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Creating Liminal Spaces

Silas Brook Spellman
West Virginia University

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Creating Liminal Spaces

Silas Brook Spellman

**Thesis submitted
to the College of Creative Arts
at West Virginia University**

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Fine Arts in
Painting**

**Naijun Zhang, MFA., Chair
Alison Helm, MFA.
Michael Sherwin, MFA.
Jason Lee, MFA.**

School of Art and Design

**Morgantown, West Virginia
2014**

**Keywords: Liminal, Painting, Process, Modular
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ABSTRACT

Creating Liminal Spaces

Silas B. Spellman

The work described in this thesis was completed as partial fulfillment for the Master of Fine Arts degree, West Virginia University. I describe how I work with a variety of media, tools, and materials to search for expression within the painting of the liminal space between the real and the imaginary. This document contains a description of the flexibility of the work to be displayed in various and transient formats. It also discusses how I encourage viewer participation on several levels and can place the viewer between the space represented in my art and the world we experience and perceive as real. It is work that seeks to serve as a bridge or space between of the many dichotomies we experience in life.

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Creating Liminal Spaces

Introduction

The work completed for this MFA program is about the passages between the physical and mental places we inhabit. It is designed to encompass boundaries between real and imaginary spaces, to provoke perceptions of these borders in our lives, and explore our relationship to art. It is about the relationships between abstraction and representation, art and its audience, and the spiritual and the mundane. My art seeks to express and explore the liminal space between creation and destruction, abstraction and naturalism, reality and illusion, mental and physical, the space within and the space without. Liminal space is described as “... where boundaries dissolve...” and where or when we prepare “to move across the limits of what we were into what we are to be”.¹ These dichotomous concepts are often considered to be in opposition, with acceptance of or reliance on one diminishing or canceling the other. My art attempts to express an understanding of a reality that requires coexistence of dichotomous relationships, and the space between them, occurring simultaneously. It is work that serves as a bridge or space between of the many dichotomies we experience in life.

One of the important questions that drive my creative process is how can I make and present paintings that express, in an accessible way, a broad spectrum of experiences and feelings? I look for ways to engage the viewer both visually and physically to

¹ Turner, Victor. *Drama, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Societies*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974.

heighten their perceptual experience. Artists attempt to direct the viewer's focus by framing subjects they feel most strongly about. I feel that life is like a randomly ordered collage of experiences, and I try to reflect this in my art. All subjects are open for exploration and the way we present our perceptions of our chosen subjects is paramount.

Painting should not deny its reality as a collection of matter that is representative of some other entity or idea. A painting should retain its connection to the world beyond its substance while consenting to its reality as a construct of mind and matter, opening the potential for the viewer to look within and without from a different perspective. Helena Kontova expressed how many contemporary artists are more concerned with how a painting is made more so than what a painting is in *Expanded Painting*.² She states that, “What [a painting] is will then emerge from how it is.” My work is an overt expression of what it is and subtle implication of how it is, inviting exploration into what it may be. How each painting is created is a significant aspect of the work, but how they are displayed is also important.

The Building Blocks Series

To get a clear picture of my work it is necessary to describe the development of the “Building Blocks” series, and then the process, concepts, and works related to liminal space that grew from it. The “Building Blocks” series is constantly evolving with only a modicum of predictability. To describe it properly I must explain its origins, its recent forms, and its current development.

Initially, with the “Building Blocks” series I did not make work about a particular

² Kontova, Helena. *Praguebiennale2: Expanded Painting*. Prague: Giancarlo Politi Editore, 2005.

thing but began by embracing my eclectic tendencies and interest in collage an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of my artistic language. My original intent was to set constraints on format that would allow me to see reoccurring themes and decipher the methods that produced the strongest results. I set up a flexible system within a consistent format. Each panel or canvas was 10 by 10 inches by one and one half inches thick. I created a piece every one to two days, with each piece drawing on my everyday experiences. I allowed myself to revisit pieces, making adjustments, or nearly covering an image and starting over, sometimes leaving only hints of the original. During this time I employed multiple mediums and styles, allowing myself to experiment. This resulted in a large variety of work (fig 1,2,3,4)

