

**TOWSON UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH**

VERSUS

by

Mario C. Sam

A thesis

Presented to the faculty of

Towson University

in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts

May 2018

**Towson University
Towson, Maryland 21252**

**TOWSON UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH
THESIS APPROVAL PAGE**

This is to certify that the thesis prepared by **MARIO C. SAM**, entitled **VERSUS**, has been approved by this committee as having a satisfactory completion of the requirement for the degree of Master's of Fine Art in Studio Art in the Department of Fine Arts.

Bridget Sullivan, Chair

Date

Print Name

Amanda Burnham, Committee Member

Date

Print Name

Phil Davis , Committee Member

Date

Print Name

James VonMinor, Committee Member

Date

Print Name

Tonia Matthews,
Graduate Program Director

Date

Print Name

ABSTRACT

Mario C. Sam's thesis, *Versus*, explores the compositions created by events, experiences, and emotions in our internal and external worlds. We begin as a unique combination of physical elements. Atop this come ephemeral layers of experiences, views, upbringings, routines, and likes and dislikes that evolve organically. These layers-upon-layers of tangible physical traits and untouchable ones make us human and ultimately shape who we become.

Using complex processes and a wide range of both digital and analog media and techniques, Mario C. Sam evokes the harmonies and conflicts between these tangible and intangible elements. His work layers compelling visuals with both fragments of ideas and very clear messages, ultimately creating a push-pull between simple aesthetics and conceptual thought; between the analytical and naturalistic.

Introduction

Life is a composition of events that compliment, contrast, and overlap each other at specific times and places. These points tend to be unpredictable and spontaneous by nature. Personal decisions have only so much impact and although one might try to control or negotiate them in hopes of altering reality, it is ultimately a wasted effort.

I have come to realize that not only is our external world full of such compositions, but so are our internal selves. We all begin with a nucleus containing genetic information that identifies who and what we are,¹ but from there on, we are a unique combination of physical elements: facial features, ethnicity and, as mentioned before, genetic makeup. Additionally, we are made up of more ephemeral elements: the layers of our experiences, our views, our upbringings, our routines, likes and dislikes that have evolved organically over the years. These layers-upon-layers of tangible physical traits and untouchable ones make us human and ultimately shape who we become.

I have wandered through life, taking in events, drifting in and out of what I can and cannot control, trying to explain my decisions to others and make sense of them myself. My entire life has been a collaborative work, often with anonymous contributors. Much in the same way I have lived, I have created work made up of compositions that involve both controlled decisions and unpredictable circumstances and accidents. From my first semester at Towson University to the present, my work has evolved multiple times, but throughout, I

¹ Lodish, Harvey F. *Molecular Cell Biology*. W.H. Freeman and Co., 2013.

have layered compelling visuals with both fragments of ideas and very clear messages. I have employed digital and analog techniques alongside one another. I have created a push-pull between physical images and conceptual thought; between the analytical and naturalistic. The results – full of both harmonies and clashes between elements – formed my thesis show, *Versus*.

Influences

The struggle for control is evident throughout the works in the show, as I utilize the formalistic principles of composition, perspective, balance, light, color, etc. that are necessary to create effective visual language. Simultaneously, however, I embrace the uncontrollable that makes much of abstract modern art exciting. I am reminded of the work of Jasper Johns² (1930 -), who explores recurring images using a wide variety of media.³ In the works below, much like my own, he begins with a structured, classical composition and then allows himself to wander visually with a variety of marks and the appearance of a range of media, created through lithographic processes.⁴

The use of materials is key in successfully translating complex thoughts to reality. Jasper Johns masterfully controls encaustic, which is a difficult medium to work with and yet, he makes it look easy and relatable. His purposeful use of materials and inclusion of everyday objects⁵ inspires my work on a daily basis.

While I don't incorporate 3-D objects onto flat 2-D spaces like Johns, I do follow a

² Bernstein, Roberta, Lilian Tone, Jasper Johns, and Kirk Varnedoe. *Jasper Johns: A Retrospective*. Museum of Modern Art, 2006.

³ Bernstein, Roberta, Lilian Tone, Jasper Johns, and Kirk Varnedoe. *Jasper Johns: A Retrospective*. Museum of Modern Art, 2006.

⁴ Bernstein, Roberta, Lilian Tone, Jasper Johns, and Kirk Varnedoe. *Jasper Johns: A Retrospective*. Museum of Modern Art, 2006.

⁵ Bernstein, Roberta, Lilian Tone, Jasper Johns, and Kirk Varnedoe. *Jasper Johns: A Retrospective*. Museum of Modern Art, 2006.

series of careful processes and treat paintings as a series of elements and parts that create one whole piece. The prolific variety of media, processes and themes he has explored in his work, as viewed in the recent *Jasper Johns: Something Resembling Truth* exhibit at The Broad,⁶ is quite incredible and played a large role in deciding what to display in my own show. I strove to balance flat paintings on paper with more structured panels, creating a variety of depths and surfaces.



Above: Jasper Johns' *Evian*, lithograph in colors on Angoumois paper, 1972⁷ (left) and my own, *Fictional Theory*, digital prints, acrylic paint, sumi inks, graphite, metal leaf, and vinyl on paper, 2018 (right). Both are bounded by a structured composition, but involve multiple layers of geographic elements and a range of mark making techniques.

My work is made up of compositions that are confident and full of energy, and generally with a central focus point. I use repetition to convey movement, urgency and importance, employing different techniques and processes while creating rules to guide my creative process. I limit the amount of brushstrokes within a specific amount of time or space. I work in intervals of seconds, using

⁶ Johns, Jasper. *Something Resembling Truth*. 10 Feb – 13 May, 2018, The Broad, Los Angeles, CA.

⁷ Johns, Jasper. *Evian*. 1972, Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York.

only one or two colors. Sometimes I try to maintain consistency of line and structure, while other times I allow gravity and/or momentum take over.

