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# ENCOUNTERS

A Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of requirements

For the degree of Master of Fine Arts

in the Department of Art

The University of Mississippi

Judy Knowles Ford

May 2013

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## ABSTRACT

My work focuses on the ever-changing effects of the natural world. I am interested in creating an essence of these experiences, as I know them.

The paintings combine the elements of the atmosphere together with the physical characteristics of the land. The rugged beauty of the land cannot be acknowledged without addressing the luminescent, vaporous sky. Both are different but part of the whole: terrestrial and celestial. An approaching storm, which envelops the horizon, changes the colors of the land, reflecting the ominous demeanor of the sky. What was once an inviting and sunny place quickly becomes dark and foreboding, and for one moment, the land and the sky become one.

My process develops by losing and finding forms in the paintings, which creates a balance between pure ambiguity and subtle forms of representation. These marks are attempts to recall my faded and almost forgotten thoughts, etched by wash like applications of paint and solvent, which alters and erases portions of the painted images.

I choose to paint in an abstract manner, which brings more attention to my emotive response rather than a depictive. I use metaphors in the forms for familiar characteristics of the landscape, which places the viewers into the center of the unexpected experience. It is my hope that the emotional and mysterious quality of my work encourages viewers to question their sense of balances within the environment.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the wilderness and all good times spent there, as well as to those who  
serve to protect and preserve it.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express my deep appreciation to each and every professor and teacher, in the Department of Art at the University of Mississippi, who gave so tirelessly of their time, knowledge, talent, and, most of all, encouragement in showing me the way

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## I. CONCEPT

My artistic concept originates from my respect for the natural world and its important legacy to our civilization. I chose to use recollections of my time hiking in the high country of the western mountains and experiencing how I now relate to these feelings as one method of recording the ever-changing effects in nature. In this collection of work, I relied on the essence, the reminiscences of these naturalistic events in order to create the pieces that focus on emotion, symbols, and process to tell a story from my own painterly point of view. My paintings celebrate what is different about the natural world: its power and beauty and ironically, its fragility. For this reason, I paint to recall these natural gifts that often are forgotten.

The concept combines my emotional content with the memories of the physical aspects of my experiences. Often, we record our impressions of these changing elements of nature that happen right before our eyes. Perhaps the phenomenon may be as usual as the sun coming through the clouds after a rainstorm. Yet at that moment, the beauty of the light and darkness, warmth and cold, and wet elements all together at once, may catch the viewer's eye and ironically seem as if the land and the sky are one for a brief period of time.

Artists of all disciplines are often intrigued by the passing moments in nature involving the elusive quality of light. Jules Bernard Dahlager, twentieth century Alaskan painter, talked of this mysterious phenomenon, saying: "A nature scene changes from moment to moment as the sunlight shifts" (Dahlager 18). This idea is evident in the experience of watching the sun rise over the land and being fixated by the glow of light on the surroundings, even ourselves, only to



see it vanish as swiftly as it came. This fascination of “split moment” changes in nature captivates and inspires the creative mind of the artist, as well, and often these moments of light are inspirations for works of art. J.M.W. Turner, celebrated English painter, was one of the artists who devoted his life’s work to painting the natural light and its effects. Turner’s watercolor study *The Moon Behind the Clouds* (Plate 1) demonstrates the dramatic effect that the setting sun and the rapid movement of clouds can produce. Turner’s *The Burning of the House of Lords and Commons, 16<sup>th</sup> October 1834* (Plate 2), is often considered a masterpiece.

According to contributor Sarah Taft, “Man’s fallibility in the face of nature was a theme he commonly addressed, but it was the combination of elements: fire, water, and air that appealed so deeply to Turner’s visual sensibilities” (Warrell 111). “It presented Turner with magnificent potential for exploring the sublime qualities of color, light and darkness” (175). Like Turner, there is a long and illustrious history of artists who were intrigued by the concept of light and a sense of awe concerning nature. A prominent painter of the Hudson River School, Albert Bierstadt painted the majesty in the power and beauty of the waterfall, in his *In the Mountains* (Plate 3), as well as light on the landscape. Others followed who were also attracted to the beauty of the land, water, and effects of light. I am also aware of the curiosity and compelling beauty of the sky, the land, the water, and the light, as well as the overwhelming sense of motion, the feeling of uncertainty, and the quickness of change in the natural world. Perhaps the eye of the painter is always looking for this element of beauty, brilliance, strength, and the unknown.

