TECHNIQUES AS A FOUNDATION BUILDS ARTISTIC CONFIDENCE

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Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the
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By

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ABSTRACT

TECHNIQUES AS A FOUNDATION BUILDS ARTISTIC CONFIDENCE

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As an elementary and middle school art teacher, this art-making research has implications for my teaching. I have learned much more about watercolor painting techniques, which can be passed on to my students. I have found that my increased learning of the artistic process can also be carried over into the classroom.

I have explored watercolor painting, which was an unfamiliar medium to me a couple of years ago. I selected ten paintings that show my development in watercolor painting as I learned the techniques and became more comfortable with the medium. My subject matter reflects specific places in Sylva, Bryson City, and the Western Carolina University campus that I found personally beautiful or interesting.

I will discuss the processes of choosing the subject matter and of designing the compositions. I will describe my process of painting the images in watercolor. My influences from art history and the artistic guidance from my professors are explained in this thesis as well. After discussing the ten artworks, I will reflect on the possible future directions for my painting.

While working on this body of work, I have discovered the value in finding beauty in the places that I live and work in. I would like to seek ways to help my young art students see beautiful or interesting imagery in their environments as a possible source for artistic expression.

Above all, I have found that an artist needs a foundation in techniques to build confidence and lead to successful art-making. While learning techniques and experimenting with watercolor, I gained the confidence to continue using this medium throughout my graduate studio classes. I will reflect on ways that I can help my students and future students learn techniques as a foundation for building their artistic confidence.

INTRODUCTION

Graeme Sullivan explained, "Research in art education involves asking questions and seeking answers that allow us to better understand how to make art, study art, and teach art" (795). During my thesis painting courses, I asked myself how I could improve my watercolor painting skills and how I could develop my style. I also asked myself how I could express my viewpoint of the beauty of specific places in my environment through watercolor. I wondered what I could learn from watercolor artists from art history. Finally, I questioned how I could apply all of my learning from the process of painting and reflecting toward my teaching in the classroom. I found that overall, a foundation in techniques leads to artistic confidence.

This thesis paper will reflect on my artistic process of learning and using watercolor techniques. Experience in these techniques gave me confidence as I looked for subject matter and experimented in new directions. This research and art-making process will influence the ways that I teach about art media to my current and future students.

CHAPTER 1:

ARTISTIC PROCESS

Watercolor Painting

The soft layers of watercolor seemed to be the best for showing the beauty and peacefulness of the landscapes and quiet places that I chose for my subject matter. I became interested in watercolor painting during my first graduate painting class: Introduction to Watercolor. Before taking this class, I mostly used acrylic paints and I sometimes used gouache paints.

After learning some of the basics of watercolor painting, I knew that this was the medium that I wanted to use for my next two painting courses. I liked the way someone can look at a watercolor painting and see all the layers the artist used. In "The Art of Watercolor: a Brief History," Stanford archaeologist Michael Shanks explains "Watercolor derives its beauty from the fact that the paint is transparent."

I like that watercolor paintings really show the history of the process in making the artworks. The viewer can often study a painting and figure out which techniques the artist used to create it. I also like that there are so many techniques in watercolor painting. I enjoyed learning each technique and gaining more confidence in my painting. The variety of available techniques can also lead to a lot of experimenting.

I am inspired by the watercolor paintings of John Singer Sargent. In his painted scenes from his travels he used so many interesting marks and techniques. It seems like

he could turn any scene into a beautiful image worth noticing. Art historian Trevor Fairbrother explains that Sargent's watercolor paintings may have ordinary subjects, but that "his true subject matter was the process of painting itself" (140).

Watercolor painting became especially popular in the English School in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Smith 138). However watercolor was used as early as 100 A.D. when Chinese and Japanese artists painted landscapes on silk and handmade papers (Shanks). This versatile medium will produce long-lasting artwork as long as permanent pigments and high-quality, acid free papers are used (Smith 139).

Landscapes

Most of the paintings in my thesis exhibit series are landscapes. English art critic John Berger explained, "When we 'see' a landscape, we situate ourselves in it" (11). When I look at landscape paintings or photographs that I think are beautiful, peaceful, or interesting, I feel like I am actually at that place.