Along with high-energy, abstract mark making, I also incorporate imagery that is significant to me on both a personal level and from a contextual reference point. Much as my view of abstract marks has evolved throughout the years, so has my preference for figurative imagery. The play of figurative lines and abstract marks creates a tense composition that is best viewed up close. My intent is to convey balance between predetermined elements and spontaneous mark making. In my figurative work, I am inspired by Richard Diebenkorn⁸ (1922 - 1993) who, like Johns, began with a structured composition and then allowed a range of media and mark-making to flow.⁹ In addition to the imagery and balance between purposeful and spontaneous marks, I am inspired by Diebenkorn's varying interpretation of "finished work."¹⁰ The thoughtful compositions are contrasted with a variety of strong marks, and lighter, sketchy lines and give the audience a glimpse of the decision-making process that took place throughout the creation of the work. The effect is a visual roadmap, with clear compositional entry and exit points and various signposts connecting the artist's hand and the substrate. I also try to create a layered map that allows glimpses of the various layers and processes I completed, rather than erased lines like Diebenkorn.

⁸ Bancroft, Sarah, and Diebenkorn, Richard. *Richard Diebenkorn*. Abrams, 2015.

⁹ Barcio, Phillip. "From Abstraction to Figuration: The Path of Richard Diebenkorn." *Ideel Art: The Online Gallerist for Contemporary Abstract Art*, 20 Jan. 2017, www.ideelart.com/module/csblog/post/352-1-richard-diebenkorn.html.

¹⁰ Bancroft, Sarah, and Diebenkorn, Richard. *Richard Diebenkorn*. Abrams, 2015.



Above: Richard Diebenkorn's *Seated Woman*, synthetic polymer paint and charcoal on board, 1966¹¹ (left) and my own *Sangre Olvidada*, digital prints, acrylic paint, sumi ink, metal leaf, and varnish on board, 2018 (right). Both are anchored by suggestive figures, then given depth and tension through mark making and mixed media.

I strive to balance all elements, merging traditional analog media, such as watercolors, inks, acrylics, and graphite, with digital techniques. I manipulate color, scale, and shape while embracing random chance.

As with most things in life, beginning is the most challenging part. The initial spark is rarely seen, but once kindled, grows to a steady flame. I labor over material integrity, making sure that the medium is respected without losing spontaneity and/or trying to make it something that it is not meant to be. I sometimes bend materials to their breaking points, but I consider those to be learning experiences and my work grows richer and more complex from accidental outcomes. I mull over layers of paint, creating reactions between paper and liquefied solutions while encouraging patterns and shapes that are more often random and organic in nature than controlled and designed. I create

¹¹ Diebenkorn, Richard. *Seated Woman*. 1966, Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York.

opportunities for materials, in their truest form, to compete and play with one another. Those moments are only seen by me and rarely shared or documented. I like to experience those times alone: to literally watch paint dry.

Depending on the progress of the piece versus my desired outcome, I may coax the materials along. I create pools of water, paint and metallic leaf, which sometimes fight with each other and other times live in harmony, balanced by volume, gravity and power.



Neruda's White Hills, acrylic paint, inks, metal leaf, and gel medium on wood panels, 2018, above, is an example of the extensive series of processes I employ, exploring and coaxing the materials toward compositions that demonstrate both contrast and cohesion.

Process is the end goal for me because I believe it is the gateway to conceptualization. Much like unconscious thoughts, ideas and dreams that are unleashed in sleep,¹² or while daydreaming through mundane tasks, when I create work, I start with an empty space, free of judgments or resolutions. I prep the surface with liquid (most often sprayed water) and then let it dry. Once mostly

¹² Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Penguin Books, 1976.

dry, I add a second layer of liquid and introduce paint. Recently, I began using inks instead of acrylics, as I believe they tend to react to water in a much more beautiful and fluid way than any other medium, making shapes that flow on the surface while maintaining structural integrity. After manipulating the puddles of colored water back and forth just enough to have it behave as I want it to, I let it dry. Several hours later, I introduce a third layer of liquid, washing away part of the first layer and sometimes using fine-grain sandpaper to create texture. This third layer is once again left to dry, typically for a few hours.

As referenced previously, my work incorporates both the analog and digital worlds, creating such a complex composition of elements and techniques that it is often difficult to tell which is which. Once all of the initial layers of traditional, physical media have dried and the surface is stiff enough, I often scan it into the computer in sections, putting it together in Photoshop and creating a high resolution file that can later be printed at two-to-three times its original size. In Photoshop, I alter light exposure, value and sometimes color without straying too far from the original. In addition, lately I have explored depth of field, constructing a hierarchy of importance in focal range. I make certain aspects of the wash composition softer and others sharper, creating the illusion of space and depth. After adjustments to each piece in the series are complete, I print them on a large-scale Canon 12 ink printer, which is able to duplicate color, depth, texture, and fidelity. I typically use Canon Bright White art paper, a medium-weight stock that when printed on and allowed to dry is able to accept wet medium easily. This eliminates the need for stretching and preparing a surface. Even though this

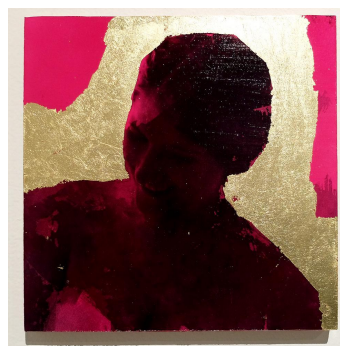
paper stock is coated, the final prints look crisp and appear to have a matte finish.

Printed inks are insta-dry, but because of the amount of color pigment and high contrast in the scan, it is best to allow the ink time to settle and absorb slowly and steadily. After the ink is fully dry, the prints are cut down to the desired size and I take inventory and arrange them to form a composition that makes sense to me and to their eventual display. This is not the end of my process, though, and is in fact where concept usually sparks and the real work begins. Depending on what I wish to communicate in each work and/or the series as a whole, I rework each piece again, adding further dry and wet mediums, such as graphite, inks, colored pencil, acrylics, metal leaf, charcoal, cut vinyl and gel-based transfer. Sometimes I mount the prints on wood or heavier board.

In developing a cohesive series, I analyze and contextualize each mark and, if the piece requires it, allow gravity and momentum to take over by fluidly moving the brush back and forth, transferring energy from my arms and wrist to the surface of the prints. Paint adds texture; graphite marks demonstrate energy or a lack thereof. Occasionally, I have even worked in complete darkness, with only a vague sense of where the wet medium is going to land and how it will ultimately develop. This increases the randomness of each work and encourages marks inspired solely by energy. From this description, it would seem that I identify with the Automatism movement, in which artists like Joan Miró and André Masson embraced complete randomness in their mark making and avoided rational

thought.¹³ Unlike them, however, I use a wide range of media and processes within a single piece, which requires conscious planning and many rational pauses throughout.

