create narrative, as people respond to his work and its meaning. He intends to teach us about ourselves, not just record these images for the sake of artistic expression. They reflect the dignity and respect of regular people just living their lives. I had the privilege to attend a workshop by Wing during my graduate studies and held a personal interview with him by phone. I have learned from him that art has the ability, and maybe even the responsibility, to share the significance of the human experience. Art seeks to reveal the hidden as well as what is common and seldom noticed. The things that we hide are sometimes the most significant parts of us. At the same time, some things become so ordinary that we hardly notice them. Art can offer an honest reflection of honoring the hidden things and finding value in what is common. Through my contact with Wing, I began to more clearly identify the constraints that were holding me back. I feared the possibility that the success of my narrative might be left to chance. All of that was about to change.

III

What I didn't realize was that I had been changing all along. My participation in pursuing my graduate degree was in itself a commitment to risk failure. What I would discover about my artwork and myself was unknown. I decided from the start that the risk of never challenging myself to grow is greater than the risk of not succeeding. I began this undertaking with the prospect that I personally and artistically still had growing left to do. The unexpected result of this journey can clearly be seen in retrospect. I had a story to tell. Many of the challenges and opportunities that I had met in my graduate studies were all teaching me how to tell it.

My first series of paintings were based on a visit to a Wisconsin state park. They represent imagery of organic rock formations that fascinated me. I felt transported to a foreign place by the size and majesty of these monstrous wonders. Painting *Rocks*, reminded me of what it was like to be there and witness their strength. Remembering seems to be a good reason to create images, especially when impressions are as potent as these.

Throughout my graduate studies, I continued to enjoy the pleasures of drawing and began to record memories and the work of my imagination. Sometimes a person's earliest memories are a combination of one's imagination and reality. As I began sharing my stories through my drawings, others affirmed my hope that my stories were

valuable. Those who viewed my stories through my art seemed to enjoy them, as much as I enjoyed sharing them. The creation of *Pencilvania* was a big breakthrough for me.

The series of *Stem Cross-Sections* were also created at the beginning of my graduate studies. I have always been curious about the microscopic world. These paintings were inspired by the wonder that these tiny structures create in me. They represent the unseen things, the hidden things in our world. Yet, our very lives depend on their continued existence. On the other hand, these structures are so common they can be mostly ignored. I did not know that I would revisit this group of paintings at a later time and that they would be the beginning and the end of a much larger body of work.

The painting, *My Life*, began with the idea of a totem that is plainly a narrative version of my life. It is read from the bottom up. It begins with my birth in Hawaii and the early loss of my mother in childhood. It recounts events of my formative years with a somewhat clouded appearance. Life is never what it seems and mine had been significantly altered at a very early stage of my life. We are our experiences. But what we ultimately become is a result of how we react to our experiences. I believe in the meaning of the words stated by Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, "My life in art has redeemed me from a thousand deaths". The three leaves, in *My Life*, represent my offspring as a result of my marriage to David. The map imprinted on the leaves signifies their own journey through life, that each of them must find. The paintbrush represents the creative nature of life.

The *Sacred Mysteries* tell the story of unclaimed happenings that would occur during the years that I was raising our three children. It begins with my daughter's creation of an imaginary friend named, "Jamie". I was sometimes surprised to find my daughter absorbed in an ongoing conversation with her. Jamie was a frequent visitor during her younger years. As our family grew, Jamie returned many years later as a family joke. For example, our family called the last cookie in the jar, like the last piece of cake in the pan, the "shame piece". When anyone who was hoping to get that last bite, inquired who had eaten it, it was always blamed on Jamie. Jamie became the unseen culprit of many mysterious events in our home. "Who left the door open?" "It must have been Jamie," was the reply. "Who left the milk out?"..."Jamie". "Where is my other sock?"... "Jamie". She was thought to be in control of the big black hole in the dryer that ate all those missing socks. And, "Who put this empty box back into the cupboard?" ... you know..."Jamie".

Blanket Kingdom is my version of a story quilt. It is loosely based on a story that my son created. He was very attached to a special blanket as a little boy. Some sleepless nights or after rising in the morning, he would retell the story of the *Blanket Kingdom*. In it's retelling, the story grew to include more adventures and convincing detail. It was fantastic story filled with kings and soldiers and feats of bravery. I sometimes thought that he believed this imaginary place to be as real as any other. One day, the stories of the *Blanket Kingdom* stopped. It was proof that boys grow up to be men. We never forgot the story of the *Blanket Kingdom* and neither did my son. He vowed that he would never forget. Fearing that he might, we encouraged him to write

the story down, to insure its safe keeping. He asked me if I would create illustrations to go with his story. That was years ago. I found it difficult to try to portray someone else's imagination in images. I made it my goal to tackle this dilemma at some point in my graduate studies. I succeeded in creating this story quilt when I was able to put aside any expectations for the outcome. I was reminded why I rarely accept requests for commissioned work. The process always becomes a tug and pull between the idea in their head and the idea in my head.