What drives my work is an emotional response to characteristics and to encounters. It is not the view that is most important, but the combination of emotion from the special light and air that surround the place and time in that moment. The painter and the viewer respond to the work on individual terms. As a clear and direct message, it is easier to comprehend; simplification of

the message in the composition eliminates distraction and detail while encouraging response. Tactile qualities show the active marks and brushstrokes that indicate the presence of the painter in the process. I want the viewer to know that I was painting the work and that I am the reality in the painting. Art historian James Elkins talks about this in his book, *What Painting Is*: “The sensations I get from paint come from attending to specific marks and the way they were made” (96). Further, Elkins says: “substances occupy the mind by invading it with thoughts of the artist’s body at work. A brushstroke is an exquisite record of speed and force of the hand that made it. If I think of the hand moving across the canvas, I learn a great deal about what I see.” I agree with Elkins on his interpretations regarding the movement of the paint on the surface. It is indeed a record of that moment and perhaps more. I would add that moods and thoughts also might be present as these marks are made. Certainly, these feelings can combine to cause this effect. With this understanding, I believe emotion continues to be the vital and essential core of my art.

## II. PROCESS

My painting process focuses on abstraction, ambiguity, composition, color, recollection, and personal symbols. As I paint, these elements become important methods for my paintings to develop into my thoughts and comments on the natural world, as I know it.

Space is used as a vehicle in relating to the expanse of the land, as well as the position that is dictated by the viewpoint of the painter. For painting purposes, and my personal opinion, space can be determined by the composition beginning with the painter's perspective and including all pertinent information for the viewer that is suggested in a two-dimensional surface. Such space or depth may help to create an effect of atmosphere in the composition, while the "far-away" vision can give the paintings mysterious qualities. The painting, *Trouble Coming* (Plate 4), focuses on the vastness of the quickly approaching storm, soon to overcome the land, and its characteristics with the changing effects of the troubled sky. This painting displays visual strength by suggesting nature's power and possible peril to those in its path. In addition to the composition, the colors and size of the canvas are selected to impress the viewer with the possibilities of doom.

As I apply paint and erase areas of the paintings, I am continuously losing and finding forms within the images to create a balance between ambiguity and subtle representation: a fine line where abstraction can live. Wash-like applications of paint and solvent alter and erase portions of painted images that suggest these experiences in the natural world. While images in

these paintings are not always clear, it allows the viewer the freedom to make his or her own decisions about the paintings. In another painting, *Firmament* (Plate 5) was painted using transparent washes and wiping away portions of the image to cloud the vision of the viewer.

Was there an image or not?

I often use layers of pigment that indicate history of time and place. Also, large brushes and palette knives move the pigment washes that create vague shapes suggesting fleeting moments and unclear images.

By showing the effect of atmosphere and subtle information to the viewer, many of my paintings rely on a suggestion of places and events. For example, I may place the central motif in the background or middle ground of the composition to evoke an illusion of mystery, while the foreground can set the stage by giving the suggestion of being “up close” and detailed. These spaces in the composition can allow the viewer an advantageous level that will give interest and variety for the enjoyment of viewing the painting.

Personal symbols are found within the compositions, by the use of active mark and brushstrokes, despite their variation. Often the lines are strong and of conflicting color that are obvious in the composition, adding or subtracting to the overarching message, while others are soft and broken and made of the same color as shapes already present. These marks support and give interest to the general mood of the painting. My emotion dictates what I use: where, when, or why. Art historian and author James Elkins comments on this painterly phenomenon: “it is best to think a while about the way that mere paint—mere chemicals—can work so strongly on people’s imaginations” (López-Remiro).

