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Liquid landscapes | A creative project and exhibit

Sally Larkin Friou

The University of Montana

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LIQUID LANDSCAPES: A CREATIVE PROJECT AND EXHIBIT

by
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BFA, University of Montana, 1992

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Fine Arts Integrated Arts and Education

The University of Montana
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Approved by

Chairperson

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Abstract

Author: Sally Larkin Friou  
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During the previous nine years as a middle school wood shop teacher, I have felt removed from the media of the art classroom and I have neglected my own artwork. I have been left with a loss of confidence as an artist and an art teacher.

My professional goal is to teach art. My personal goal is to find my own form of aesthetic expression. This assessment documents my attempts to develop as an artist and art teacher. The process explored different media and pushed toward expressions of the natural world including rivers, creeks, lakes, and oceans. During the research, I was inspired by other artists and developed an original process of creating art.

The end results were the production of a body of work of thirty-seven pieces exhibited in the New Black Dog Café. I found that I could work creatively in my classroom and in my studio.
Intent of the Project

The intent of the creative project began as a need to seriously create art. This was important in order to achieve success as an artist and teacher.

In 1993, soon after completing my BFA and receiving teaching credentials, I was offered a position as a middle school wood shop teacher. The resulting dilemma has been my focus on developing projects in wood, and not in a variety of media. I am also required to provide a different curriculum than that of the school art teacher. Over the course of the past eight years in this position, I have only occasionally completed artwork of my own. This has resulted in a loss of confidence in my abilities as an artist and as an art teacher.

My professional goal has been, and presently is, to teach art. When I have the opportunity to move into an art position, I need to feel confident in my abilities as an artist. My personal goal is to find my own form of aesthetic expression. Both of these goals will only be accomplished through extended applied practice and development of completed works of art. This project was proposed with the purpose of achieving these goals while creating a one-woman public art exhibit. The forum I have chosen for the body of work created for the project is in a show at The New Black Dog.
Café in Missoula, Montana.
Accomplishments and Significance of the Project

Included in the accomplishments of the project are a body of completed art works and a public exhibit of this work. Throughout two years of development, I observed when I was comfortable or uncomfortable in order to help define my roles as an artist and teacher. I explored and pushed myself into areas that in the past I have avoided. In the process I have grown as an artist and teacher, as well as personally.

Media Exploration

The project began with the intent to learn the use of different media in order to find my own form of expression. I have not used oil paints to any extent in the past, and decided to gain experience using this medium. Oils are a traditional, long-standing painting medium. In order to teach art, it is important to have skill in the use of this established material.

In the past I have avoided oils as I felt they required extra care and skill to use. However, I found that I appreciated how well oil paints accompanied my chosen subject of water landscapes. Oil retains a wonderful depth of color as it dries instead of becoming flat or dull, as will other media. The bright, clear colors communicate the energy I wanted to
describe in my paintings of water, rocks, trees and mountains.

I chose paper as a surface because I love good paper. A paper surface is slightly textured and its size can be easily altered just before beginning. I am not drawn to the hard edges of a stretched canvas, and the surface has a regular pattern from the stitching in the material that I wanted to avoid. Later, I realized later that the cost of this inclination is paid for in the price of a frame that would not be necessary for a stretched canvas. Paintings on paper need the backing and protection of a frame that triple the cost of materials for each piece.

It was my goal to include a range of sizes in the completed body of art. As all of my oil paintings were large, I felt I could use drawings to fill this objective. However, I was now unable to complete smaller drawings that I found acceptable. The drawings contained no spontaneity or life, but instead were stiff, flat and uninteresting.

Journal Entry, May 10, 2002:

I wanted to use other media, including those I was familiar with and those that were relatively new to me. I have always felt closer to the surface of the paper and believed that I could transmit the energy I wanted to show through drawing. However, I am now unable to complete an even somewhat satisfying drawing.

The drawings could not be used in the exhibit as they were; however, I
saved them for possible future use.