In his book, *Out of our Minds*, expert in creativity and innovation, Sir Ken Robinson says, "Creativity is a dialogue between ideas and the media in which it will be formed". This proved to be the heart of my problem. I gave up the idea of drawing images and changed my focus to recreating an animated version of the blanket, through which the characters would come alive through the very fabric of the quilt. I needed the work to become mine and let go of my desire to please my son. I had to be satisfied with the finished piece. I took the chance. It was another exercise for me to practice risking failure in order to succeed.

The most rewarding group of work that I produced during my graduate studies is the *Doily Series*. Doilies are underappreciated by many, today. They represent an old fashioned pastime which has lost its flare. Doilies are among those things that we love to hate. I was excited by the challenge to use them to create something original that had value. I knew that they had a story to tell.

I explored my own experiences with doilies and became fixed on the memory of my grandparent's house. Their house smelled funny. As you entered the front door,

you were immediately in the living room of their small home. Doilies decorated the backs of chairs and arms of the sofa. They were held in place with long sharp pins, shaped like the letter “T”. Doilies occupied an important place in every room of their home. Doilies could be found in the bedroom, covering the dresser, on the night stand and doily pillows decorated the bed. Doilies even adorned the toilet tank in the bathroom. This home was not a place for kids. That was clear.

Today doilies still remind me of that funny smell in my grandparent’s house. I have become heir to many of those doilies and in fact, I have three generations of doilies that now belong to me. Love them or hate them, they remain. I wanted to use them to illustrate what I thought might be a common theme for others. I wanted to use the actual doily in the art piece, hoping that calling it “art” might give its reputation a boost.

This group of artwork evolved in the making. I began working in a sequence from one piece to the next piece. I later found myself returning to beginning pieces and reworking parts. I worked on several of the pieces alternately. This process seemed to bring the series together. The texture rubbings done in pencil, in the *Doily Series*, began as an experiment that really intrigued me. I built on that technique and the momentum for the series increased. My last work in this series is the *Yellow and Pink Doily*. I created the textured surface that was used under the paper to make the rubbing, by playing with the negative and positive shapes made with a paper punch. What became of this piece brought me back to the *Stem Cross-Section* paintings that I had created at the beginning of my graduate studies. This colored texture rubbing linked together the

Stem Cross-Section series with what the *Doily Series* had produced. Their delicate circular shapes seemed to mimic each other. Each group of paintings completed the other. The seldom noticed and often ignored microscopic cells had met the under appreciated, long forgotten doily.

The concluding artwork of this exhibit is presented in the grouping of mixed media pieces entitled *My Experience at UWS*. It is an attempt to summarize the various experiences that have contributed to the completion of my Master of Art Degree in Studio Art. Each piece of this group fit remarkable well together. Its synthesis reflects the parts of my graduate studies that came together and became stepping stones to an exciting and enriching time of artistic discovery in my life.

Conclusion

Phil Rosenthal, contributing writer for the *Chicago Tribune*, commented on a revealing interview done by Chris Jones in *Esquire*. The article reveals the remarkable candor displayed by Roger Ebert, in discussing his work since losing his jaw and his ability to speak from cancer. Rosenthal encourages readers not to miss reading the *Esquire* interview. Rosenthal states, "It can be risky, but sometimes people discover things about themselves when they let an outsider in". Roger Ebert was willing to take the risk to let us into his intimate and personal struggle. Through his story, others can learn something about themselves and maybe even find encouragement and hope.

Sharing my own story through my artwork, I am letting outsiders in. I am aware of the risks involved. This time of artistic growth, exhibited by this body of work has changed me in fundamental ways. It has changed the way I see myself and the way I see others. I did not become an artist, I was born an artist. Creative activity is what I was put here to do. In large part, it defines my place in the world. Here I have attempted to give an honest account of honoring the hidden things and finding value in the ordinary. My life, my art and my view of the world continues to expand. I will never stop growing.

My hope is that by sharing my story through my art, viewers can find a connection to our shared human existence, or that others might look at the world in a new, revealing way. Life is both ordinary and extraordinary all at the same time. Art should give people a reason to look. Looking might lead to understanding.

LIST OF WORKS

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- Fig. 2 *Rocks II, 2009*
- Fig. 3 *Sea caves, 2009*
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- Fig. 6-9 *Stem Cross-section Series*
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- Fig. 26 *My Experience at UWS*, 2011
- Fig. 27 *2nd Grade*, 2011

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Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