Furthermore, many of my paintings use color to emphasize the characteristics of the subject, such as the sky. The painting *As Today the Trees Turn to Gold* (Plate 6) is a work

filled with a variety of my favorite yellows: gamboge, cadmium yellow medium, Italian yellow ochre, lemon ochre, alizarin yellow, and alizarin crimson, coupled with the complementary colors of cobalt, cerulean, and ultramarine blue. I wanted this painting to feel as if winter was soon to arrive, dashing the beautiful leaves to the earth. The gorgeous blues of the sky are used as a guise that I often see in the fall air. The sky's beauty whispers falsehoods of many lazy days left before the snow's fall. I used thick and thin processes of paint for depth so that the viewer could look into the masses of color and notice the swift wind tearing off the colorful leaves and sending them on their silent way, fluttering and twisting in the slight chill of the air. Of course, this painting was a pure celebration of emotion.

Several blues were chosen for the subject of the hidden, giant powerful force of the falling water in the work titled *Force and Gentleness: All Together at Once* (Plate 7) which displays a high perspective view that seems to take the breath away. It is the imagination of an encounter not often seen: the raging power of water racing from the wooded cliffs down the river bank where the sound is deafening to the ears and the spray of the liquid explosion drenches the viewer. The work is painted in a limited color palette of carefully chosen grays and purples. It is visually "sliced" open with multiple shades of cool blues that mix, mingle, and separate, while dividing the long, vertical surface with the downward flow of the water. This composition was clear and simple, yet I wanted the viewer to feel the power of the beautiful and terrifying downward, racing water. I also wanted viewers to be visually challenged and to wonder about this giant water encounter. There is little else to distract the viewer's attention in this painting, as the composition, the palette, and the textured effects all relate to a singular message: the power and grace of the waterfall, found deep in the woods far away from civilization. The sides of my paintings are unfinished, revealing raw brushstrokes and shapes of color left during the painting

process; I leave these to show the history making of the work. Leaving these subtle details that continue onto the sides brings focus to my process; also, leaving information for the viewer can allow the viewer his or her involvement in the painting. I also enjoy seeing these effects materialize, as often subtleties in the paintings are surprises to me because the process is always consuming my attention.

I find my process to be an exciting and technically challenging area of painting. As I progress in my understanding of the reactions and relationships of oil pigment, its color and the application, I hope to realize the vitality, the response, and the power of the medium all at my fingertips.

### III. MATERIALS

Since variety is found in the natural world, I choose to support my concept with the variety of wood and cloth. Each choice gives the final painting its unique surface and also allows me the opportunity to paint these effects as I really experienced them. In these encounters, so many possibilities happened that it seemed natural to choose more than one surface for my paintings. When one painter executes the entire exhibition, there tends to be similarities. To lessen this, the variety of surfaces allows the entire work to remain visually active and interesting to the viewer and also for the artist as the work was painted. Using one surface and then another gave me the option of selecting the right surface for each painting and each experience, keeping the process fresh and interesting.

My knowledge of the surfaces gave me an opportunity to know what the outcome of each might be. Of course, this is not always absolute and that is part of the challenge of painting. Briefly, the prepared birch panels give the painter clear, hard edges, and precise marks that shows the painter's influence on the painting. Due to the slow process of absorbency into the wood, there can be factors of time involved in creating washes of paint that change the process of making stained edges as the pigment dries. This is part of the "letting go" and not having control of the painting at all times. I find it difficult to do so but rewarding in the final product.

The soft quality of woven canvas surface allows the pigment to gradate and absorb into the cloth, leaving behind subtle marks of pigment drying that are not made by the artist or the brush. The same process on wood can work entirely different. Even though the techniques are similar, these two surfaces give tremendously different final effects. In my exhibition, I can place a canvas work next to a painting on a birch board and view exactly what I stated in the last sentence.

Most painters have distinct choices on painting dimensions and how they should be hung. The renowned abstract painter Mark Rothko preferred large paintings to be hung low, preferably six inches from the floor, where viewers could almost touch the surfaces. He remarked that these large works offered the viewer an opportunity to feel they were within these paintings (López-Remiro).

I also used variety with the dimensions, as many paintings worked more effectively on one size more than another. It was encouraging and easy for me, as a painter, to pick and choose according to the topic. The sizes range from 48" x 36" to 72" x 40" which allow each painting ample surface to develop the individual experiences as I painted them.