During art expeditions I carried a variety of art supplies. I wanted to sit by a river or creek and show the energy before me using any media I chose. Although I was not successful while drawing, I also worked with photography. Using a camera, I felt I could capture what was before me. One day, I also carried the unsuccessful drawings in order to experiment with combinations of the drawings, water and photography.

Journal Entry, June 1, 2002:

_How much of what you do when creating is an accident and simply choosing an accident. It is still a matter of choice, whether to allow the accident to become important and not covered or erased._

There is something about a photograph of one’s drawings and paintings that is appealing. Perhaps it’s the way that all of your efforts have been condensed and become almost jewel-like. I decided to put the unsuccessful drawings under creek water and to photograph them there. Although I did not believe the original drawings were successful in their present state, I was willing to destroy them while exploring a new technique. My subject matter is water; why not let water become a more direct part of the results? I played with the drawings in Rattlesnake Creek. I put rocks on the edges, and used small mirrors propped against the rocks
to add other dimensions. The mirrors added reflected colors and figures that further changed the original drawings. I forgot time and place, and stood standing staring, and photographing into running water for what turned into hours. The combination of accident, deliberation, color and form worked. Once developed, the photographs captured the light and movement of the creek and incorporated them with the line and color in my drawings. Moving water created new forms and beautiful cells of color (Figure 1).

After this experiment with the drawings in the creek, the next step was to intentionally create art works to be photographed under water. Pieces of photographs were also added to some of the new drawings and paintings. Completed at home, I returned to my favorite spot to place the finished art under creek water. Each time I tested different depths of water, new camera settings and angles, combinations of close-up lenses and varying distances from the art. With each series I learned more about techniques that were successful in communicating what I wanted to express.
Expressive Goals

Journal Entry, March 15, 2002:

I find myself searching, still looking for MY way of expressing myself. I want less realism, but still representation. I am not inspired by what I am turning out, but no matter how I start, I always end up going back to the same way of working.

There are moments in a person’s life that are pivotal, but they are only recognized later. About a year ago, I was inspired to pursue my ideas without fear and self-criticism by something that happened when an acquaintance asked if I would like to go to a poetry reading. I accepted, enjoyed the reading, and purchased the poet’s newly published book.

After we left and stopped in a nearby café, we were joined by the poet, an author and university professor, a well-known local author, and a painter. The conversations that followed were interesting, inspirational and with individuals who were confident in their creative abilities. The subject matter was varied and I don’t remember them well. What affected me was how each individual was respectful and genuinely interested in each other’s efforts. Their energy was used to create and not to promote themselves or to be fearful of results. I left this impromptu meeting feeling more open and able to begin to make art. I realized that I had been negatively judging and
setting aside my own ideas instead of accepting and acting on them.

My inspiration comes mainly from nature. However, as an artist, I find other artists and styles motivating and insightful. I find I am inspired by the work of Marsden Hartley, (1877-1943) who painted with broad, energetic brush strokes. His landscapes are simple, but his style conveys an energy and fearlessness that I want to feel in my own art (Figure 2).

I also found myself drawn to the art of Wassily Kandinsky who contends that color and form communicate through a universal language (Kandinsky, 1977). Many of his pieces tell stories that are complex and somehow deeply affective. I find this narrative approach appealing and I experimented with the idea of story within a painting or photograph (Figure 3).

One of the dominant elements of my art is color. I tend to include dense areas of pigment, and bright hues. In my studies during the project, I was drawn to colors used in the work of the Fauve ("wild beasts") landscape artists of the early 1900’s (Freeman, 1990). It was helpful to closely examine their use of color and technique. I tried to incorporate those ideas I found most inspirational with my own (Figure 4).

By studying these works of art I hoped to discover elements that were
aesthetically moving and use them in my art. It is my aspiration to move forward with these ideas to develop my own style. I want my art to convey the inspiration I experience from the natural world through color, form and technique. When I am by the ocean or on a river, I am content and at peace. Through creating art I wish to relive these moments and share them with others.