After forty pieces were completed, I began to explore the ways in which they might be displayed. While creating the pieces, I thought of them as non-precious parts of a process, as parts of a larger whole. I placed the forty completed pieces on a wall in a grid pattern. The multiple mediums and styles kept the work from being unified or related in any visible manner. The grid display also discouraged physical interaction by the viewer, which was something I was interested in creating. The question then arose, “How can I make the paintings interact with their environment and encourage a higher level of viewer participation?” The problem of how the paintings related to each other also needed to be addressed. Each piece was meant to be a separate response to the world but I wanted them to be viewed or read as a series. This lead to another question, “How can I create works that, although on their surface seem unrelated, will feel connected and parts of a unified whole?” Traditionally, the art object has been seen as something isolated from the world around it, carefully contained within a defined space or frame.

Displayed in this traditional way, art assumes a place of importance, claiming superiority to its utilitarian surroundings. I sought a form that would support the idea that art should be an everyday experience, a part of our lives, engaging the viewer by drawing the viewer within and around the work. Removing the grid from its static position on the wall was my first attempt to answer these questions. To facilitate this move I looked to Minimalist sculptors like Carl Andre (b. 1935) and Sol LeWitt (1928-2007) who were using standard units in sequences and mathematical combinations to promote the idea that the work is part of a much larger system that the viewer can imagine and complete in their mind (fig 5,6). I was also interested in how these artists used the repetition of a modular unit in a way that informed the viewer's interaction with the work.³

My solution was to use multiple squares to build a freestanding structure with interior and exterior space. The use of multiple pieces forming a larger structure forces a change in the viewer's relationship to the work as they approach and explore it. As previously noted, individual pieces vary in both materials and content, but can be viewed/displayed as parts of a whole. Each 10 by 10 inch work is created and assessed as a single piece. Chosen pieces are then added to the growing, three dimensional, structural grid, becoming a social part of the space. In this form the Building Blocks series becomes a collage of materials on the outside, and a collage of paintings on the inside (fig. 7,8).

The Viewers Relationship To The "Building Blocks" Series

My observations of people viewing the "Building Blocks" piece as structure

³ Lucie-Smith, Edward. *Artoday*. New York: Phaidon Press, 1999, p. 79-81.

suggested that viewers accepted the structure as a single entity, built of multiple pieces. The freestanding structure entered the environment in which it was displayed and encouraged viewer participation. I watched viewers approach the structure from outside the piece and observe the backs of the pieces as parts of a wall - a perforated room made up of squares. The wall may be read as a three-dimensional collage of materials in the form of a grid. Closer inspection of the piece by the viewer gave them a glimpse of the paintings, which constitutes the inside of the structure, seen through perforations in the wall made by leaving open squares. Discovery of the surface treatments within the structure enticed viewers to enter, engaging them in a more intimate physical and visual experience. The viewer within the space became part of the display, seen through open squares in the wall by people outside the built space. Viewers outside the space seen from within seemed isolated from the intimacy of the experience found inside the structure. This interaction by viewers within the built space added a surprising visual element to the structural piece and seemed to increase viewers' relationship to the work.

A viewer inside the built space of the structure may experience a number of things. As the structure is assembled, the paintings are placed in random order to avoid promoting my own preferences and allow viewers to create their own relationships between the works. The grid system, with all squares touching other squares, paradoxically creates a sense of confusion, introducing a sense of liminality as the viewer considers how the pieces relate to each other. Some pieces may seem connected conceptually, others visually, but many appear unrelated and compete for attention. Individual squares might attract the eye of the viewer, while the openings between pieces might draw the line of sight outward, to the world outside the structure. Faced with an

abundance of information, the viewers are forced to do their own conceptual and visual editing. There is no single focal point inside the structure and no intended viewing hierarchy. Each viewer will have a different experience based on his or her own aesthetic and degree of physical participation. The design of the structure provides opportunities to view pieces across the space at traditional eye level and from ground to overhead height. People move in, out, up, and down within the built space as various squares attract, repel, invite, and provoke.