By using dry mediums on top of wet ones, I am able to add a new aesthetic and exert some control. The addition of gel-transferred images onto the surface adds a figurative element that seems more successful when it appears worn and worked over. This process in itself has many steps, but conceptually, it all starts and ends with the idea that our subconscious suppresses memories which are filed away to be revealed in bits and pieces later. This is the subliminal meaning behind the majority of my work - dreams and memories so deeply intertwined with glimpses of reality that they are impossible to separate.



Above: Two paintings from the *Sangre Olvidada (Forgotten Blood)* series, digital prints, acrylic paint, sumi ink, and metal leaf on wood panels, 2018, which combine digital and a wide range of analog media to evoke dreamlike images.

All figurative images used in my work derive from one source: desire. The figures that I use are sensual, silent and mysterious. I use mostly female imagery to portray desire, but it is the desire for proximity and human connection that I am

¹³ Montagu, Jemma. "The Surrealists: Revolutionaries in Art & Writing." *The Surrealists: Revolutionaries in Art & Writing*, Tate Gallery, 2002, pp. 15–15.

most interested in, rather than a purely sexual one. I believe these figures, juxtaposed with abstract backgrounds and layered, decisive mark making creates dramatic tension and uncertainty with the audience. I often work on the surface of these prints over and over again until they feel complete and the meaning, to me, is clear. Up to that point, I add and remove layers, creating negative, blank space where there were previously vibrant, high-contrast marks. I sand away details but keep sections that feel important. The process is truly one of finding balance; of harmony versus acrimony. Once I am satisfied, I leave the work to dry for a few hours, if not days, and then come back to make final touches as needed. When all is done, the work is sealed.

The term “complete” is complicated. I believe one is never truly done with anything in life. We are always works in progress. Likewise, every step in my artistic process is temporary, constantly moving, drifting from place to place without a concrete end in mind. Although we try to control and steer our lives in a specific direction, the results are never exact. In determining a work’s completion, experimentation can often go too far or not far enough. These are the times I wish I knew what I wanted to show the audience more clearly from the beginning; when I would appreciate finding meaning in conscious thought more than the ephemeral unconscious. And yet, these are the times where process and the creation it inspires are at climax, and when discussions about the work really start to take shape.

The work process described above is just one of many that I have developed over the years. It is not the only way that I work and shouldn’t be taken as a step-

by-step guide since there is so much spontaneity and exploration each time. My processes evolve constantly. I alternate steps and sometimes do not even complete all of them to ensure that the work feels fresh and unique every time. Sometimes steps are done in a different order, or take more time, or less. Media is applied in different manners and digital processes are sometimes not employed, or are utilized with utmost subtlety. Gel-transfer imagery changes from time to time and becomes the backdrop of work, instead of its focal point. All of this is done so that there is always something different; so that each work has its own voice and character but remains familiar.

Alternatively, a process does not always involve long, complicated methods with dozens of mediums, and guidelines to be followed. In keeping with the theme that there are compositions full of clashes, as well as harmony in the external and internal worlds, I included a handful of pieces in *Versus* that are pure and minimalistic. I began these works with clear ideas in mind that I wanted to communicate then used simple techniques involving only my hands to create depth, space and texture. With minimally manipulated materials, they exude honesty, creating a narrative from abstract shapes, color and text elements. In these works, I find inspiration in Cy Twombly¹⁴ (1928 - 2011) and his series of white paintings,¹⁵ which are likewise monochromatic with minimalistic aesthetics.

Twombly stands out as an artist who was truly able to blend multiple disciplines into cohesive body of work, creating successful paintings and

¹⁴ Twombly, Cy, and Jonas Storsve. *Cy Twombly*. Sieveking Verlag, 2017.

¹⁵ Twombly, Cy, and Jonas Storsve. *Cy Twombly*. Sieveking Verlag, 2017.

sculptures alike.¹⁶ Unlike Jasper Johns, referenced earlier, who is primarily a painter that occasionally adds 3-D elements and dabbles in reliefs, Twombly immersed himself in multiple planes, with sculptures and paintings that are visually cohesive, but exist separately. Twombly's work influenced my own practice in that, while I appreciate and understand three-dimensional objects, I have not incorporated them into my 2-D works. Like another of my influences, Richard Diebenkorn, Twombly's definition of "finished work" is ambiguous, with a variety of both confident marks and more gestural ones overlapping and leaving room for interpretation.



Above from left to right: My piece *A Dario (To Roosevelt, excerpt)*, acrylic paint, sumi ink, vinyl, and gel medium on wood panels, 2018 (left) and *Hero and Leandro (A Painting in Four Parts) Part II*, oil-based house paint, oil on canvas by Cy Twombly, 1984¹⁷ (right). Both use minimalistic aesthetics and a monochromatic white color scheme that, despite its connotation with lightness, feels tense and wrought.

I believe process-as-inspiration is also born from my life as an immigrant. I have had a nomadic life, which has forced me to adapt and cope with a steady stream of change. Moving from place to place as a child and eventually as an

¹⁶ Twombly, Cy, and Jonas Storsve. *Cy Twombly*. Sieveking Verlag, 2017.

¹⁷ Twombly, Cy. *Hero and Leandro (A Painting in Four Parts) Part II*. 1984.

adult greatly impacted my development. Every aspect of my life has been a process of preparing for and managing change, sometimes with only a slight idea of what is to come, and ending with uncertainty as to whether the outcome was fully intended or a degree of happenstance. It has been a life of vital, conscious choices influenced by many circumstances outside of my control. Throughout these changes, I have found comfort in simple daily routines.

In developing complete, cohesive work rooted in process, I was influenced by the artist Franz Kline (1910 - 1962). One of my favorite abstract expressionists, Kline used his entire body and its rotation to create gestural marks that speak of energy, mass and continuity.¹⁸ In his work, each paint stroke is controlled and decisively balanced with the next. The marks are predetermined but, because of the movement and energy conveyed in them, the work feels surprisingly fresh. The layering of his whites, the under painting, the corrosion of his working surface, which is able to withstand his force and mark making, are remarkable. His work exudes bold, succinct movements, but is equally made up of countless minute decisions.

¹⁸ Gaugh, Harry F. *Franz Kline: Art and The Structure of Identity*. Reprint ed., Abbeville Press, 1994.