Personal Discoveries

Developing a body of my own artwork to be placed in public was a personal struggle. Was my art good enough to be exhibited? I fluctuated between waves of fear, and thoughts of self-acceptance.

Journal Entry, June 1, 2002:

The dilemma - if I am painting for myself, what will push me through to completion? If I am painting for a public exhibition, can I remove thoughts of the public eye? Is selection of subject matter, or technique affected by the public? Positive end - I work, I finish. Negative end - I am battling thoughts of the public. Can I do the artwork I enjoy without exhibiting? I don't think I have the self-discipline. History shows exactly how much I have worked without the push; not at all for years. My own self-doubts crowd in, they loom. I have preferred to avoid trying to decipher whether the doubts and fears are from within myself and about myself, or if they are fear and doubt in regard to what others will think.

While reading, Art and Fear, Observations on the Perils (and
Rewards) of Artmaking, by Bayles and Orland, 1993, I realized that I expected perfection in every piece of art I created. Of course in this light I was a failure, and had no reason to continue. By accepting the fact that not every painting would be successful, I had permission to fail and to learn from mistakes. I was not paralyzed by the need for perfection to the point of not completing anything.

Journal Entry, May 20, 2002:

It's pushing through to the finish that is so hard. I find myself getting to a place where I feel a horrible block. It is tempting to stop at this point. There are so many things to distract. I have found that it takes focused inspiration for that last part of a painting. To really look and see each area. To take the time to completely rework a set of colors - light to dark to light. Greens or blues. Yellows? When I just can't go further on one, I push into another painting. There are definitely times when a painting needs to sit. It is almost as if the painting itself needs time to exist as is before taking on more. I know I need time away so that I can see again.

In addition, I faced the fact that each person will have her own opinion of what is and isn't “good”. Every art teacher, artist, most viewers, will have an opinion about my pieces. Some people will like my art and some people won't. I have to ask myself if I am going to allow the opinions of others to stop me from working on my own art whether I exhibit or not. These thoughts are not original, they are even simple, but it is easy to find
excuses to avoid creating.

The Exhibit

When I started looking for a place to have a show, I was nervous. I knew the commitment that would be required. By actually contacting and making an agreement with an establishment, I would have no choice but to produce. It was helpful to have a friend who knows the local exhibit spaces well; however when I called the gallery she recommended, I was told that they already have thirty artists and a two year waiting period. That wouldn’t work in my time frame, and I realized I would have to find a more alternative setting. The possibilities became:

Site #1 - The Raven - Very nice walls, but artwork shares space with customer notices such as, “As of immediately, .25 charge for any pool cue or ball that hits the floor.” The clientele is ‘different’, and the atmosphere has a scattered feeling.

Site #2 - Shakespeare & Co. - This store contains only a small exhibit area at the back of the room and more space high above book shelves that is shared with book posters left up with the artwork. Not a good place to display much art and it doesn’t feel right.
Site #3 - The New Black Dog Café - Very nice wall space, good location. The owner was very concerned about his eyes and the negative effects of the glare from the plastic holding my slides and photographs. He was more interested in talking about primitive man and the lack of glare in early times, than art.

In February, after considerable thought, I came to an agreement with the owner of The Black Dog. The reds and browns of the brick, and the blues in the furniture went well with the colors in my artwork. The natural tones of the walls agreed with the natural subject matter. However, I was told three weeks before the show that the restaurant may close. I scrambled for an alternative, and eventually found another space on The University of Montana campus for a weeklong exhibit. This space would not be as available to the community, and I therefore would not be able to confront my fear of public opinion. At the last minute, I was able to exhibit at The Black Dog. I understand why regular galleries and desired locations have long waiting lists.

Once I had secured the space, I needed to work quickly on publicity. I had postcards made and contacted two local newspapers. In the process of arranging this exhibit I learned that there are many details and
complications to take time away from producing art.