According to art historian Albert Elsen, art is a record of man's interaction with nature. Landscape art has value not because of the geographical information that it gives, but "because of the way these places were seen, felt, and thought of and then given aesthetic form" (190). I intended for these paintings to express the way I felt about the places depicted.

Images of Solitude

The paintings in my series represent peaceful, quiet moments enjoying the beauty of nature and my local surroundings-from the Western Carolina University campus where

I have spent many years as a student, to rural landscapes in Sylva where I live, to a waterfall in Bryson City where I work. The artworks have a theme of solitude. Author Pier Santini explains that "Just because we seek in outdoor nature a relief or counterpoint to our daily lives, we like it to be as far as possible divorced from human activity and the signs of human presence" (22).

Solitude is defined by <u>Psychology Today</u> editor Hara Marano as "the state of being alone without being lonely…a time that can be used for reflection, inner searching or growth or enjoyment of some kind" According to Marana, experiencing the beauty of nature requires solitude. I think a solitary person can focus on and appreciate the beauty of nature without distractions. The theme of solitude in my W.C.U. paintings is ironic because the campus is usually heavily populated with students, though in my paintings it is empty.

<div align="center">The Creative Process</div>

These paintings are based on reference photos that I took while searching for beautiful and interesting places in my environment. Researcher Patricia Leavy explained that no matter the medium, all art is a "product of the time and place in which it is created, as well as the individual artist who is an embodied actor situated within the social order" (216). My paintings are a product of a full-time elementary/middle school art teacher who worked on them as assignments for graduate classes. These artworks reflect images from the W.C.U. campus as it was in the summer of 2011, as well as images of local places from Sylva and Bryson City.

At the beginning of this process, I looked for interesting combinations of geometric and organic shapes. I planned possible compositions while taking the photos and later cropped them if needed through my Iphoto computer program. Some of the photos were taken or cropped in such a way as to show a vast landscape, increasing the feeling of solitude. The sketches for these paintings were based on the photographs that I took.

During the planning and sketching process, I changed many of my photograph's compositions to better show the beauty and peacefulness of a place or to make it more interesting. I usually sketched the focal point and the horizon line first. According to researcher Leonard Shlain, the horizon, the orienting line of all perspectivist art, is the most crucial stripe on a canvas" (105).

After the watercolor paper was ready with a light sketch, I began laying down washes of color on the main shapes in the design. Unless I was using the wet-on-wet technique, I would need to physically walk away from the painting at that point. The layer needed to dry because adding more right away would cause the colors to mix and turn to "mud." Therefore, each painting involved a pattern of painting and waiting, painting and waiting.

The stop-and-go process of watercolor painting was a very different method of working than what I was used to. In the past, while using acrylic paint or drawing media, I would work until I finished or until my schedule forced me to stop. Working continuously was not possible with watercolor paint, and this led me to stop and reflect much more while I was working on each painting.

While painting, I usually referred to my reference photograph frequently. This seemed especially important when I was working on paintings of specific places, as in some of the W.C.U. paintings. However, as I became more comfortable with using watercolor, I looked less at the photographs and became more led by the color and technique possibilities in each artwork.

CHAPTER 2:

ARTWORKS AND INFLUENCES

Figure 1: The Beauty of Threes

Groups of threes first caught my attention in this scene behind the campus recreation center: the three windows, the three doors, and the three horizontal sections. It surprised me that the backside of the center had such an interesting design. This scene also had an interesting contrast of geometric shapes (sharp-edged windows and building walls) and organic shapes (Japanese maple tree, bushes), and artificial colors (turquoise windows, brick-red building) and natural colors (sap-green grass, Hookers light green trees, raw sienna mulch).

The Beauty of Threes is the first painting that I did while trying out my new higher-quality Windsor & Newton watercolor paints. While becoming familiar with the

colors, I experimented with watercolor techniques. Below the turquoise windows, I glazed ultramarine blue on top of the crimson red. Because I had learned the wet-on-dry technique in watercolor class, I knew the importance of letting one layer dry before adding on to it.

Figure 2: Gazing Upon the New Fountain

I have always thought fountains were beautiful and peaceful. Even in paintings, such as John Singer Sargent's The Spanish Fountain (Figure 3), fountains have these qualities. When I photographed the campus fountain, it had only been operating for a few weeks. I thought that the concentric circles around the fountain made an interesting composition. The surrounding red bushes in the foreground seemed like an audience watching the moving water. The alizarin crimson bushes are intended to invite the viewer to look at the fountain with them.