Above: Franz Kline, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 1957

In *Versus*, I tried to incorporate elements of Kline's forceful mark-making style and I was also inspired by his use of a variety of tools to create his marks.¹⁹ My own toolbox included everything from Sumi ink brushes to a computer mouse to create strokes. As these precision tools might suggest, I worked on a much more intimate scale than Franz Kline.

I must note that the size of a work often seems to play an outsized role into whether it is deemed "complete." It seems that the larger it is, the more easily it is classified as an important work of art and revered by the audience. I tend to disagree with this notion, at least in relation to abstract work. I do not see merit in work based on size. It is impressive and unquestionably ambitious to work on a larger scale, but I do not believe it is inherently better or should be deemed to have more gravitas than human-scaled work hung at eye level. The fascinating thing about Kline's work is that although it is large, the viewer is able to grasp the sense of energetic, spontaneous movement that I believe he intended. These

¹⁹ Gaugh, Harry F. *Franz Kline: Art and The Structure of Identity*. Reprint ed., Abbeville Press, 1994.

attributes are difficult to master and to translate at a large scale, yet he was able to. Though their styles are very different, both Kline and Twombly rely on processes that lead to the illusive “finishing” of work that, from a classical view, is unfinished. Likewise, I seek that nuanced version of “finished” in my work.

Basing my entire practice on process comes as second nature to me, I am not afraid of exploration. I have been a chameleon most of my professional career, at times working as a designer or illustrator, and currently as a mixed media artist. Creating balanced, aesthetically pleasing compositions takes long periods of time and extensive experimentation, but results in work imbued with a tension that satisfies my need for self-expression and artistic development.

When I started the Towson MFA program, I wanted to keep an open mind and deeply consider feedback from both my committee and my cohort. I believe it is imperative to hear and reflect on reactions from your audience, as it creates an environment for growth. With criticism from multiple sources, often multiple times a day, I became hyper-aware of reactions and at times it impacted my ability to create. I am proud to say, however, that ultimately it was a vital learning experience. My thesis show *Versus* is the culmination of this evolution, the result of many semesters of experimentation, criticism and growth. It is a strong and complete showing of my progression as a graduate student and also a show I am deeply proud of. Most of the work in the exhibition is new, created in the past few months, and therefore fresh to my audience. Every piece in *Versus* lives within a series and includes the aforementioned contrasting and harmonious compositional elements within itself and among the other pieces in its series. As

I examine various pieces in the following paragraphs, it is important to note that I am referencing the entire series, not individual works.

Versus

The first series in the show, immediately to the right as one enters the gallery, is *A Dario (To Roosevelt, excerpt)*, which is based on a poem by Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío. Written in 1904 in Malaga, Spain,²⁰ Dario's original poem, entitled *A Roosevelt*, is about the United States' relationship with Latin America.²¹ In the poem, Dario describes the United States as a proud, powerful nation that will overthrow Latin American countries and engulf the ways of the Latin American people. He is specifically referencing the United States' role in the separation of Panama and Colombia.²² Being of Hispanic heritage and an immigrant to the U.S., this subject matter was very interesting to me and I remember learning about Dario's work during my youth in Nicaragua. My intent with this series was to show Dario's words mixed with layers of acrylic paint and inks to portray the multi-layered conflicts between the United States and Latin America. Historically, these conflicts have included everything from political power struggles, to diverging economic interests as Latin countries established sugar and fruit monopolies, and, later, to the drug war that brought billions of tons of cocaine to the U.S.

²⁰ Dario, Ruben. "A Roosevelt/To Roosevelt." *Songs of Life and Hope*, edited by Will Derusha. translated by Alberto Acereda, Duke University Press, 2004, p. 84.

²¹ Ellis, Keith. *Critical Approaches to Rubén Darío*. University, 1974.

²² Ellis, Keith. *Critical Approaches to Rubén Darío*. University, 1974.



Above: *A Dario (To Roosevelt, excerpt)* series and details on two of the pieces. Vinyl text of the Rubén Darío poem that inspired the piece is layered with acrylic paint and ink to convey long-standing conflicts between the U.S. and Latin America.

A Dario (To Roosevelt, excerpt) is a series of four paintings on wood panels layered with high-flow acrylics, inks, cut vinyl, gel medium, and varnish. Each painting measures 16" x 20" and all were created in January 2018. As mentioned, most of my work has a digital component that contrasts with analog techniques. In *A Dario*, however, the digital element is very minimal. The cut vinyl is the only part of the piece that is remotely digital, as it was typed up on a computer, then sent to a vinyl plotter to be cut and trimmed by hand. Every other component is handmade, from staining the wood panels to the layering of the acrylics and inks. I strove to give this work a subtle, gestural sketch quality. Due to the nature of my process, most of the work on these was done in bursts of energy and time. Much of that was spent either accelerating or delaying the drying process of each layer to create variations in translucency, tone and hue. In allowing some of the vinyl text to peel and curl, I hoped to create a sense of depth and urgency relating back to the poem that inspired the series.

Visually, the work of Christopher Wool²³ (1955 -) and Mira Schendel²⁴ (1919 - 1988) influenced this series. Wool's work feels focused and slightly ironic, like the results of painting non-stop for a few days with little-to-no sleep. From his abstractions, to the use of photography and typography, Wool's work is visually appealing and has a certain quiet energy, possibly derived from his limited color palette and graphic design aesthetic. I have been able to see Wool's work in person a few times and am always astonished at the amount of mark making and gestural movements that are visible only when you are extremely close. Finally, Wool's use of non-traditional fine art materials²⁵ is, in my opinion, one of the reasons why his work feels fresh. It has truly contemporary aesthetics, including overspray and graffiti-like elements.

A modern look and feel, as well as ambiguity between what is handmade and digital, is one of my goals in *Versus*. Much like Wool, I want my audience to come closer²⁶ to see the graphite and paint marks and search for the transitions from man-made to computer printed. Because *A Dario* is smaller in scale than Wool's work, I am able to interact with the audience on a more intimate level, forcing them to step in closer and try to discern the text, rather than being able to see it from across the room. This series isn't bold or loud but rather subtle and almost shy at first glance. This is where Schendel's influence comes into play, as her works are much more delicate and precise than Wool's, and include a variety

²³ Brinson, Katherine, Hudson, Suzanne, Lang, Melinda, Prince, Richard, and Wool, Christopher. *Christopher Wool*. Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2013.