I was fortunate to have an adult son living with me during the summer of 2002. He willingly helped with frame construction and when finished, we hung the show together. I was concerned about how to hang groupings of art as neither of us had ever installed a show. It was useful to find information about the standards of design when displaying art and we spent the day carefully arranging the placement of each piece.

The Opening Reception

It was important to hold an opening to share the project with my peers in the graduate program at the University of Montana. The owner of The Black Dog agreed to open the restaurant on a Monday for a special event, and I ordered vegetables, bread and dips and asked another student to play the guitar. Everyone in the Creative Pulse received an invitation. My hopes were that the evening would be a relaxed time for people to get together, visit, look at the art, eat and drink. This was a celebration.

As people arrived, I was surprised to find that I was comfortable. The comments I received about the artwork were positive; many visitors liked the colors of both paintings and photographs. There were questions about how I had achieved the results of the photographs taken in the creek, and I
enjoyed being able to explain the progression of the discovery.

There were also positive comments in regards to the appearance of the exhibit as a whole. The owner of the Black Dog was happy that the show was at eye level and easy for others to view. Several people remarked that the exhibit worked well in the space of the restaurant; the lighting and colors of the room complemented the art.

The evening went well. I was able to speak to most of the guests and everyone seemed to enjoy him or herself. Although I had at times been uneasy about the prospect of having my artwork in public, I experienced none of the fear I had anticipated. I wondered if I would do as well in the upcoming public opening.

Missoula galleries and other local exhibit spaces coordinate an art opening evening on the first Friday of every month. My public opening is scheduled to occur later in the summer. This involves more risk than an opening for my peers. The public will view the show in relation to other exhibits and artists. If I consider how my art will be appraised and give this crucial meaning, I will miss the importance of the exhibit and my efforts. There is no competition. My purpose is to create the art and to share it with others.
Effects on Teaching

Mosaic

At the beginning of the school year, the art teacher and I talked about coordinating our curriculum in order to produce a large work of art, made by students, to enhance the long, blank brick wall at the front our school. In the past I would not have considered such an undertaking, but the process of the creative project provided me with the courage to proceed. When exhibiting art in public, each piece needs to be completed well. It is difficult for an individual to work to this level of quality and more complex when involving our planned seventy-five students.

However, we were able to complete the mosaic and to have each section artistically sound (Figure 5). As I was teaching I was comfortable helping students with techniques, having discussions about color choices and helping solve design problems. My intention with the creative project was to feel confident as an art teacher. Now, after completing the project and the mosaic, I know that I can teach art and teach it well.

Teacher and Artist

As a result of the creative project I have come to understand that I
must separate thoughts of myself as an artist and as a teacher. I found that I was most aware of this as a problem when I wrote a short biography for the local newspaper about my upcoming exhibit. "Sally Friou is an artist and art teacher..." I wasn't sure at first how to write this. These are related professions, but in order to continue making art, I need to acknowledge that the teaching and making of art are separate efforts.

However, working as a teacher and producing art are related, and in fact, compliment each other. A good teacher is required to remain open to learning. As new information is available, innovative tools emerge, and inevitable problems surface, a creative teacher is able integrate all of his knowledge to work with students and staff.

A middle school teacher encounters individual students who are constantly changing and growing. A creative approach is needed in order to accept these changes as they happen. As I produce art I need to remain inventive and flexible. The two professions enhance continuous original thinking processes.

In the design of new classroom projects or new art pieces of my own, an innovative approach reflects our era and becomes meaningful. My students have been raised with continuous change and need to be provided
with stimulating, challenging projects that are related to their lives. As an artist I need to remain open to new ideas and forms of expression. Maintaining creativity in each profession, supports inspiration in both teaching and producing art.
Unexpected Results and Conclusion

The question is, what is an artist? According to Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, an artist is “...one who practices art...” and art is defined as, “…the conscious use of skill and creative imagination especially in the production of aesthetic objects…” By these definitions, am I an artist?