While inside or outside the structure the open squares become frames for the space observed through the piece. After some time inside, these open squares become frames for the exterior space. Thus framed, exterior, “real” space appears to assume a two-dimensional aspect, becoming as flat as the paintings around them, creating the illusion of the exterior environment as two-dimensional (fig. 9). This illusion reverses conceptual reality. It pushes the viewer into a liminal space as the outside world is seen as two-dimensional and the art, in its form as a structure, is three-dimensional reality. It is a visual and conceptual demonstration that art is not an object separate from the world. It speaks to how art can effect our perception of the world and, more precisely, how art can effect how we perceive the world.⁴

The multiple squares combined in a grid as parts of a structure become a unified entity. The built structure is undeniably physical with its intrusion into the space inhabited by the viewer, and can be seen as a symbol for a living, organic structure. The exterior wall of the built structure, like our body's surface, has order. The grid is analogous to the symmetry and order of the body, and suggests only hints of a complex

⁴ Weschler, Lawrence. *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

interior. The abundance of visual imagery in the work's interior encourages selective acceptance and exclusion of its many parts. The complexity of the body allows it to selectively take what is desired from the outside world while sheltering what is inside from undesirable elements.

Developing The Door Series

While working on the “Building Blocks” series and researching related concepts, my individual paintings began to change. The 10 by 10 format and quick response elements remained the same, but the imagery, process, and materials began to relate to the mental and physical spaces that we encounter every day. My process began to become more consistent as well, allowing for the creation of a series of works that were more closely related to each other visually and referenced the structure that had been their inspiration. These works had intentional relationships that allowed them to be displayed in a more traditional manner, such as in a row on the wall at eye level, or they could be incorporated into the “Building Blocks” structure. At this time I was researching the work of artists whose work exists between abstraction and representation. I was heavily influenced by Gerhard Richter (b. 1932) and his concepts related to how destruction is just as integral to the process of painting as creation (fig. 10).⁵ I also looked to the work of Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986) and Peter Halley (b. 1953). Both of them created abstract paintings that were inspired by real things. For the most part, they are stylistically very different, but in some of their paintings I see a strong relationship to the concept of liminal space (fig. 11, 12).

⁵ Storr, Robert and Gerhard Richter. *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002, p. 295-297.

Each painting made in relationship to ideas of liminality includes explicit but subtle remnants of the creative process. On the sides of each work, elements of the process, such as saw marks, fingerprints, and drips, are left exposed to the viewer. I want viewers to discover the creative process while also considering aspects that appeal to them in a particular work of art. Exposing elements of the creative process makes the substance of each work more accessible and invites inspection, consideration, and speculation about the hands that created the work.

Many of my recent works incorporate a door, or a rectilinear shape that references a door, as a trigger or “key” that causes the picture plane to fluctuate between abstraction and representation.⁶ I choose the shape of a door because it is a simple shape that is a powerful metaphor for liminality, strengthened by its real function as an object in space that connects and separates at the same time.

“the door is an entire cosmos of the half-open... it is one of the primal images, the very origin of a daydream that accumulates desires and temptations... If one were to give an account of all the doors one has closed and opened, of all the doors one would like to re-open, one would have to tell the story of one’s entire life.”⁷

Interesting events and stimulating experiences may happen at the boundaries between things. Pieces that contain an opening, or door, invite the viewer to look into or out of the perceived space into another, different yet equally ambiguous space (fig. 13, 14, 15, 16). Creating these flat spaces begins with the surface on which each painting is built.

I began to experiment with the size of my surfaces in order to explore how it

⁶ Goffman, Erving. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1974, p. 40-81.

⁷ Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. Maria Jolas. Presses Universitaires de France, 1958, p 222-224.

would affect one's perception of space and the physical relationship to my work. I kept the square in ten-inch increments, and scaled up to 40 x 40 inches. Many things changed with this increase in scale. The way that the works were made changed from how I had to move around them to the size of the tools needed to work on them. Their relationship to the viewer also changed. They were no longer the small intimate works that make up the "Building Blocks" series. However, they were still related in many ways. The process and content remained the same, so they still related to the modularity of the small works, but they needed to be displayed in a manner that related to other work without overpowering it. My solution was to hang them in a large grid on the wall that denied their individual visual weight while referencing the modularity apparent in the rest of the display (fig. 17).