²⁴ Barson, Tanya. *Mira Schendel*. Tate Modern, London: Exhibition Catalogues, 2014

²⁵ Brinson, Katherine, Hudson, Suzanne, Lang, Melinda, Prince, Richard, and Wool, Christopher. *Christopher Wool*. Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2013.

²⁶ Brinson, Katherine, Hudson, Suzanne, Lang, Melinda, Prince, Richard, and Wool, Christopher. *Christopher Wool*. Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2013.

of both stark and tentative strokes. I am especially inspired by the artist's *Graphic Objects*²⁷ series.



Above: Mira Schendel's *Untitled* from the series *Graphic Objects*, graphite, transfer type, and oil on paper between transparent acrylic sheets with transfer type, 1967²⁸ and Christopher Wool and Felix Gonzalez-Torres' collaboration *The Show is Over*, Offset lithograph, 1993.²⁹ Both are rooted in text elements slightly obscured through kerning and layering.

Progressing through the show, *Over the Mountains, Through Your Heart* is about love, loneliness and distance. In this series, I was focused on the idea of space, not necessarily from a physical point of view, but rather from an emotional one. We often romanticize past relationships, blurring away the up-and-down reality of being or not being with a significant other. *Over the Mountains, Through Your Heart* depicts the hurdles we are willing to take on in seeking past loved ones, including some who ultimately transition from fond memories to completely forgotten. I believe that this process, more often than not, leads to a sense of loneliness and depression as we try to rewrite history and reshape our memories.

²⁷ Schendel, Mira. *Graphic Objects*. 1967, Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York.

²⁸ Schendel, Mira. *Graphic Objects*. 1967, Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York.

²⁹ Wool, Christopher Wool, and Gonzalez-Torres, Felix collaboration *The Show is Over*, Offset lithograph, 1993.

Each of the four paintings in the *Over the Mountains, Through Your Heart* series is 6" x 6" on Claybord. I have used Claybord in the past for commercial illustrations and always love how the surface reacts to wet paint. This series encompasses the whole of my work process. It is the result of many hours of experimentation with both wet and dry mediums. Elements in the work include photography, gel transfers, inks, acrylics, and metallic leaf. Referencing the gaps in our memories and our desperation to bridge them, I created negative space by sanding down sections of each panel, only to refill them later with something else—a splash of ink, another transferred element, etc. Although small, the compositions of these pieces, i.e. how tightly they are cropped, is larger than most than most of the other work in *Versus*. I wanted my audience to be captivated by every square inch of the panel and for them to visually explore the layers of each section, creating their own interpretations, much as one does when revisiting hazy memories. In reference to the romantic glow we apply to memories, I made them visually appealing, filled with lush texture, high contrast and strong imagery.



Above: *Over the Mountains, Through Your Heart*, gel transfer, Sumi ink, acrylic paint, and metal leaf on Claybord, 2017 explores the sense of loneliness that often comes from revisiting and romanticizing memories.

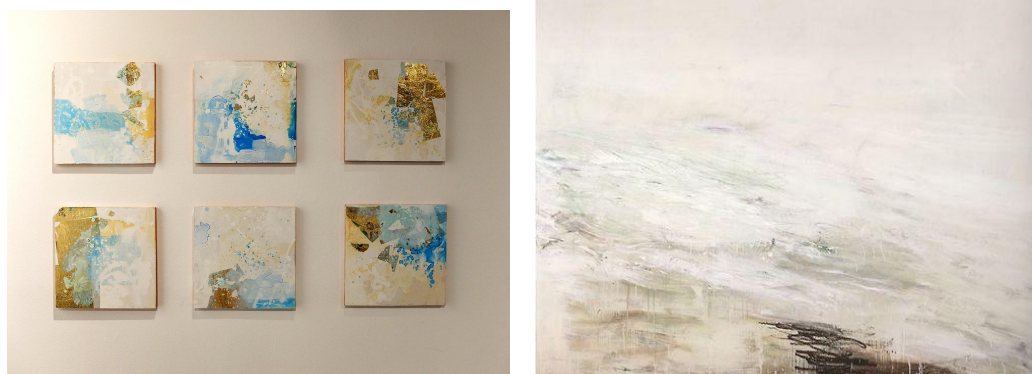
Across the gallery from *Over the Mountains, Through Your Heart* lies *Neruda's White Hills*, based on a poem by the Latin American poet, Pablo Neruda. Titled *Cuerpo de Mujer*, the poem is a short piece that evokes strong visuals and feelings of desire and desperation. Written in 1924, it is part of Neruda's *20 Love Poems and a Song of Despair*.³⁰ The writer meant for the poem to boldly advocate embracing sexuality and used sensual words and imagery to describe a woman's skin. Although the subject matter may be shocking to some, I always thought this was one of Neruda's most charming and

³⁰ Neruda, Pablo. "Cuerpo De Mujer." *Twenty Love Poems & a Song of Despair*, translated by W.S. Merwin, Penguin Books, 2004, p. 3.

intimate works. In *Neruda's White Hills*, I wanted to express Neruda's descriptions with layers of paint and metallic leaf. The series includes six 12" x 12" stained and sealed wooden panels layered with acrylics, inks, metallic leaf, and gel medium. The sides of these panels are not cleanly finished and include paint drips, marks and scuffs to represent the messy memory process. I began the series working on all panels at the same time, using gestural motions that drift from panel to panel to create a cohesive flow. Following the initial phase, I worked on each piece individually, manipulating the drying process of the wet medium to create variations of transparency, texture and hue.

For this group, Cy Twombly's (1928 - 2011) series of white paintings³¹ were a source of inspiration. Twombly's pure, childlike marks inspired the layering of paint and other media that is atypical to my other processes. Beyond Twombly, I was inspired by nature, specifically frost and ice. I wanted to mirror the translucency of frozen humidity in a way that it was subtle but also evident if explained. Adding metallic leaf was a last minute decision, to convey the beauty and power of both women's bodies, which Neruda idolized, and the wonderment of exploring nature.

³¹ Twombly, Cy, and Jonas Storsve. *Cy Twombly*. Sieveking Verlag, 2017.