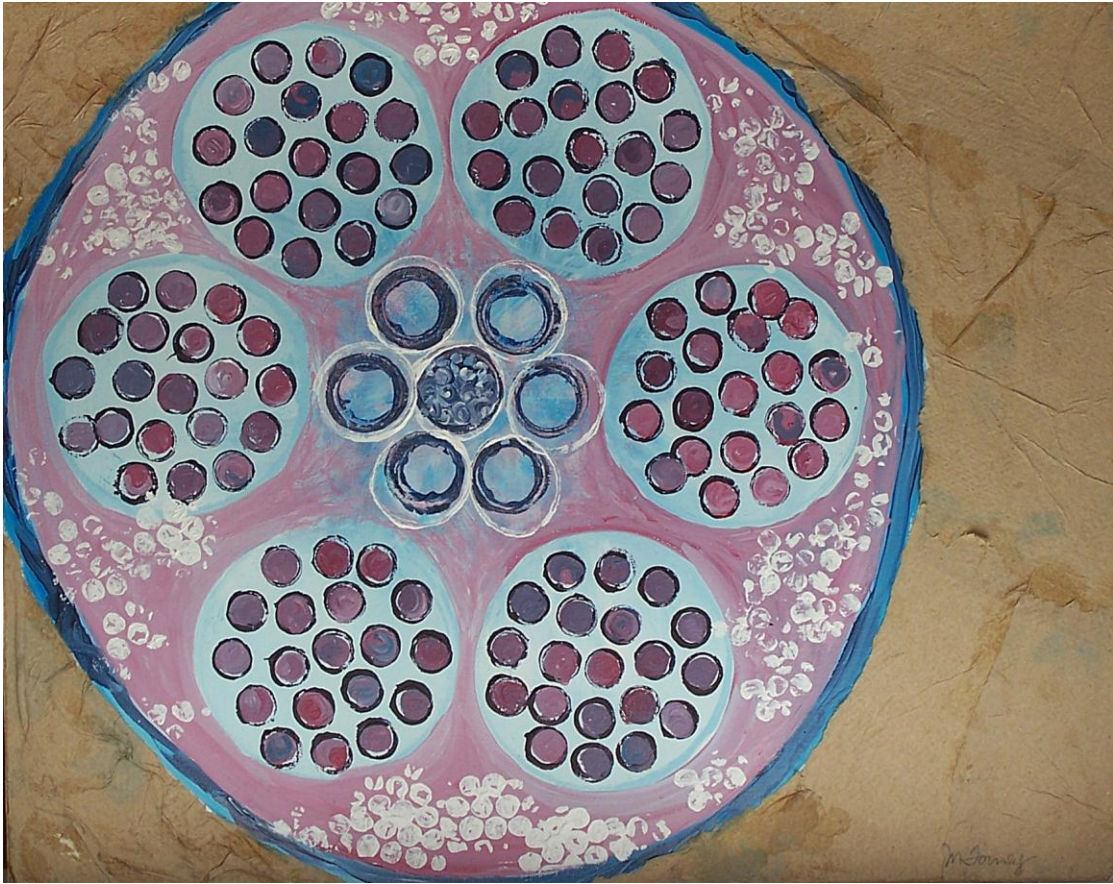


Fig. 6



Fig. 7

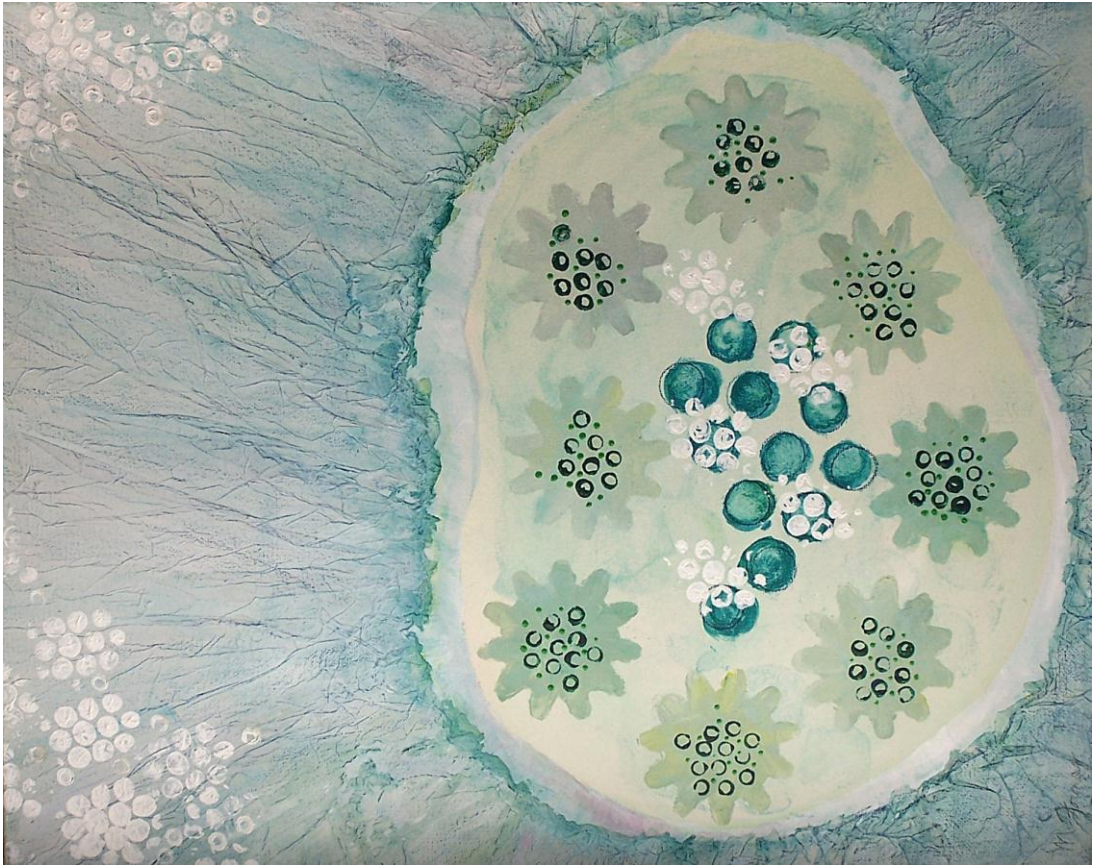


