

THESIS

HOUSES OF TRANSITION

Submitted by

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY AMY J. MCMURTRY ENTITLED HOUSES OF TRANSITION BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

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Abstract of Thesis

HOUSES OF TRANSITION

The body of work entitled "Houses of Transition" was the result of having undergone a profound personal change in my life; namely the birth of my daughter. These houses were created over a period of approximately a year and a half. At the time when all of these pieces were being created, My husband and I were experiencing either the emotional roller coaster known as pregnancy, or the first wonder-filled year of our daughter's life. For me, both events proved to be exhausting, exciting, and unfortunately somewhat disappointing.

Throughout my life, I lived with the belief that once I was to become a mother, I would step back from my own life for a bit and take care of another full time. The realization that this was not possible left me initially angry, bitterly disappointed, but eventually lead to resolution of a significant life transition and acceptance of it. The house form became a metaphor bridging the gap between home which was where I wanted to be and the reality necessitated by my life. Color and shape process and textural composition are used to express the emotions of each stage of this transition.

The result is a body of work which mirrors the emotional stages of this significant life change. It is immensely personal while at the same time is somehow universal in nature. All who

have had a child understand the biological and spiritual longing to be with that other little person. And all who have been unable to fulfill this longing understand the pain of that separation. These houses of transition helped me to cope with and understand my own situation.

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This is for my friend and husband, Jerry, who never gave up on me and provided me with more encouragement and inspiration than he will ever know. Thanks for believing in me.

Thank you also to Gene and Eloise Rickard who have enthusiastically supported me throughout my life. Following your lead has been an honor and a privilege.

And finally, Thank you to my daughter Abbygail who has been the driving inspiration for this body of work. My heart goes out to you all.

The body of work entitled "Houses of Transition" represents my thoughts and feelings experienced during a period of transition in my life. Transition means change. Though at times painful, change is necessary to produce growth in one's life. Transition is a universal experience. Although everyone approaches and processes transition in a personal way, experts on human behavior support the theory that there are definite stages which one must move through in order to grow and thrive.

The stages of transition begin with an ending to something and a subsequent sense of loss even if the change was eagerly anticipated. Emotions associated with this phase, among others are grief, resistance, and denial. The second phase can be characterized by feelings of frustration, numbness or anger at the loss of the old and predictable, and the lack of tried and true coping strategies necessary to deal effectively with the new. Transition is realized when change has been explored, synthesized and accepted. As one door closes forever, another opens, leaving the personality altered. A bitter sweet process to be sure.

The experience which I speak of can be seen in the following poem by Robert Graves entitled "Warnings to Children".

## Warning to Children

Robert Graves

Children if you dare to think  
Of the greatness, rareness muchness,  
Fewness of this precious only  
Endless world in which you say  
You live, you think of things like this:  
Blocks of slate enclosing dappled  
Red and green, enclosing tawny  
Yellow nets, enclosing white  
And black acres of dominoes,  
Where a neat brown paper parcel  
Tempts you to untie the string.  
In the parcel a small island,  
On the island a large tree,  
On the tree a husky fruit.  
Strip the husk and cut the rind off:  
In the center you will see  
Blocks of slate enclosed by dappled  
Red and green, enclosed by tawny  
Yellow nets, enclosed by white  
And black acres of dominoes,  
Where the same brown paper parcel---  
Children, leave the string untied!  
For who dares to undo the parcel  
Finds himself at once inside it,  
On the island, in the fruit,  
Blocks of slate about his head,  
Finds himself enclosed by dappled  
Green and red, enclosed by yellow  
Tawny nets, enclosed by black  
And white acres of dominoes,  
But the same brown paper parcel  
Still untied upon his knee.  
And, if he then should dare to think  
Of the fewness, muchness, rareness  
Greatness of this endless only  
Precious world in which he says  
He lives--he then unties the string.

In this poem, Mr. Graves uses the analogy of an untied package to speak of the innocence of a stage of life. He states that children leave the string untied and do not question. When the untied parcel is opened and examined, a reality is called into question and scrutinized. Once this

has been done, the knowledge gained can never be lost and a part of life will never again be the same. Childhood has been transcended.

It is the same with a life transition. What has been stable has been called into question, has undergone change and has somehow produced growth. The progression of "house" pieces in this body of work was the result of having undergone a profound personal change in my own life, namely the birth of my daughter; the first addition to our family.