The warm-colored bushes and mulch in the foreground create a "central focus" and the cool colored background implies distance (Doherty 28). The foreground is painted more thickly with some dry brushing. I experimented with the salt technique to

create texture in the mulch around the bushes. The mountains in the background are a cool light ultramarine blue that enhances atmospheric perspective

I used a bit of light cadmium orange in the fountain water to contrast with the mountains. I added this contrasting color because Professor Eldridge had explained that impressionists used barely-visible dabs of complementary colors to make parts of a painting stand out against the background.
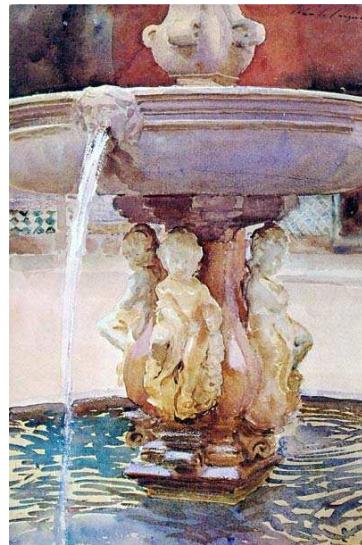

Figure 3: The Spanish Fountain

Figure 4: <u>An Early Walk to the Bell Tower</u>

On most days, the U.C. lawn is a very busy place. But on a summer morning, it is a quiet and peaceful place with only the sounds of chiming bells and birds chirping. In <u>An Early Walk to the Bell Tower</u>, the sidewalk leads the viewer's eye like an arrow to the bell tower. The alizarin crimson and burnt sienna colors on the bell tower and the mulch contrast with the Hookers green light of the grass and the trees.

Like in many of the compositions, I tried to place the focal point (the bell tower) in an interesting place. The authors of <u>The New Encyclopedia of Watercolor Techniques</u> explain the rule of thirds: "Divide the painting surface into thirds horizontally and vertically, then place your focal point at or near one of the focal points where the lines intersect" (Craig and Harrison 136). After I divided the paper in this way, I placed the bell tower at the top right line intersection. Placing the bell tower in that intersection

helped the tower become a focal point, yet still encourages the viewer's eye to move throughout the composition.

Figure 5: <u>The Catamount Greeter</u>

The catamount statue is one of the first images of W.C.U that many people see when they pull into campus. I have always thought the statue was beautiful. This is partly because I love animals. He stands alone, watching over clusters of flowers that the landscaping crews change by the season. The majestic statue reminds onlookers that they are in the mountains and that there is a strong mountain heritage here (see the sign behind the statue).

By this point in my painting progress, I had gotten much more familiar with the Windsor & Newton watercolor paints. With more confidence, I enjoyed the process of painting many small organic shapes of different green colors among the flowers. I also began putting shadows in with purple. Professor Tapley explained that many watercolor artists used some form of purple in their shadows. While researching watercolor artists, I saw examples of this in the art of John Singer Sargent, such as in Figure 3.

Figure 6: <u>The Old Bridge</u>

This old bridge overlooks a refreshing stream of water. Ever since coming to college in the mountains, I have loved the look and sound of streams. Visiting this bridge is a peaceful break from the busy W.C.U. campus. Norton Dorm in the distance is the only indicator that this scene is even on the campus.

A challenge in <u>The Old Bridge</u> was showing the moving, reflective water. I painted many layered glazes of raw umber, raw sienna, and sap green. The unpainted sky reflection leads the viewer's eye to the bridge. A bridge over water may have appealed to me as a choice of subject matter because as an art teacher, I am familiar with Monet's <u>The Japanese Bridge</u> (Figure 7).

Figure 7: <u>Bridge Over a Pond of Lilies</u>

Figure 8: <u>Going for a Walk</u>

<u>Going for a Walk</u> was my last painting in the W.C.U. series. When I chose the subject of the WCU track, I thought that it was a beautiful place. The track has a beautiful backdrop of mountains and sky. To me, beautiful images have peaceful or have appealing colors or shapes. When I think of the track, I remember breezy evenings walking the loop with a friend or alone and enjoying the view of the setting sun. My intention in painting an image of the track was to express the beauty of this place through soft, calming

watercolors. However, this painting turned out to be more interesting than beautiful. To me, interesting images capture my attention because of something unique or because of a hint of mystery.