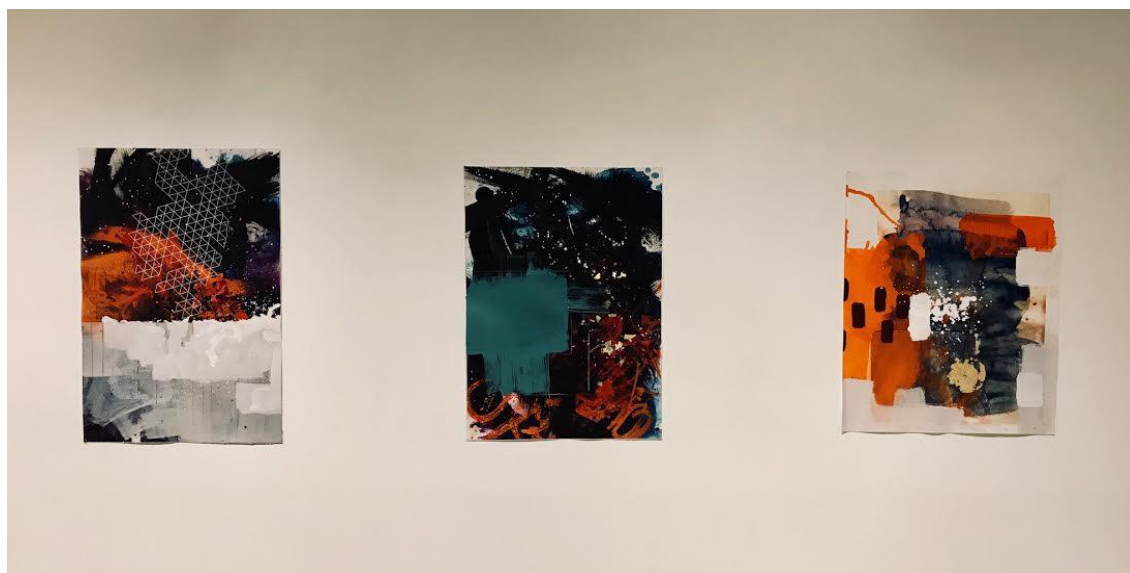
Above: *Neruda's White Hills*, acrylic paint, inks, metal leaf, and gel medium on wood panels, 2018 uses a wide range of media to depict memories and the wonderment of nature. Cy Twombly's white paintings, including the above right *Hero and Leandro (A Painting in Four Parts) Part II*, oil-based house paint, oil on canvas, 1984,³² were inspirational.

In Spring 2017, I began experimenting more and more with work that I could digitally enlarge to several times its original size to convey the desired scale. Simultaneously, I began exploring the idea of subtraction by addition, creating negative space in compositions and concepts that would otherwise be full of imagery. The resulting series, hung on a wall directly across from *A Dario (To Roosevelt, excerpted)* is titled *Fictional Theory* and is based on the concept that a fictional experience might somehow have a physical impact on reality. When creating this work, I thought about the thin line between dreams and reality, and when unconscious sleep evolves to lucid dreams, in which the mind is fully engaged but basic motor skills are unavailable.³³ I wanted to subtly confuse my audience, encouraging them to appreciate the visuals superficially, while also hopefully implanting them in their mind for later reflection.

³² Twombly, Cy. *Hero and Leandro (A Painting in Four Parts) Part II*. 1984.

³³ D'Urso, Beverly, and Berit Brogaard. "Lucid Dreaming and Self-Realization." *Psychology Today*, 4 Dec. 2012, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-superhuman-mind/201212/lucid-dreaming-and-self-realization.

There are seven pieces in the *Fictional Theory* series, but due to space constraints, only three are displayed in *Versus*. When viewing the selected works from the left to right, they are: *Fictional Theory 1*, 22" x 32"; *Fictional Theory 2*, 22" x 30"; *Fictional Theory 3*, 24" x 28.5". The series began with photographs, which I altered with inks, then scanned into the computer, enlarged and printed on Canon Heavyweight Bright White paper. I then used a combination of inks, acrylics, graphite, metal leaf, and vinyl. They each began with different photographs to evoke a sense of mystery.

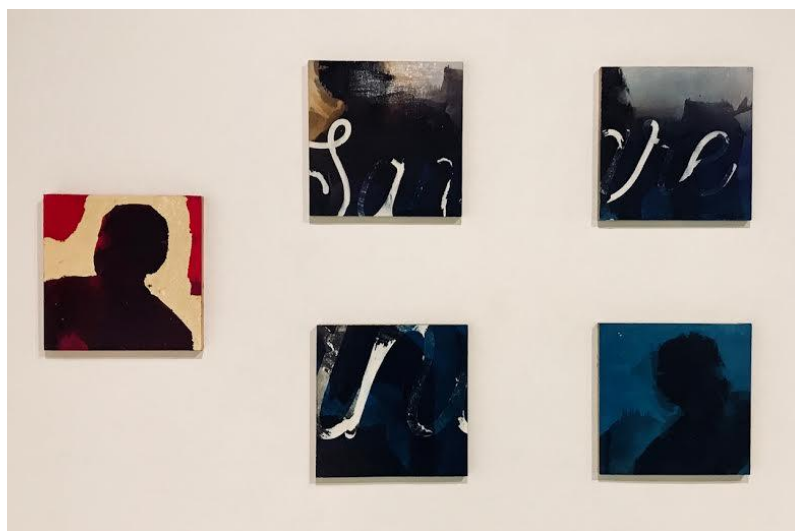


Above: *Fictional Theory*, digital prints, acrylic paint, Sumi inks, graphite, metal leaf, and vinyl on paper, 2018 explores the tenuous line between reality, lucid dreams and other fictional experiences.

When looking back at my life as an immigrant, from a long line of immigrants, I often think about origin, tradition and longevity. Even before my own migration to the United States, both sides of my family migrated from very different parts of the world to Central America. I consider questions like: "What is home?" "Why do people leave their homeland?" and "Why or how do we choose where to settle?"

These quandaries formed the basis for *Sangre Olvidada (Forgotten Blood)*. In creating this work, I reflected on a key challenge that immigrants face in a new land: that in order to be accepted and access success, they must assimilate. This was definitely the case for both of parents' families. My mother's grandparents left behind their heritage from the Iberian region of Europe and my father's family left China. These distant relatives immigrated near the turn of the century to pursue a better future for their children, often putting aside their own needs and desires, forced to forget their home and culture.