The Process of the Door Series

There are two things that Chuck Close (b. 1940) once said that inform my process. Firstly he said, "Inspiration is for amateurs- the rest of us just show up and get to work." I feel a strong work ethic is crucial to the artistic process. The other observation of his that has affected how I work is that "Process, in a sense, is liberating ... you don't have to reinvent the wheel everyday."⁸ This led me to consider how I could create uniformity within my work through consistency of process. Even though my subjects may change, each work can inherently relate due to its method of creation.

I build my supports out of common construction materials such as pine two by fours, plywood, tile backer, oak, poplar, oriented strand board (a type of plywood), or

⁸ Fig. Joe. *Inside the Painter's Studio*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009, p. 42.

Masonite™. Each panel is square which denies any predetermined/subconscious reading as either a landscape or a portrait. The first pieces created for my MFA exhibit were all relatively small, measuring 10 by 10 by one and one half inches. I enjoyed the intimacy of the viewing experience provided in pieces of this dimension and considered them as parts of larger pieces that would exhibit the process of painting as an end in itself. Surfaces made in 10-inch square increments created unity and a sense of order between pieces. This sense of order may make viewing the work more pleasurable. An underlying sense of order allows the viewer to assign a feeling of meaning and reason in the work.

A key component of my medium is a thin-set mortar used in construction as a tile adhesive. The mortar is made of calcium carbonate, water, resin polymer, inorganic fillers, zinc oxide, and mineral spirits. Starting with this concrete like material, I add pigments from many different sources. The choice of what type of pigment to add depends on the effect I wish to create. I use dry pigments, such as ink toner for vibrant colors and iron oxide and other ceramics powders for earth tones. I use wet pigments in the form of acrylic tube paint, latex house paint, or oil paint. Wet pigments lengthen drying time and allow for a variety of effects that are very different from those achieved with the powders. The mortar itself is a dull white or grey, so white must be added to achieve a high value. Sprinkling or spraying water will also lengthen drying time and reactivate partially dry sections of the work. Adding water can also be used to create textures through bleeding and resist, similar to its effect on watercolor paper.

To apply and manipulate my “paint” I use common construction tools, traditional painting tools, and re-purposed construction materials. The construction tools include but are not limited to chisels, screwdrivers, drywall knives, framing squares, sandpaper, and

concrete trowels. Traditional painting tools include brushes, pallet knives, pencils, and paints. I have also made my own tools, mainly scrapers or long straight edges, using various construction materials for dragging the paint and creating textures. I have become familiar with construction tools and materials, during my 15 years of experience as a carpenter. The use of these tools and materials personalizes the process of building a painting. My methods and tools also embrace an element of chance and bring a sense of playfulness and immediacy to the work.

I work with each piece supported by a floor or table to avoid dripping and running and to facilitate movement around the piece. After applying mortar and medium, while each layer is drying, the work is moved to an upright position on a wall or easel. This allows me to assess the piece and relate to it in the way it will be viewed on completion. Dry time for the mortar depends on additives, the surface it is applied to, and the ambient temperature. The mortar has a working time of about 30 minutes before it dries to a point where additional media cannot be incorporated into that layer. This relatively quick and somewhat unpredictable dry time requires me to work quickly and intuitively with each layer. As I work I think about color and value relationships and their emotional impact. I create visual cues with line, shape, and tone that allow and deny the perception of spatial depth within an abstract field.

Many of the construction materials used as a surface in my work come with a grid printed on them. I begin each piece by applying a grid to the surface if it does not already have a printed grid. The work evolves as I respond to the grid, building up abstract spaces until I find a composition that retains a sense of flatness and at the same time allows for the perception of depth. I then respond to the surface, focusing on limiting the amount of

information needed to express a sense of space. Once I am satisfied with the abstract field I have created, I look for ways to add the shape of a door as the symbol that causes the picture plane to fluctuate between abstraction and representation.