I began painting the track image with the wet-in-wet technique for the sky and layers of washes for everything else. During the process of painting, the layers of color that I put down were brighter and bolder than I had planned them to be. The painting began to take on an intense, stormy look. I became interested in the shapes, especially in the bottom half of the composition. The shapes reminded me of a close-up view of the tread design on the bottom of a running shoe. I outlined the shapes for emphasis.

A person's shadow in the bottom left corner leads the viewer into the composition and toward the track. Even though this is a shadow, it is the only reference to a person in all of my paintings in this series. I think this person keeps the space from looking too lonely.

Going for a Walk shows a different painting style than my previous paintings. Painting this was an experience in being willing to try something different, even if I was not sure I would like the results. This painting ending up being not beautiful to me, but instead the painting became interesting.

When Larry Rivers asked fellow artist David Hockney if he would prefer his work to be thought beautiful or interesting, Hockney's answer was beautiful. Hockney then said "perhaps the most beautiful paintings are beautifully interesting" (224). Many of Hockney's paintings are beautiful and interesting.

Some of Hockney's landscape paintings have a slightly distorted perspective because of a high angle viewpoint such as <u>The Road Across the Wolds</u> (Figure 9), <u>Garrowby Hill</u> (Figure 10), and <u>The Road to York Through Sledmore</u> (Figure 11). I think that Hockney's <u>Garrowby Hill,</u> with its high vantage point and bright colors, influenced my <u>Going for a Walk</u> painting. <u>Garrowby Hill</u> is on the cover of <u>Art: A Personal Journey,</u> an art textbook by Davis Publications that my middle school classes use, so I see it often!

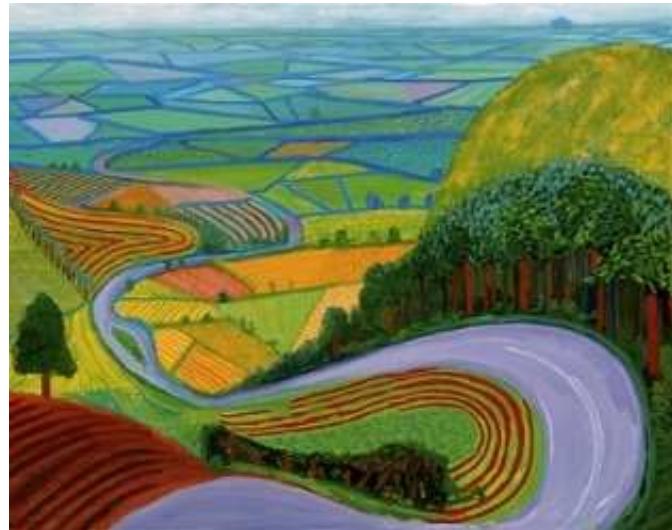Figure 9: <u>The Road Across the Wolds</u>

Figure 10: Garrowby Hill

Figure 11: The Road to York Through Sledmere

Figure 12: <u>Driving Down the Mountain</u>

<u>Driving Down the Mountain</u> shows the peaceful view at the top of an uninhabited

mountain property in Sylva. This place is best viewed during the winter months. In the

summertime, weeds overgrow the road, making it difficult to navigate.

Professor Laboray recommended this composition out of my reference photos

because of the interesting fractured layout. I also really liked this layout. Like <u>Going for a</u>

<u>Walk</u> (Figure 8), this painting shows the influence of David Hockney's paintings. A road

in the foreground leads into the rest of the composition, which echoes <u>Garrowby Hill</u>

(Figure 10) and <u>The Road to York through Sledmore</u> (Figure 11).

In <u>Driving Down the Mountain</u>, fog rises between mountain layers. The organic

leaf shapes on the winter trees were inspired by the loose style seen in Chinese Brush

painting. I knew that I did not want to paint every leaf, so I showed the leaves grouped

into organic shapes.

The middle ground mountain layer shows wet-in-wet ultramarine blue, cobalt

blue and Hookers green light. The foreground is done in warmer sap green and cadmium

yellow. I experimented with the splatter technique in the road to create a rough gravel texture. I noticed that when I became more confident in some of the basic techniques like wet-in-wet and wet-on-dry, I was more willing to experiment with other techniques like splattering.