My brushes were also chosen meticulously, so they would give the right effect for each work. I chose my "favorites," which include traditional bristle brushes, and my familiar, the synthetic mongoose. Experimentations with large palette knives were successful on canvas, and I did enjoy seeing their unusual and free marks. Of course, many supporting sizes were also used when needed. I chose each brush for its function: from large washes and images to liquid flowing pigment that left no brush marks. Each brush or tool gives a unique mark meant to create just the right element in the composition. Most painters know what their tools can accomplish and how to use them for that purpose, and it does not take long to realize what each paintbrush will do. I was looking for more variety in the mark-making steps, so I taped my brush



to a long handle to see just what the experiment would produce. I needed a loss of control in order to give the paintings freedom and excitement through my brush strokes and I found it. A repetition of marks is not always desirable and finding another way of making shapes is exciting to see. I used other unconventional tools to apply the paint to the surface, such as a large trowel for masonry and broken wooden rulers to move the paint around in a different way than brushes or knives. Art making is certainly not always formulaic; therefore, artists are often driven to use their instincts to allow for personal discovery.

#### IV. INFLUENCES

As with most artists, I search for inspiration from those who will offer encouragement through their artistic practices. What an experience it is: to read the words of famous artists and feel as if I was there with them, although they may have lived before I was born. It is a legacy that is passed on to another generation of artists, those before and those who will come after. Actually, there are many who share their thoughts and actions to preserve the creativity in life every single day. So many who do come from different disciplines cross the boundary lines and, by reading and researching, they contribute to one another. These are the influences that touch my work and inspire me.

I look to the painters to see just how I might learn from their art and their thoughts about their own processes. I am interested in their lives and times and those who influenced them. Joan Mitchell (1926-1992) ranks as my most influential artist. She made her mark as an American Abstract Expressionist during the times of DeKooning, Pollack, Hofmann, and Rothko. I admire her talent and strength to paint and keep up with the greats of art at that time, and today she is still considered a major influence in the history of American art (Whitney Museum of American Art).

“Though her paintings are abstract meditations on light, color, rhythm, and space, Mitchell focused on remembered landscapes using emotion rather description” (Whitney Museum of American Art). I relate to the energetic brushwork of her paintings and her poetic responses to the natural world, as well as her use of color to convey the messages through her

paintings. Like Mitchell, I draw from my emotions concerning nature and also the intense experiences I remember.

Mitchell's compositions "almost always are informed by imagined landscapes or feelings about places" (Livingston 41). "Within these invented compositions, Mitchell allowed color to become the main subject of many of her paintings. She once stated: "What excites me when I'm painting is what one color does to another and what they do to each other in terms of space and interaction" (33). Author Yvette Y. Lee comments that Mitchell uses the juxtaposition of colors to emphasize her feelings in her most identifiable large works, *La Grande Vallée Suite*. This work, a total of twenty-one paintings, is filled with rich, beautiful colors and unrestrained gestures and brushstrokes (68). It is most interesting to me that Mitchell was never in that spot she so beautifully painted. Mitchell's friend, Gisele Barreau, told the artist of the time she and her cousin Jean-Philippe played as children in this place they called *La Grande Vallée* (68). Perhaps the painter's desire to paint this place that she had never literally seen was inspired by childhood memories of Mitchell's sister, Sally, and Barreau's cousin who had recently both died of cancer (68).

Joan Mitchell's work inspires me as an artist and how I think about the experiences of nature as I see them. In my paintings, I use the strengths of colors and their relationship to each other to pique the curiosity of the viewer as they look at the compositions. Often my work will focus on an overall image that seems not to stop at the edges of the painting or perhaps another subject will be placed in the background, with scale reduced and the palette dulled to suggest far-away distances. I am interested in using the principles of space, color, and emotion as I paint.

Painter Brian Rutenberg, a master of color and composition, is a young painting star. He

paints about the priceless days as a child spent with his brothers in their father's boat, exploring the rivers and out banks of South Carolina (Amenoff). An abstract painter, Rutenberg uses these recollections as inspiration to create dazzling paintings where color and emotion reign. It is not difficult to follow these two painters, using my own feelings of encounters with nature and my love of color.