Conclusion

In the “Building Blocks” series I want to entice viewer participation and change perceptions of space in order to engage each viewer more deeply in the experience. Parts of the process, such as obvious scraping, splattering, and sanding, along with deteriorated transfers, or incomplete images, are left exposed in the individual pieces. When combined, the exposed backs, the low level of finish, and apparent physical process, all give clues to how each element was developed. The squares are attached to each other with screws that are readily visible. This may create a perception in the viewer that this is a humble structure, not pristine, or precious, or permanent. In a way the squares are like Lego™ blocks. They can be arranged to fit a variety of environments. The form of the built collage can change each time the work is installed. A large number of squares create the opportunity for a greater variety of structural forms. There is an element of play involved, not only in the construction, but also in the interaction that occurs when the viewer is able to go inside, put their head through a hole, or crouch down to get a better look at something. This invites and encourages imagination and participation in and with the art.

In each individual work, I am not painting an absent or non-existent object in space. I am building an object that references absent or non-existent space. I am working between sculpture, which actively participates in this world, and painting, which

transports us from it through two-dimensional representation. Together they put us between here and there. We are in liminal space. It is a game of illusion and meditation. We look for the power of an artistic experience that can evoke the pleasure of seeing.

I do not think of this work exclusively as minimalist or abstract. Like James Turrell's (b.1943) sky spaces, all that is seen is real but dramatically altered by your perspective and expectations. Your imagination is sparked because you are seeing reality in a new way- in a minimalist or abstract manner. It is a process of using one's medium to frame a version of what is already there or to frame the results of materials and processes that evoke the imagination.

Everyone brings his or her own preconceived notions and relationships to a gallery. Controlling a person's perception is impossible, but giving them a comfortable system from which they have the opportunity to see elements of the world from a new perspective is an achievable goal. One of the interesting things about the "Building Blocks" series is that it takes a step away from the traditional idea of content as being something that is found within the work itself. The content is in the experience, and that experience will be different for each person. Full appreciation requires that one be involved with the work, that one approaches, enters, and explores it. And it may be that we are not the same person as we were once we've passed through a door, crossed over a boundary, and moved in and out of one space and in to another.

List of Figures

1. Silas Spellman, *Jeremy Fisher* (from the Building Blocks series), 10"x10", oil on board, 2012.

2. Silas Spellman, *Band Aids* (from the Building Blocks series), 10"x10", mixed media on tile backer, 2013.

3. Silas Spellman, *Pop-its* (from the Building Blocks series), 10"x10", oil on canvas, 2012.

4. Silas Spellman, *Old Door* (from the Building Blocks series), 10"x10", mixed media on board, 2013.

5. Carl Andre, *144 Magnesium Square*, Magnesium tiles on floor, 1969.

6. Sol LeWitt, *Corner Piece #4*, white painted wood, 1976.

7. Silas Spellman, *Building Blocks series* (as a structure, exterior view), dimensions variable, mixed media, 2012 -.

8. Silas Spellman, *Building Blocks series* (as a structure, interior view), dimensions variable, mixed media, 2012 -.

9. Silas Spellman, *Building Blocks series* (as a structure, detail), dimensions variable, mixed media, 2012 -.

10. Gerhard Richter, *Claudius*, 311x406 cm, oil on canvas, 1986.

11. Georgia O'Keeffe, *My Last Door*, 48"x84", oil on canvas, 1956.

12. Peter Halley, *The Grave*, oil on canvas, 1980.

13. Silas Spellman, *Steve's Door* (from Door series), 10"x10", mixed media on board, 2014.

14. Silas Spellman, *Red Cat Door* (from Door series), 10"x10", mixed media on board, 2014.

15. Silas Spellman, *Wallpaper Door* (from Door series), 10"x10", mixed media on board, 2014.

16. Silas Spellman, *Door in the Mountain* (from Door series), 10"x10", mixed media on board, 2014.

17. Silas Spellman, *Untitled* (Large works from the Door series displayed in grid format, viewed from inside Building Blocks structure), 128"x128", 2014.