I know very little about my great-grandparents – only tidbits that have been passed down orally from generation to generation. Yet I can identify with them, having migrated to the United States as a child when my own mother sought a better life for her children and we were similarly forced to leave behind the memories and culture of a native land. It was not an easy process for a seven year-old child to leave family, friends, school and a comforting daily routine, to travel to an unknown place and learn a new language and way of life. Creating this series was an important opportunity for me to resolve angst about this loss. I wanted to create work that was visually appealing to connote the brighter future that each generation pursued, but also to use color and texture to explore geographic shifts, and convey moods and the passing of time. Of all of the work in *Versus*, this series is the most personal and thus feels very intimate.



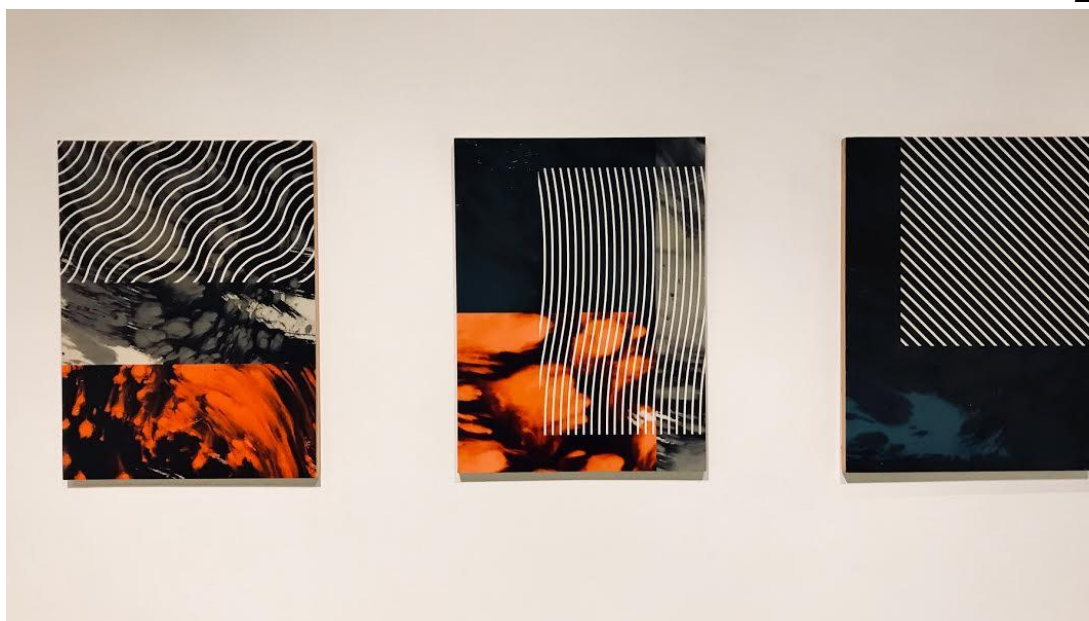
Above: In *Sangre Olvidada (Forgotten Blood)*, digital prints, acrylic paint, Sumi ink, and metal leaf on wood panels, 2018, partially obscured figures and delicate, nearly abstract text contrast with bright colors to depict the difficult journey that immigrants undertake in pursuit of a better life.

In total, *Sangre Olvidada* is a series of five wooden panels, 10" x 10" each, that are hand-stained and then layered with digital prints, acrylics, inks, metal leaf, and varnish. Typography was used but unlike in the *A Dario (To Roosevelt, excerpt)* series, it is employed as an abstract compositional element. I created the typography with a vinyl stencil. The surface was airbrushed and the stencil was then peeled off, revealing and in some cases slightly removing the layer beneath. On the first panel of the series, metallic leaf surrounds the silhouette of a figure, referencing the traditional Catholic beliefs that offered some sense of comfort and stability to past generations of my mother's family.

The next series, *Silence Without Motion*, is hung on the wall across from the *A Dario* series and includes three 18" x 24" wooden panels. I initiated this series two years ago when I was listening to music in my Towson graduate studio and began thinking about how I could translate the energy of sound and rhythm into visual representations. At the time, I had laid large speakers on the floor, with a

piece of board on top to make a flat work surface. I proceeded to work on paper on top of the “sound table” while music was playing, letting the vibrations of the sound dictate the direction of the marks and their intensity. Out of this experiment, several heavily textured drawings emerged. Once the drawings dried, they were scanned into the computer and I digitally altered the depth of field in certain sections to create the illusion of space and a photographic aesthetic.

Two years later, while listening to music in my home studio, the same song that inspired those pieces came on. I searched my files and, lo and behold, found those scanned renderings. I decided to rework them further, adjusting color and light, and ultimately cutting and pasting sections in order to achieve more dynamic compositions. I then printed each drawing, mounted them on wooden panels and added light layers of inks. Finally, I decided to add geometric vinyl to convey the idea of movement and repetition in music. Once the vinyl was added, the pieces were sealed and slightly polished. Of all the work in *Versus, Silence Without Motion* is the most reliant on formal aesthetics and digital techniques.



Above: *Silence Without Motion*, digital prints, vinyl, and gel medium on wood panels, 2016-18 was inspired by music and employs digital processes and ink washing alongside geometric vinyl to convey repetition and energy.

The final series in the show, *Acepto Salvación*, was created before *Over the Mountains Though Your Heart*, and was the first time I experimented with Claybord beyond its traditional use by illustrators. The process used in these pieces allowed me to create depth much more efficiently, wiping away layers of paint to reveal only the most important, lasting elements. *Acepto Salvación* is one of the more personal pieces in the show and is so ephemeral that I am truly unsure how the series took shape. It was certainly not visually planned to the extent that the others were.

Creating the series took a considerable amount of time, much more than the other pieces in *Versus*. I took a lot of care with the visuals, thoughtfully repeating imagery while avoiding predictability to preserve a sense of motion. One can easily navigate from piece to piece in this series of five 5" x 7" painted panels. By

observing every inch, much like *Over the Mountains Though Your Heart*, one is able to find details hidden in plain sight.

Conceptually, *Acepto Salvación (Accepting Salvation)* is about religion, specifically Catholicism. It reflects that moment in a Catholic's life where the salvation of Christ becomes all encompassing. This work is not meant to communicate any kind of social or moral preference, but rather to simply capture the moment of total surrender that comes from faith and devotion. I have shied away from work inspired by religion in the past, considering it too cliché, but because these are some of my most narrative in nature, I thought they would be a good addition to *Versus*. They demonstrate the full range of conceptual thought and visual techniques that I employ. This series was created with digital photography, graphite, acrylics, inks, and metallic leaf. Sandpaper was used to erase some sections and create texture. Neither this series, nor *Over the Mountains Though Your Heart* are sealed for protection, to retain the depth shown in a variety of finishes.