Rutenberg is a native of South Carolina's Low Country, and his painting subjects are based on his childhood adventures in the lands between Pawleys Island and Charleston. Artist Gregory Amenoff speaks of Brian's paintings as being a "shimmering body of work, and to get lost in one of Rutenberg's is to get found in your own reverie" (Amenoff).

He uses the brilliance of color shapes that have meaningful relationships to each other and places them in compositions that also have vague, misty areas that give mystery to the paintings. These mysterious areas seem as if the viewer can float through space, right into another world and beyond. For me, looking at one of Rutenberg's paintings is similar to going back in distant time, to a place remembered and cherished. I am influenced by his use of personal symbols, such as the way he paints the trees, the subtle hills and woods, and the variety of personal and gestural marks that are made on the canvas. The paintings are masterpieces of color and, and his powerful works certainly influence my color and color relationship choices. Perhaps this is one reason that Mitchell and Rutenberg inspire my work in a way that uses my own experience from times in the natural world. For me, using color and emotion brings the magic of the past to life once again.

## V. CONCLUSION

There is a good deal of wisdom that can be expressed when looking back on the days now passed. Three years ago, I hoped for great change in my work without understanding how that process would or could affect my paintings and, more importantly, affect me as an artist.

Elated and eager to begin my journey, I thought of learning new techniques and ways of solving problems in making my art. I hoped for quick answers to difficult questions and ways of avoiding the “terror” of the blank canvas. Mid-toned compositions were another problem. I remember one day, in my school studio, finding “busy work” to keep me occupied rather than face the empty painting surface. For me, the hard lessons that come from procrastination took the full three years to understand and to overcome: or at least come face-to-face with the problem. Even now, I have to remind myself of what I have learned in order to combat procrastination.

During the program, I came to realize with a full understanding that quick fixes are just that: quick fixes. They are not valid painting principles, and they do not hold up under the pressures of time and experience.

There were methods designed to face and change my misconceptions, and graduate school was the place to learn these lessons. The accomplishments took hard work and a lot of it. Professors encouraged multiple paintings to be worked on at the same time to help with unity and presentation and to combat painter’s block. Consequently, my previous struggles became more realized and managed and even the fear of making mistakes eventually subsided. There

were so many painting to begin, develop, and finalize and so little time. I did not have time to be afraid; I was simply too busy.

The research of artists and their lives were a source of information and, interestingly enough, comfort. Reading about particular painters, their works, and their times was beneficial to my growth during these past three years. My paintings reflect this new understanding and appreciation. I will continue this research throughout my career because these artists speak to me, my work, and to the message I have about the natural world, as I view and paint it.

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PLATES

## PLATES

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Plate 2. *The Burning of the House of the Lords and Commons, 1834*. Tate, London. *J.M.W. Turner*. Ed. Ian Waddell. London: Tate, 2007. Print.

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Plate 1. *The Moon Behind the Clouds.*