#### Working with Handmade Paper

Working with handmade paper has been important to me ever since my first contact with the material eight years ago at the home of a good friend and artist. This brief brush with handmade paper and it's asthetic qualities proved to be intoxicating and irresistible. It held an allure and mystery which was undefinable at the time and begged for exploration. Years later while working on the completion of my undergraduate degree in painting, I began to expore the traditional methods of working with handmade paper. The renewed contact with this material filled a void somewhere and led me closer to the successful communication of my ideas and feelings. In a word, it just felt right. I was attracted to the purity of the material, it's soft, skin-like texture, as well as the rich history associated with it.

The history of handmade paper is very much like that of fiber or cloth. Like cloth, paper is made up of cellulose fibers, it's utilitarian lineage paralleling that of fiber arts. Traditionally, both materials have been assigned sportive roles in their relation to mankind. Cloth or fibers wrap, warm, and protect. Paper protects, supports, and communicates. For centuries, both have supported and served people. This aspect of serving when applied to human beings is beautiful and selfless. It's my hope that through my use of handmade paper, it's personal significance and my relationship to it's history, that I too serve people.

#### Process

The creation of one of these works is lengthy and labor intensive. Compositionally, they are made up of paper (100% cotton fibers), sifted water putty, acrylic paint, and metallic pigments. Initially, objects of personal importance which I've found or have been given to me over the years, along with materials such as fabric and lace, plastic and foil, are embossed into large sheets of paper which I use as "stock". Once these large sheets are cast and have dried, they are selectively torn apart and re-cast into a new composition. Sometimes this process is repeated three to four times before the final form is obtained. The result is a complex composition of textures, layers, and

shapes.

Once this phase of the construction is complete, the pieces are sealed front and back with acrylic medium. Water putty is then sifted selectively onto the surface and manipulated with soft brushes, spray water bottles, and my fingers. The water putty is allowed to dry and is then further manipulated with fine sandpaper and scrapers. This process allows for the increased flexibility inherent with the use of both additive and subtractive methods of working. Once this step has been completed to satisfaction, the piece is then painstakingly sealed a second time with more acrylic medium. The piece is now ready to be painted.

#### Evolution of Idea into Art

I've always felt a strong connection to my methods of working. They are the anchors which allow me to stay focused; the rituals or routines which create stability in one area and allow for creativity to blossom in others. It was out of this method of working that this body of work grew.

I had been working with the idea of the contemporary artifact with handmade paper. My life was suddenly and very drastically altered when my husband and I learned that I was pregnant with our first child. Up until this point, I had been able to plan my life in a reasoned and methodical fashion. When this happened, I had to come to terms with

the fact that I would not have the life I had once envisioned for myself. It was with great sorrow and anger that I found myself giving up the dream of being at home with my child on a full time basis during the first years of her life.

This transition to a new way of thinking about life was difficult. The emotions associated with it were strong and frightening and demanded expression. This expression found form and meaning in the shape of the house. The colors used throughout the creation of this body of work serve to mirror my feelings about this significant life change. It was a very visceral and therapeutic process for me which gave me the opportunity to express emotions about circumstances which were beyond my control.

### Transitions

As stated earlier, transition begins with an end to something, bringing with it the emotions associated with or necessitated by a loss. The pieces, Untitled #1, (plate 1), Rock Paper Scissors House.(plate 2), and Armored Plated House, (plate 3), were created during this stage of my own personal transition. In these pieces, tactile quality and color are used to create a rock-like surface. Paint and texture are coupled with tightly composed embossed and hand-manipulated forms to create a wall-like, impenetrable force

which imparts a sense of resistance. These manipulations speak metaphorically about the resistance associated with the initial stage of transition, and serve to keep the viewer involved strictly with the surface of the works, denying access to anything deeper.

The second phase of transition is associated with the feelings of numbness, anger, or denial. In my own personal experience, I choose to express anger. The warm, high intensity colors, and higher value scales of School House, (plate 4), and Chimney House, (plate 5), are subordinated by simple complimentary contrasts and convey feelings of unrestfulness and agitation. In School House, a composition of textural ambiguity is used to heighten a sense of confusion associated with frustration. With the exception of the door shape, forms are not solidly defined, and though this form is recognizable as a door, it is closed.