Above: *Acepto Salvación (Accepting Salvation)*, gel transfer, Sumi ink, acrylics, and metal leaf on Claybord, 2017 reflects that moment in a Catholic's life where the salvation of Christ becomes all-encompassing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, with the *Versus* exhibition now closed, I am again reflecting on my journey at Towson and in life. I truly believe that my life as a whole, and my time in this MFA program specifically, are complex compositions of events, both planned and unplanned. Personal decisions like when to take a required class and whether to carry a full course load have only so much impact and are equally weighted with the minutes and hours of exploration in the studio, becoming one with the media. All this to say: one never knows when an artistic breakthrough will come and it cannot be forced.

As my external world has developed compositionally, so has my internal one in this program. The hours of creation and constructive discussion with my committee have led to years of self-reflection, conceptual growth in my work and an emotional struggle to balance priorities, including family vs. work and personal satisfaction vs. professional development. The body of work I created while pursuing an MFA inherently encompasses all of these internal and external elements - sometimes clashing, sometimes in harmony - alongside the more specific broad concepts discussed previously.

From my first semester to the present, my work has evolved multiple times, but ultimately, thanks to this educational experience, I believe I have unlocked new, richer layers and even deeper processes that will guide me all of life's conflicts and collaborations - an endless series of *Versus*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Auping, Michael, and Frank Stella. *Frank Stella: A Retrospective*. Yale University Press, 2015.
- Barcio, Phillip. "From Abstraction to Figuration: The Path of Richard Diebenkorn." *Ideel Art: The Online Gallerist for Contemporary Abstract Art*, 20 Jan. 2017, www.ideelart.com/module/csblog/post/352-1-richard-diebenkorn.html.
- Dario, Ruben. "A Roosevelt/To Roosevelt." *Songs of Life and Hope*, edited by Will Derusha. translated by Alberto Acereda, Duke University Press, 2004, p. 84.
- Bancroft, Sarah, and Diebenkorn, Richard. *Richard Diebenkorn*. Abrams, 2015.
Barson, Tanya. *Mira Schendel*. Tate Modern, London: Exhibition Catalogues, 2014
- Brinson, Katherine, Hudson, Suzanne, Lang, Melinda, Prince, Richard, and Wool, Christopher. *Christopher Wool*. Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2013.
- Diebenkorn, Richard. *Seated Woman*. 1966, Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York.
- D'Urso, Beverly, and Berit Brogaard. "Lucid Dreaming and Self-Realization." *Psychology Today*, 4 Dec. 2012, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-superhuman-mind/201212/lucid-dreaming-and-self-realization.
- Ellis, Keith. *Critical Approaches to Rubén Darío*. University, 1974.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Penguin Books, 1976.
- Friedman, Martin, and Bethany Johns. *Sol Lewitt: A Retrospective*. Edited by Gary Garrels, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2000.
- Gaugh, Harry F. *Franz Kline: Art and The Structure of Identity*. Reprint ed., Abbeville Press, 1994.
- Bernstein, Roberta, Lilian Tone, Jasper Johns, and Kirk Varnedoe. *Jasper Johns: A Retrospective*. Museum of Modern Art, 2006.
- Johns, Jasper. *Evian*. 1972, Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York.
- Johns, Jasper. *Something Resembling Truth*. 10 Feb – 13 May, 2018, The Broad, Los Angeles, CA.

Lodish, Harvey F. *Molecular Cell Biology*. W.H. Freeman and Co., 2013.

Montagu, Jemma. "The Surrealists: Revolutionaries in Art & Writing." *The Surrealists: Revolutionaries in Art & Writing*, Tate Gallery, 2002, pp. 15–15.

Neruda, Pablo. "Cuerpo De Mujer." *Twenty Love Poems & a Song of Despair*, translated by W.S. Merwin, Penguin Books, 2004, p. 3.

Schendel, Mira. *Graphic Objects*. 1967, Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York.

Twombly, Cy, and Jonas Storsve. *Cy Twombly*. Sieveking Verlag, 2017.

Twombly, Cy. *Hero and Leandro (A Painting in Four Parts) Part II*. 1984.

Wool, Christopher Wool, and Gonzalez-Torres, Felix collaboration *The Show is Over*, Offset lithograph, 1993.

Mario C. Sam

Graphic Design • Illustration • Fine Art

www.mariocsam.com

Education

2018 MFA, Studio Art, Towson University, Towson, MD (expected)
2002 BFA, Illustration, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD

Experience

2013 - Current Graphic Designer, Art Services, Towson University, Towson MD
2012 - 2013 Freelance Graphic Designer & Illustrator, Baltimore, MD
2005 - 2012 Creative Manager, Transamerica Insurance & Investments, Baltimore, MD
2003 - 2005 Art Director, Communication Experts, Baltimore, MD

Group Exhibitions

2018 MFA Thesis Show, Towson University, Towson, MD
2016 MFA Exchange, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Co
2015 Section 1, Creative Alliance, Baltimore, MD
2014 Crossing Channels, University of Dundee, Dundee, Scotland, UK
2014 Small Works, Atomic Books, Baltimore, MD
2013 Untitled Show, Milk & Honey, Baltimore, MD
2012 One Love, Creative Alliance, Baltimore, MD
2011 Baltimore Love Project, The Windup Space, Baltimore, MD
2010 Salon Show, The Windup Space, Baltimore, MD
2010 Love is All, Silo Point, Baltimore, MD

Recognition and Publications

2012 CMYK Magazine, "Top 100 Creative", Sausalito, CA
2008 - 2011 CMYK Magazine, Sausalito, CA
2005 - 2007 Best in Show, Insurance & Financial Communications Associations, Toronto, Ontario, CAN

Clients

Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake
Parks & People Foundation

HOME Residency
Baltimore Love Project
Baltimore Symphony Orchestra
World Relief
Section.1
Baltimore County Government
Maryland Food Bank
Baltimore Office of Promotion & The Arts
Johns Hopkins University
School 33 Art Center
Transamerica Insurance
Monumental Life Insurance Company
Progressive Insurance Company
Commonwealth Insurance
Virgin Group

Teaching

2016 TA, 2D Process, Towson University, Towson, MD

2005 Visiting Teacher, Mount Royal Elementary-Middle School, Baltimore, MD