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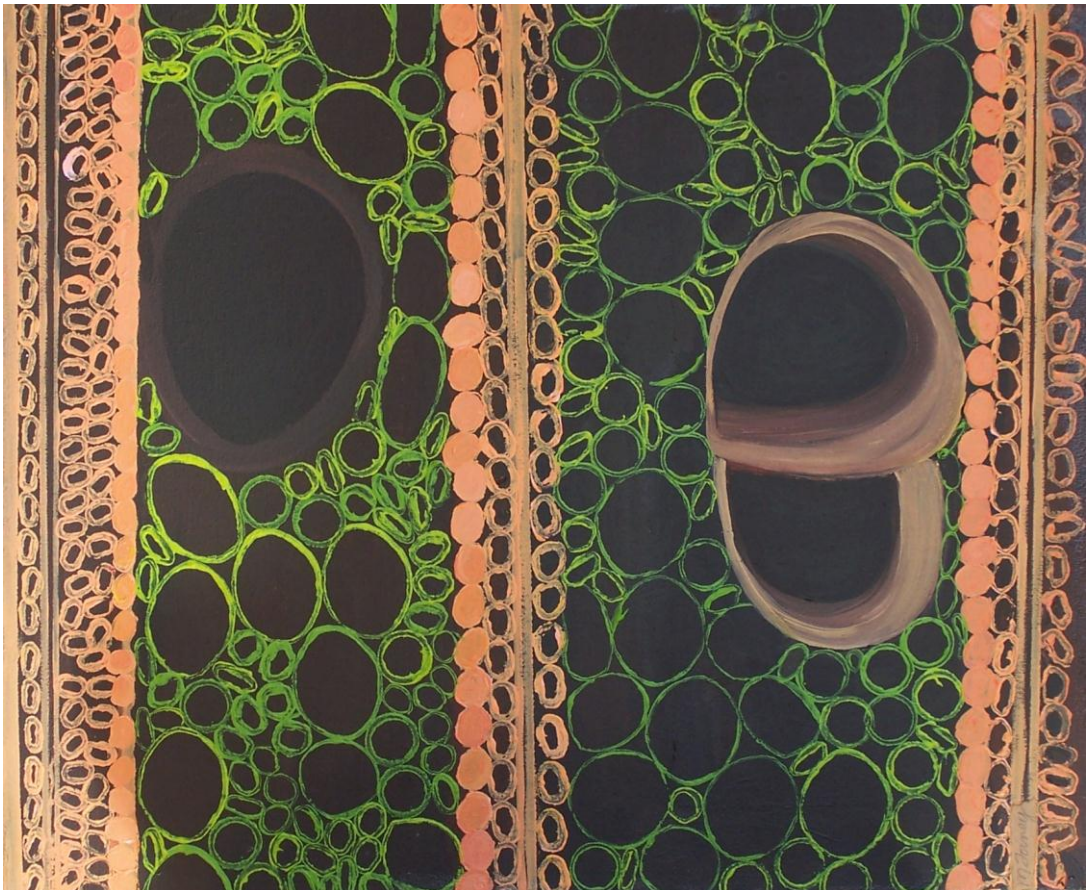


Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

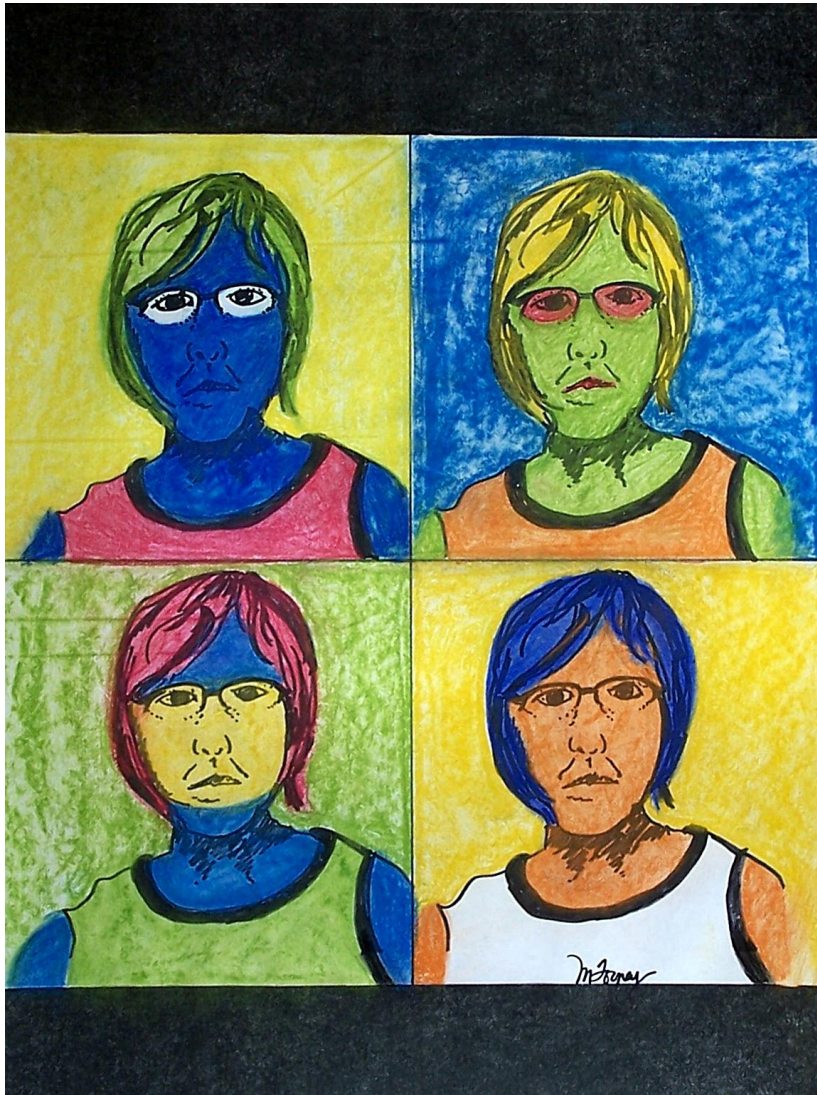


Fig. 13



Fig. 14