Much of the difficulty I experience when creating art comes from a lack of confidence in my abilities as an artist. As I progressed this year, I found it difficult to ward off my concerns of other’s opinions. Only when completely absorbed in the creative process was I able to forget this problem.

Despite my own doubts, there were specific times that I knew I was an artist. The first was when I looked at one of my earlier pieces and felt surprised that I had created this art myself. The next instance was when first seeing the results of my underwater photography. This process involved discovery and allowed an expansion of my own forms of aesthetic expression.

A teacher is not expected to create outside of the classroom, and I have been able to avoid a serious commitment to the production of my own art. However, whereas making art is optional for an elementary, middle or
high school art teacher, it is requisite at the university level. I have learned that although producing art is not required by my employers, making art does enhance my abilities as a teacher.

Although at times I was hesitant to publicly display my art, I now know this was a critical decision. Exhibiting forced me to make a commitment to produce. Over the past two years I have created art, whereas I had not for the previous nine years. You cannot call yourself an artist unless you are making an effort to make art. In order to be an artist, I need to continue to make art.

I am inspired by what I have done this year to carry on my work. I have plans to write and illustrate a children’s book, and to develop this into an art exhibit. The teaching profession supports these efforts, as I will not have the pressure of public opinion influencing my creativity. Selling the art is not necessary.

In conclusion, I recognize that I have been successful in the final project and in achieving my goal to make art. I needed an external push to begin to seriously produce. I have finished motivated to continue to develop my abilities and to follow my own inspiration. Beyond gaining confidence as an art teacher, I can now say, I am an artist.
Bibliography


Figure 2  “Potato Point - Cranberry”
Figure 3  "Escape From the Dominican"

This painting illustrates a story about a way the Friou family may have escaped from the Dominican Republic in the early 1800's.
Figure 4  “The Mountain From Higgins”
Figure 5  Detail from mosaic at Rattlesnake Middle School
Appendix A

LIQUID LANDSCAPES
Paintings and photographs by Sally Friou

I began to wonder about the significance of bodies of water for my family and myself when I realized that all of us lived or spent time on islands. These islands were located thousands of miles apart, yet somehow we had all migrated to places surrounded by water. My father lived on Lido Island - a posh southern California sand bar. My mother’s home was on Vashon Island, just off West Seattle. I lived with my family on Lynx Island, a small piece of land in a lake in northern Minnesota. But the place that had equal impact on all of us was, is, an island called Cranberry, three miles off the coast in a rough bay in Maine. To most people, the word “cranberry” brings up thoughts of turkey and mashed potatoes. To the Friou’s, “cranberry” reaches deep into memories of water; three miles of ocean in thick fog, squalls, or sun; sailing, rowing, motoring in any direction wanted; ropes and knots whose safe use provide connection to the mainland; dangerous rocks and ledges to remember and avoid. This place is woven deep into the tissues of all of us. Even so, Cranberry is only the present generation’s draw to water. There are stories. Tales of merchant sailing ships, captains and close escapes by sea. Generations before us have had their lives depend on oceans and rivers. The enjoyment and desire to be by and on water belonged to those before us and has been passed on to the present generation.

These paintings and photographs are about a family connection. Some are of stories told by my father, mother, aunts and uncles, as told to them by their parents and grandparents. Others are simple landscapes of places I know well, or stories of my own. All are about water.

Sally Friou is an artist and art teacher who teaches a wood shop class at Rattlesnake Middle School. She received her B.F.A. and teaching certification at the University of Montana and is currently completing a Master of Arts in Fine Arts, with an option in Integrated Arts and Education.
Liquid Landscapes

Sally Friou

July 15 - August 15, 2002

New Black Dog Café
138 West Broadway
Missoula, MT

OPENING RECEPTION
Friday, August 2
5 - 8 p.m.