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Artist Statement

Silas Spellman

Liminal space *[definition]*

“Psychologists call “liminal space,” a place where boundaries dissolve a little and we stand there, on the threshold, getting ourselves ready to move across the limits of what we were into what we are to be.”⁹

Currently my work is about the boundaries between spaces, both real and imaginary, and how we perceive these borders in our lives and in our relationship to art. It is about the passages between the physical and mental places we inhabit. It is also about the process of building a painting that is simultaneously about abstraction and representation. I am looking for a painting that sits on the threshold between the real and the imaginary and bridges constructs generally thought of as being in opposition. I am interested in how we live in the doorway between creation and destruction, abstraction and naturalism, the mental and the physical, the inner and the outer, reality and illusion.

Process and materials, as well as design, are important to my art’s context in relationship to built environments as well as natural spaces and how we perceive them. I build my supports out of common construction materials. The first marks on the surface are a grid, which I feel creates a sense of order and safety through which we can comfortably view the unpredictability of nature. Each panel is square which denies any predetermined reading as either a landscape or a portrait. Panels are also made in 10-inch increments making them modular, so the work becomes part of a whole that may be rearranged in order to reconstruct meaning and aesthetic responses to the work. I mix my medium using a thin-set mortar that is used in construction as a tile adhesive. I then add color from different sources, depending on the desired surface treatment. I use anything from acrylic, oil, or watercolor paint to powdered colors such as ink toner, iron oxide, or charcoal, and I sometimes include collage elements such as old wallpaper or leaves. I often begin to apply and manipulate my medium using common construction tools but sometimes turn to traditional painting tools in the later stages.

In terms of the work’s arrangement, the grid, which results from the modularity, acts to create a sense of under-lying order, unifying the work and referring back to the first element of the images. The manifestation of my mental process and the physicality of each work can be exemplified by creating a three-dimensional collage of my paintings that can be rearranged depending on the venue. A large portion of my recent work is a series of paintings related to doors. For me the door is a powerful symbol of the relationships between different aspects of our lives. The door joins and separates simultaneously. It is both a boundary and a bridge. It is liminal space.

⁹ Victor Turner, *Drama, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Societies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1974), <http://aporee.org/parole/work/index.php?char=1>.

Silas Spellman
314 Opekiska Rd.
Fairmont, WV 26554
Sspellm1@mix.wvu.edu

Exhibitions

Exhibitor, “Graduate Appreciation Exhibition”, West Virginia University Mountainlair, Morgantown, WV, 2014

Group exhibition, “Confluence”, AIR gallery, Pittsburg, PA, 2014

Group exhibition, “Confluence”, AIR gallery, Pittsburg, PA, 2013

Group exhibition, “Home Grown”, AIR gallery, Pittsburg, PA, 2012

Collaborative graduate exhibition, “Ego, Anti-ego”, Maserose Gallery, Morgantown, WV, 2011

Selected works on display, Maxwell’s, 2011-2012

Solo Exhibition, “Silas Spellman: Painting and Mixed Media”, Zen Clay Galleries, Morgantown, WV, June-July 2011

Selected Works on display, Morgantown Brewing Co., 2010-11

Co-coordinator and exhibitor, Graduate Art Show, Morgantown Brewing Co. Fall 2010

Exhibitor, Morgantown Arts Walk, 2007-2010

Selected works on permanent display, The Riverstone Ale House, 2005-2010

Exhibitor, solo show, Mountain People’s Co-op, 2000

Co-coordinator and exhibitor, Undergrad art show “Under the Den,” spring 1999

Awards

Graduate Teaching Assistant, West Virginia University Foundations, 2013 and 2014 academic year

West Virginia University Creative Arts Scholarship Recipient, 1998-99

Hiram College Student Art Exposition, 1995; received \$500 cash award for painting, honorable mention for collage piece, and student recognition for sculpted bust

Professional Development

Assistant Artist to William Rynolds, for a 72”X192” mural for WV Governor’s Mansion, 2007. Now anticipated to be shown at the WV Cultural Center.

Volunteer, Mon. Co. “Arts for All” program, 1997-2000

Education

Master of Fine Arts Degree, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV, 2014

Bachelor of Fine Arts: Visual Art, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV, 2000, Cum Laude

Hiram College, Hiram, OH, 1994-96