Driving Down the Mountain was initially very light all over, which flattened the image. Professor Laboray encouraged me to show more depth through a more detailed foreground. With his suggestion, I improved the foreground by adding darker values and more detailed, grassy textures.

Figure 12: Sky Beauty

Sky Beauty is inspired by a view in the same place as the one featured in Driving Down the Mountain (Figure 12). While I was walking around the property, looking for inspiration, I kept noticing the sky. The soft, moving colors of the sky remind me of the wet-in-wet watercolor technique. I wanted to try and reflect the beautiful and peaceful morning sky colors of the sky.

The sky takes up most of the composition in this landscape. In <u>Sky Beauty</u>, I used the wet-in-wet and wet-on-dry techniques with layers of ultramarine blue, cobalt blue, magenta, and cadmium yellow. Professor Laboray suggested darkening the foliage in the Hookers green light foreground, which helped add depth to the painting.

Figure 14: <u>Fall Tree</u>

I enjoyed the non-representative colors of the sky in <u>Sky Beauty</u> (Figure 13) so much that this tree painting began to take an abstract quality. The leaves were bunched together in organic shapes painted in sap green, Hookers green light, and magenta. Soft ultramarine blues and violets fade into the soft tree colors.

Shlain explains that Impressionist artist Claude Monet was more interested in the "massing of colors" than in the geometry of shapes (112). Monet began with color instead of ending with it and he blurred the edges of objects. In Monet's art, the colors of objects became more important than the objects themselves (174).

I am really enjoying starting with a reference photograph but not relying on it too much. Influenced by Monet and other impressionists, I laid on colors that were not always restricted to the shapes of the object represented.
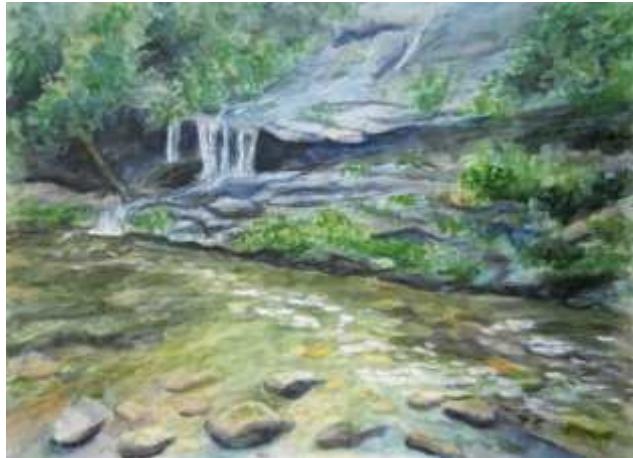

Figure 15: Toms Branch Falls

Waterfalls, like fountains, are very beautiful and peaceful to me. Toms Branch Falls, located in Bryson City, is my favorite waterfall. Professor Laboray suggested trying out compositions that led the viewer's eye into the work. He recommended looking at compositions by watercolor artists that I admired. I looked at John Singer Sargent's Venice series (Figure 16) and noticed that Sargent often used wavy line water ripples to lead the viewer's eye to the focal point. In Toms Branch Falls, I used white gouache to make a shimmering path to the falls.

Figure 16: <u>Venetian Canal, Palazzo Contarini degli Scrigni e Corfu</u>

Future Directions for Painting

In my future paintings, I would like to develop more interesting compositions that show better depth and contrast of values. Professor Laboray suggested, "Future work may challenge the viewer with compositional arrangement or subject." He explained that "plein air and watercolor are full of romance and nostalgia," and that I might want to consider "subject matter which is contrary to those principles." An example he mentioned was to paint a fast food restaurant or parking lot in plein air watercolor. This type of subject matter sounds like an interesting direction that I may consider pursuing.

After researching David Hockney's landscape paintings, I am interested in studying them more. I like their bright colors, high viewpoints, and interesting patterns. His interesting style, with its bright colors, could be an inspiration for more local paintings

CHAPTER 3:

CLASSROOM APPLICATION

Watercolor is one of the main art mediums used in most elementary and middle school classrooms. My students use water-based media for many of their projects. Therefore, watercolor was a great medium for me to learn more about during my graduate painting courses. Watercolor is often described as easy to learn but difficult to master. Students can quickly learn some of the basics of watercolor painting. Through my classes, I have learned more about watercolor painting and techniques that I can share with the students. I hope to apply not just what I learned about techniques, but also what I learned about the general process of art making.