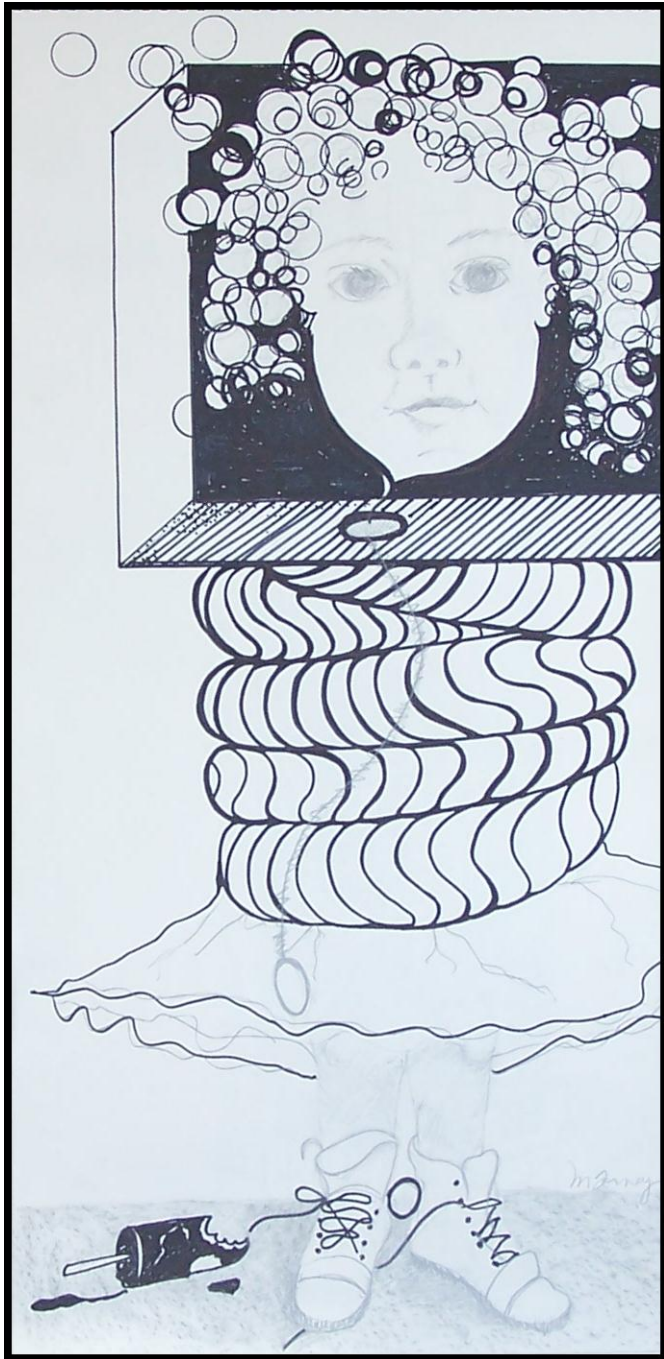


Fig. 15

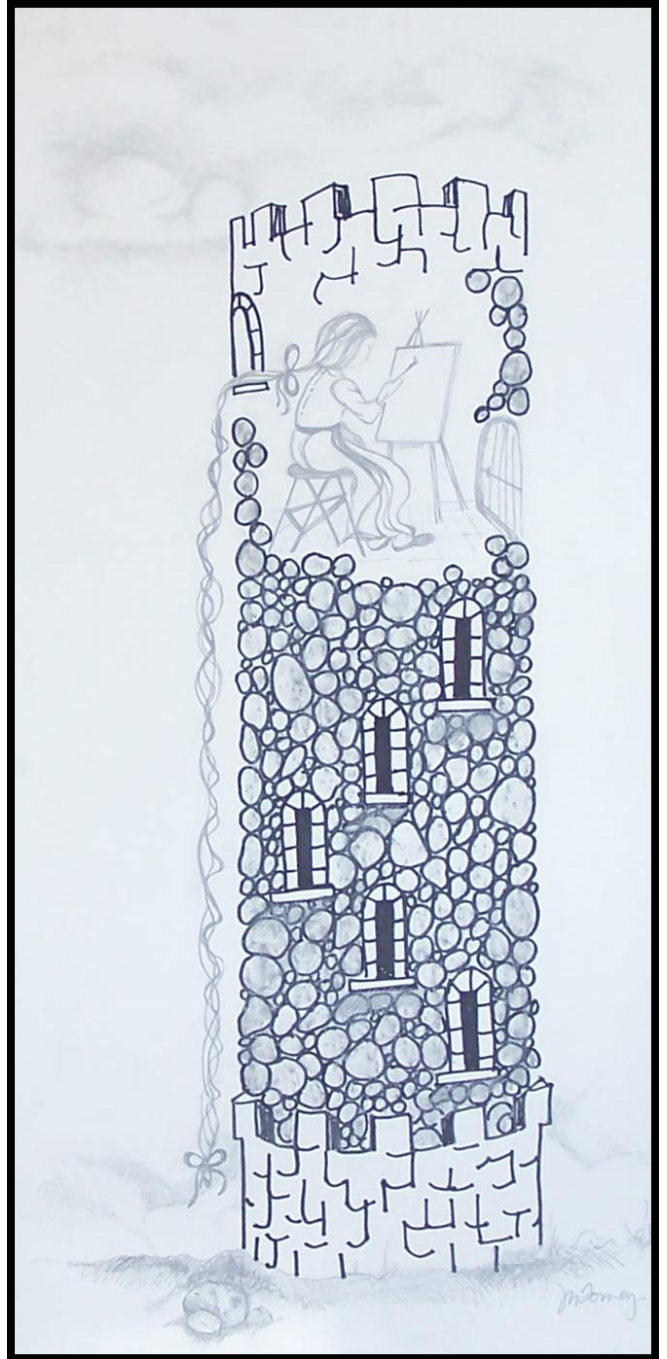


Fig. 16



Fig. 17