This piece mirrors my feelings about this stage in my life. At the time when it was being created, my daughter was about eight months old. Circumstances were forcing me to spend less and less time with her on a daily basis, and she was responding to other people with more enthusiasm than she was to me. I felt frustrated, angry, and trapped by the things I couldn't change, and hypocritical about the way I was being forced to raise my daughter, without the full time mother status I had always imagined I would have.

In Chimney House, structural and compositional

ambiguity are combined with various textural elements arranged to question the organizational integrity of the house, thereby bringing into question it's emotional integrity and stability. This is accomplished by placing forms which visually suggest building blocks and symbolically suggest stability, rhythm, and order in relationships which call into question these very qualities. Large "bricks" aren't stacked neatly next to or on top of one another. Instead, they touch at odd intervals and seem to be in the process of falling apart. This piece was once again created out of a need to express agitation, frustration, and anger at the burden of such a seemingly dysfunctional living situation, and out of the lack of order and understanding at a time when I feel my life needed to be made up of these elements.

The introduction of a broader range of color and the use of metallic pigments in the paintings, Crooked Man House, (plate 6), (Louis Undermeyer, 1967,) and Grungy Little Green House, (plate 7) were used to reflect the phase in my life transition when my burdens began to release their oppressive hold and started to take on a redemptive quality. I was beginning to look at my situation as something which I was an active part of and not just something which was happening to me.

My anger began to loose it's edge and my frustration began to loose it's power as issues were examined with more

emotional clarity and objectivity. I saw myself embracing this transition. My explanation for this change of heart is a spiritual release of human control for Divine control. When this happens, what was once overwhelming, becomes tolerable, even beautiful.

#### The Redemption Series

As stated earlier, during the creation of these works meaningful objects are used to produce embossed surfaces. In these three pieces of the Redemption Series specifically, the symbolism of these embossed surfaces becomes very significant. In each of these pieces the circle is a symbol for regeneration, significantly female. It's repeated placement and appearance refers to head, heart, or womb. Other elements are placed to contribute to structural order.

The changing role of color is expressed through multiple layers of paint and metallic pigments which are applied to create a patina-like richness of surface. This surface is carefully wiped away to reveal new depths of information and understanding about my relationships with my work and myself.

Size and shape reflect human scale. Like full length mirrors, these forms of worked metallic surface have been polished to reflect my acceptance of change. My emerging ability to surrender to my situation and it's attendant feelings of peace signal this acceptance. What was once a

burden has now become a blessing.

### Conclusion

Throughout this process, my connection to materials, to the processes used to create these pieces, and to a decision to use the house shape as a bridge between my personal and professional lives, created reliable and secure boundaries within which I could explore the emotions and feelings associated with this life transition. The time lost with my daughter will never be replaced. However, the understanding gained through the exploration of this transition transforms the painful into a thing of beauty and acceptance.

Bibliography

Undermeyer, L. (1967) Editor

Children's Poetry

Golden Books, Racine WI



PLATE 1  
Untitled #1  
Acrylic on Handmade Paper  
10" (W) x 12" (H)



PLATE 2  
Rock Paper Scissors House  
Acrylic on Handmade Paper  
5" (W) x 9" (H)



PLATE 3  
Armored Plated House  
Acrylic and Metallic Pigments on Handmade Paper  
23"(W) x 32"(H)



PLATE 4  
School House  
Acrylic on Handmade Paper  
40"(W) x 28"(H)



PLATE 5  
Chimney House  
Acrylic on Handmade Paper  
38" (W) x 40" (H)



PLATE 6  
Crooked Man House  
Acrylic and Metallic Pigments on Handmade Paper  
9"(W) x 17"(H)



PLATE 7  
Grungy Little Green House  
Acrylic and Metallic Pigments on Handmade Paper  
37" (W) x 42" (H)



PLATE 8  
The Redemption Series #1:  
I Will Not Take These Things For Granted  
Acrylic and Metallic Pigments on Handmade Paper  
38"(W) x 72"(H)



PLATE 9  
The Redemption Series #2:  
I Do Believe.  
Acrylic and Metallic Pigments on Handmade Paper  
34"(W) x 70"(H)



PLATE 10  
The Redemption Series #3;  
Cross House  
Acrylic and Metallic Pigments on Handmade Paper  
30"(W) x 72 "(H)