Art critic and historian James Daichendt explained, "Teachers who embrace their own artistic aptitudes and value the connections between studio and classroom can create a classroom experience that utilizes individual art making interests" (37). Through my studio work I really appreciated that I was able to work with watercolor paint, even though this medium is often considered less permanent and less desirable than oil or acrylic. Working with the material that I was interested in, I also got to choose subject matter that I was interested in. In the art classroom (as in any classroom) students will have more motivation and interest in subjects and materials that they choose.

While I got to choose my medium and subject matter, my professors offered artistic guidance and feedback along the way, as explained in the previous pages. Collaboration can lead to much better ideas. In the classroom, if students are willing to

consider suggestions from me or even their classmates, their artworks can improve or become more interesting than if done in a solitary effort.

From my experience with watercolor painting, I have learned that having a foundation in techniques is an important way to build confidence in students. Experimenting during the introduction of a medium is important in order to feel comfortable with that medium. After experimenting and learning some of the basic watercolor techniques in Introduction to Watercolor Painting, I was better equipped to paint the large paintings in my thesis series.

When teaching my elementary and middle school students, I would like to give them a foundation in techniques of different art media. For watercolor, students would need to learn basic techniques such as wet-on-dry, wet-on-wet, dry-brush, lifting and more. I would like to pass on Professor Eldridge's advice to step back once in a while and let the work dry. Other art media involve different techniques, but each medium offers learning and experimentation for students. Elementary and middle school art classes are an important time of learning art techniques, balanced with opportunities for creativity and expression.

As I worked, the pre-painting process of planning showed me that I usually needed time to plan out the composition-whether simple or detailed. Watercolor paint especially needs this because a watercolor artist works from light to dark and usually "reserves" white areas in the paper. This reminds me that sometimes students need time to plan out paintings with thumbnail sketches and drawings.

Students can learn art-making processes from other artists and then apply them and change them according to their own needs and styles. In my classes and research, I learned about possible techniques, styles and compositions by looking at the artworks of John Singer Sargent, other Impressionist artists, and David Hockney. I think that as an art teacher flooded with images from art history, I probably have many influences of which I am not even conscious.

In my research, I learned about Bronx art teacher Rikki Asher, who guided her students in an art-making program in which they rediscovered their local environment (33). After learning about past and contemporary artists who were inspired and influenced by their city's environment, Asher's class explored their neighborhood and surroundings (35). In the classroom they created artworks inspired by their impressions of their surroundings.

Figure 17: Student artwork. Brush and ink, from memory.

Through this art making, Asher's students "created new views of a familiar world" (37). Students were able to express these views in a variety of media and over multiple art projects. Asher observed that the students "developed positive ideas about

self-image in relation to their surroundings" as they developed their creations (34). As an outcome, the students developed a greater appreciation for their neighborhood through an "aesthetically enhanced awareness of their environment" (37).

Artist Lynn Sondag wanted to "discover inspiring experiences in common circumstances and familiar environments" (82). She took walks through her environment looking for new details in familiar surroundings. Through these walks, she found "new aesthetic potential" for her art (82).

While teaching a beginning watercolor course to college students, Sondag encouraged her students to find beauty in their campus environment. Reading about the positive outcomes in Rikki Asher's Bronx art program inspired her. Like Asher, Sondag found that when her students created artworks about their surroundings, this art making helped "form positive connections to the natural environment depicted" (86).

Art teacher Mark Graham also set out with his students to explore the place where they lived through artworks. He wanted to "discover the aesthetics and metaphorical richness" of their Long Island home. Inspiration for his class's artworks came from both the natural environment and the man-made structures in their surroundings. Graham's students' local-inspired art exhibit was a "rich mosaic of different experiences, held together by a new awareness and sense of belonging" (2007).

This research helps me see that when students make artworks inspired by their environment, their aesthetic appreciation for their surroundings will be deepened. I can see this result from my own art-making process. I see the beauty of my environment even more after working on this watercolor series. I would like to find ways to help students

see beautiful or interesting imagery in their environments as a possible source for artistic

expression. However, these students would need a good foundation of techniques in the

art mediums that they choose to use in order to successfully create these artworks.

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