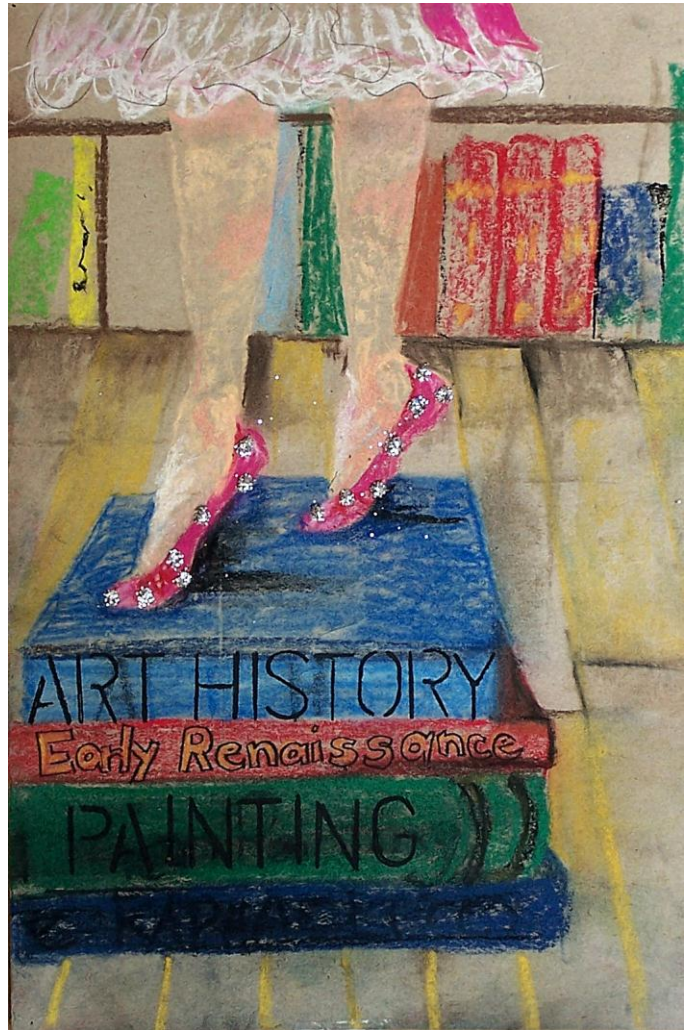


Fig. 18



Fig. 19



Fig. 20



Fig. 21



Fig. 22

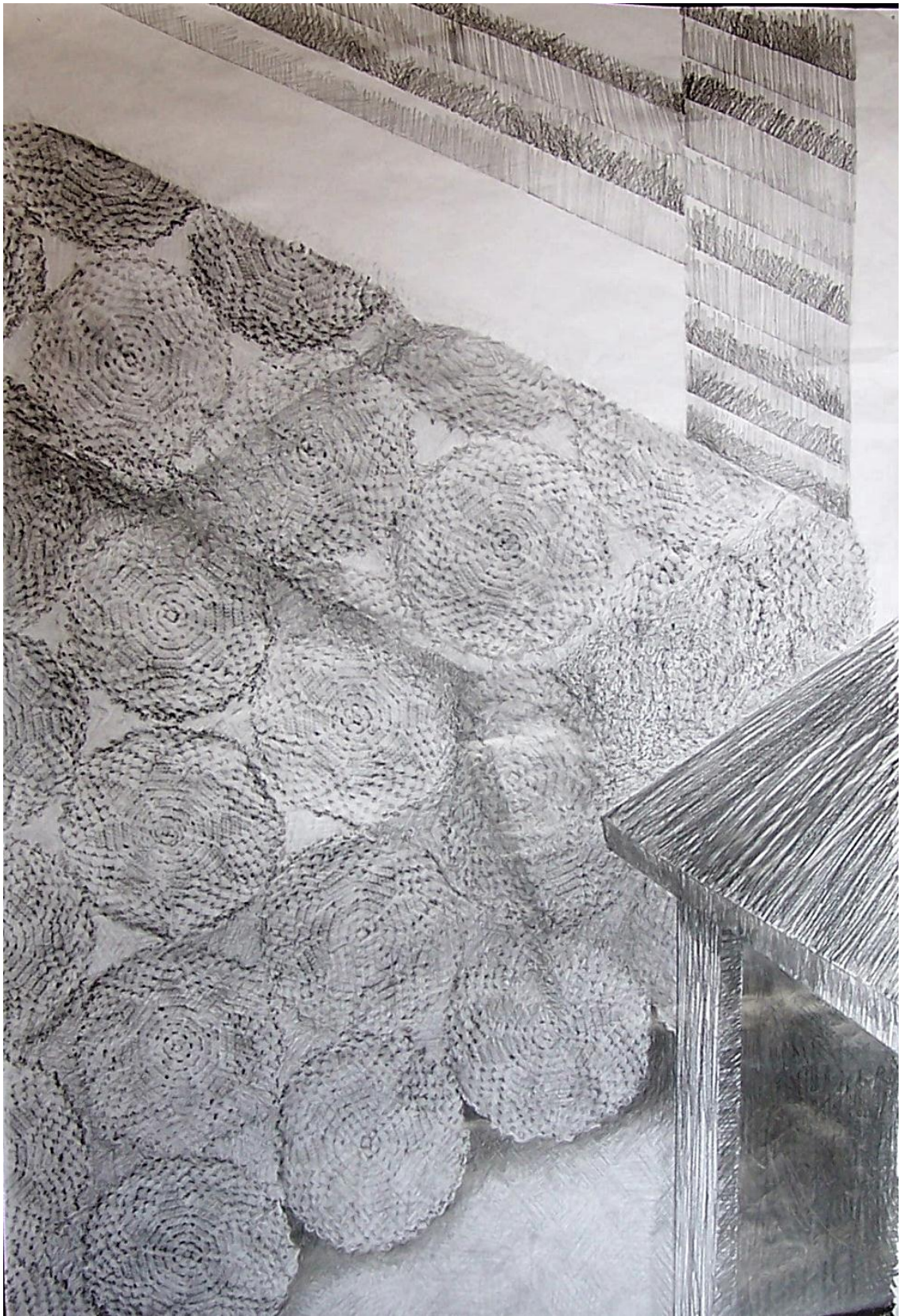


Fig. 23