Plate 1. *The Moon Behind the Clouds.*

Plate 2. *The Burning of the House of the Lords and Commons, 1834.*

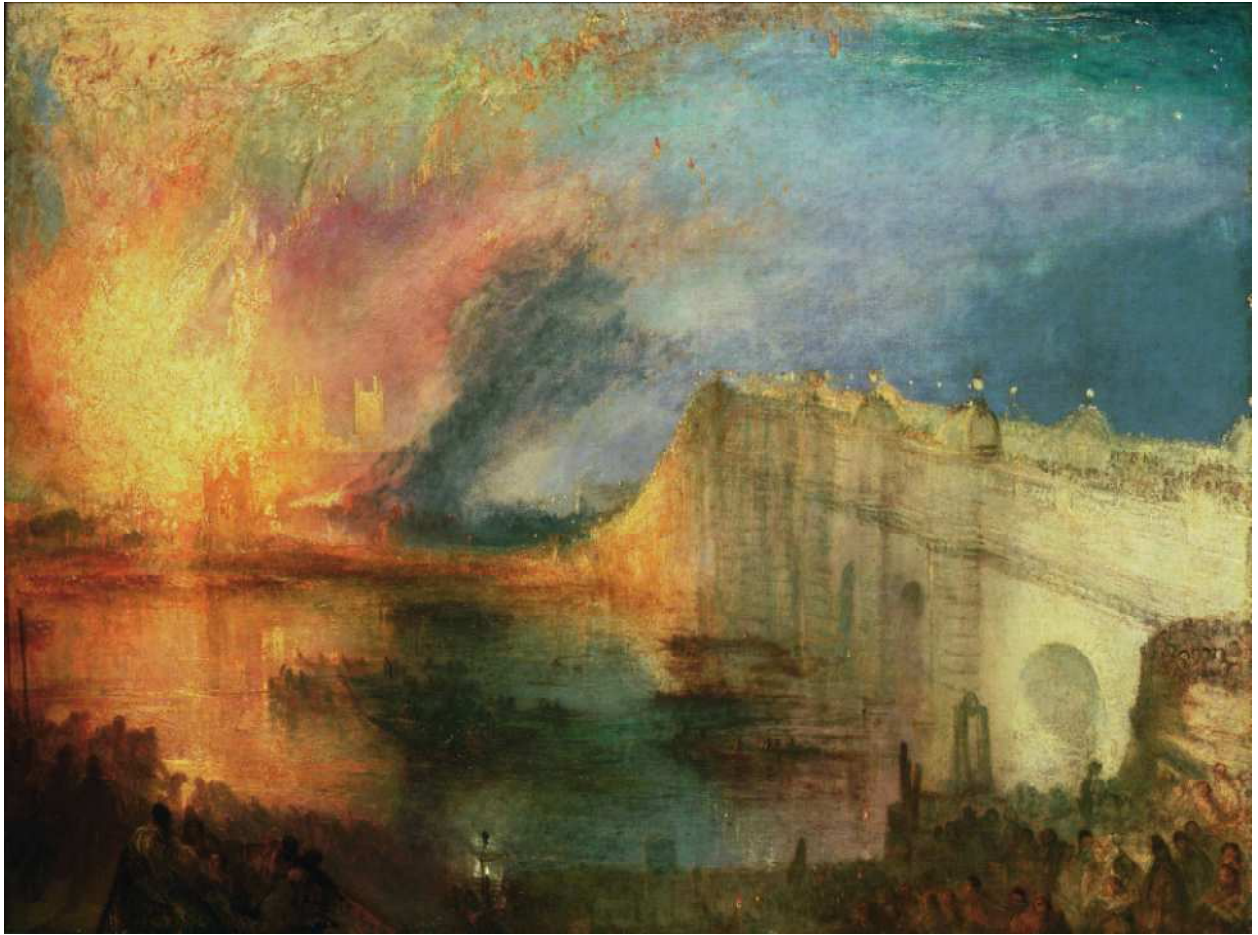


Plate 2. *The Burning of the House of the Lords and Commons, 1834.*

Plate 3. *In the Mountains.*



Plate 3. *In the Mountains.*



Plate 4. *Trouble Coming.*



Plate 4. *Trouble Coming.*

Plate 5. *Firmament.*



Plate 5. *Firmament.*

Plate 6. *As Today the Trees Turn to Gold.*



Plate 6. *As Today the Trees Turn to Gold.*

*Plate 7. Force and Gentleness: All Together at Once.*



Plate 7. *Force and Gentleness: All Together at Once.*



Plate 8. *The Thaw.*



Plate 8. *The Thaw.*

Plate 9. *Fall's End.*



Plate 9. *Fall's End.*

Plate 10. *Snow Coming, I and II.*



Plate 10. *Snow Coming, I and II.*

Plate 11. *Drought.*



Plate 11. *Drought.*



Plate 12. *Impact.*



Plate 12. *Impact.*

## VITA

Judy Knowles Ford, born in 1941, was raised in her hometowns of Mobile, Alabama and River Forest, Illinois.

Ford was a textile artist and president of Judy Ford Fabric Art in Jackson, Mississippi, from 1980 to 2005. She developed unique fabric painting techniques and produced custom, hand-painted textiles in the interior design industry for home furnishings. Also, she created site-specific artwork for hospitals, hotels, and casinos.

Ford received a B.F.A. from the University of Mississippi in 2010. Presently, she lives in Oxford, Mississippi, and is married to Dennis Ford, an attorney. They have two daughters and two grandchildren.