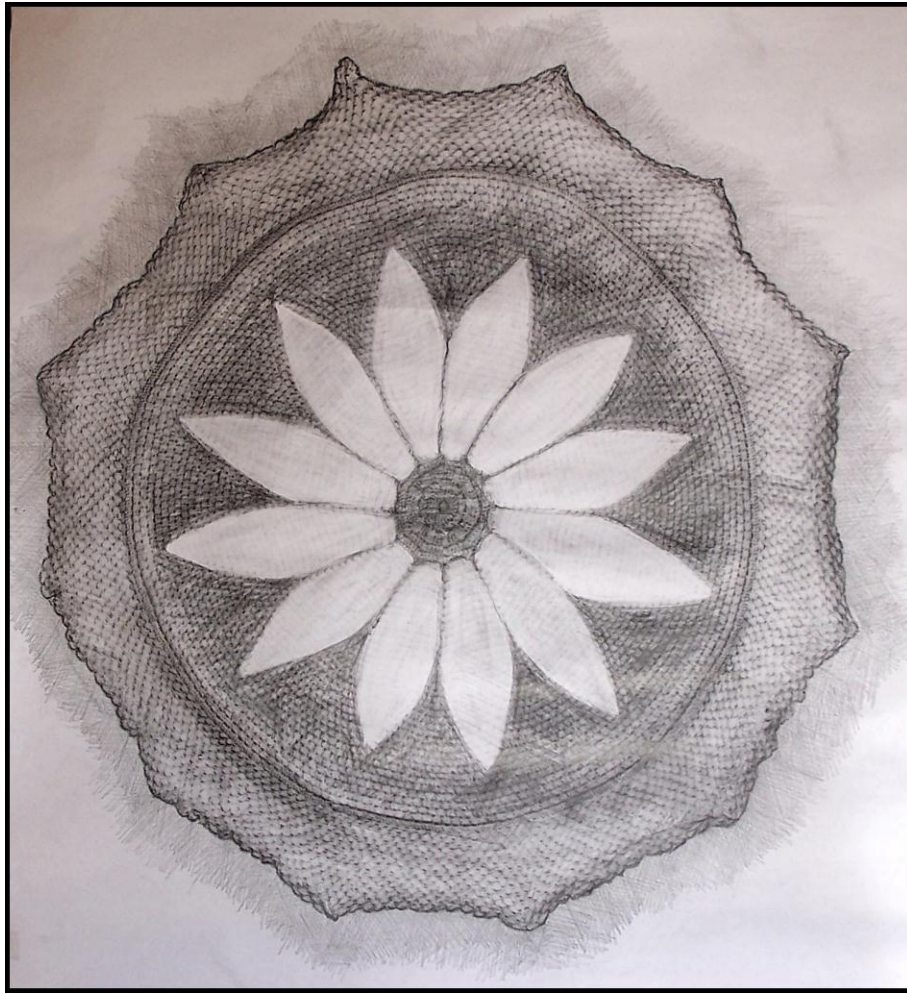


Fig. 24



Fig. 25

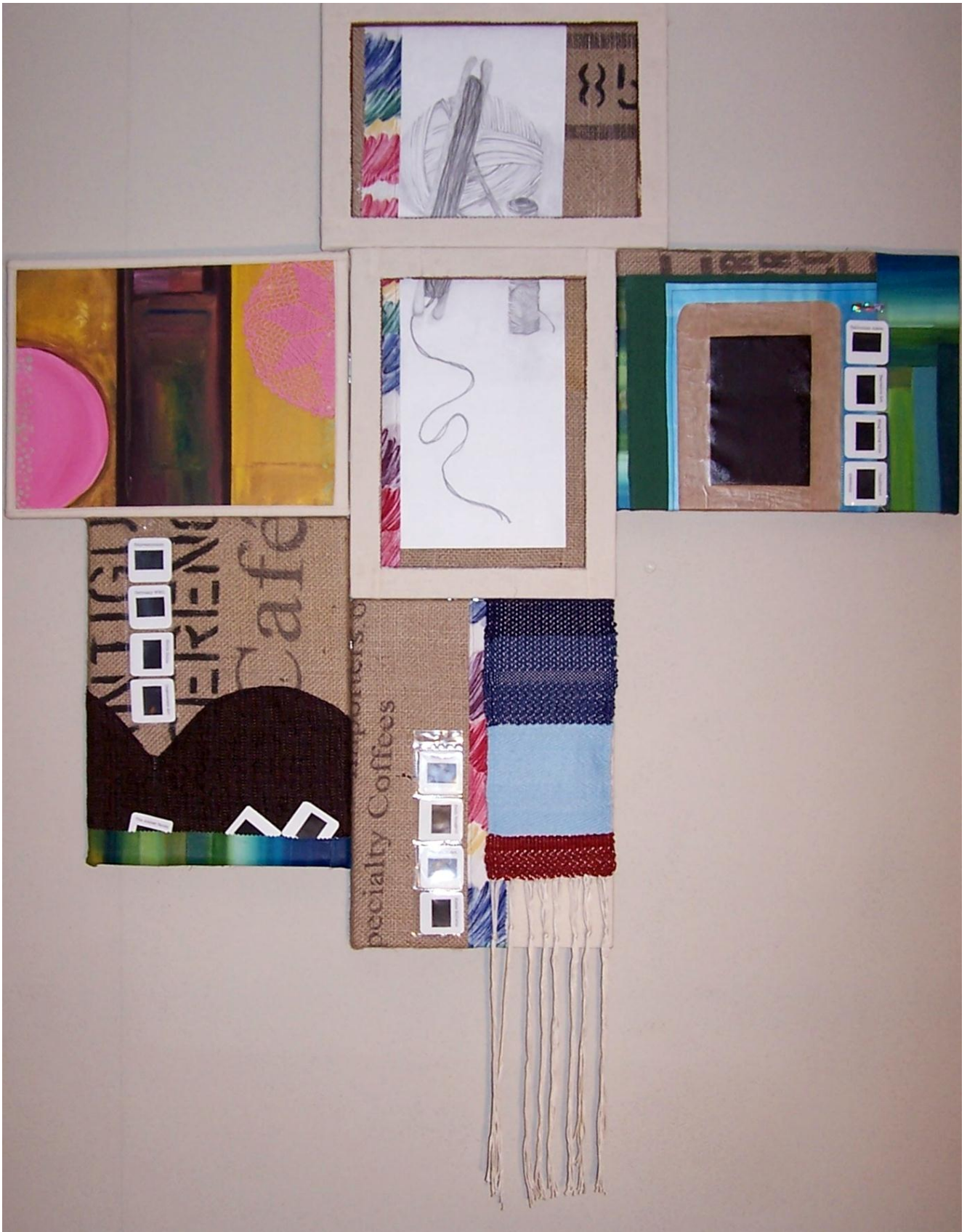


Fig. 26



Fig. 27