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University of Wyoming

The Relationship between the Written Word and Visual Art
Research Paper & Artist Statement

Madison Pass

Honors Program

Senior Honors Program Project

Prof. Diane Panozzo

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Research Summary

The written word is an incredible tool, and has been used in conjuncture with visual art for centuries. Poems, stories, and descriptions of artworks abound, yet all of these are nestled safely in a separate space, distinct from the artwork they tend to discuss. But the written word itself is an art, as poetry and calligraphy have aptly demonstrated. This paper is a deeper look at the history of these relationships. The relationship between the written word and the visual arts is a complex one that is demonstrated through visual poetry and other mediums. This is completed by looking at the ways that visual art has included or worked written word into the visual art, and not just having something written in relation to a visual piece. In this paper, it is also explored by briefly looking at the history of calligraphy and visual poetry.

For the brevity of this paper, the focus on calligraphy will be limited to Western and Arabic. To begin, let us discuss western (specifically English) calligraphy. English calligraphy is an art form that has been changed by the modern age. However, that is not to say that it has faded. Typing “English calligraphy” into Google brings up millions of results, and almost all of the immediate ones are instructional videos or blogs about how to create calligraphy. This is a surprising discovery, as in this day and age so much media has been digitized. In fact, type face is becoming more and more common, taking a very similar place in art as traditional calligraphy. Traditional calligraphy had a multitude of styles, including Half-Uncial, Insular Minuscule, Caroline Minuscule, as well as a plethora of others. These styles of traditional English calligraphy were most commonly used as ornate decoration (while not inhibiting readability) of very significant texts, like the Bible (Lovett, 2008). This also leads to the fact that in earlier times, calligraphy was not an art form, but the only way to write and create multiple copies of a manuscript. History has seen it of course move into the space of an art form, which is what it is

considered today. Especially in more recent times, calligraphy has been popularized and used in connection with a variety of quotes, and sometimes does inhibit the actual reading of the text for purely aesthetic or embellishment purposes.

Arabic calligraphy has a distinct place because it is very frequently used as more than just an embellishment of words. There are plentiful examples of Arabic calligraphy that show the words and letters are stylized to create a specific visual image, such as the figure of an animal. In ancient manuscripts, traditional Arabic calligraphy has followed a similar path as western: starting as the way to write, and becoming more elaborate as it became more of an art. There are similarities in the early prevalence of calligraphy, and ornate decoration in relation to religious texts. Many early examples of Arabic calligraphy come from discovered Qur'ans (Blair, 10). In recent times there has also been a movement towards typeface, and other digital programs to create new Arabic calligraphy. Moustapha and Krishnamurti discuss the ways that symmetry and reflection get utilized in computational creations of calligraphic art, specifically as graphic design. This is very different from how calligraphy used to be seemingly reserved for things that embodied a much higher register. It also shows ways that Arabic calligraphy has moved into creating more and more intricate designs. In many of the examples cited, the words are indistinguishable, and simply appear as intricate visual patterns. (Moustapha and Krishnamurti, 10-13).

Calligraphy is a perfect example of an instance where the written word actually is visual art, though that is not how it was initially. Nowadays, in this situation, there is not only a relationship; there is complete correlation between the two elements that are so commonly separated. This does not mean, however, that calligraphy is always recognized as, or titled as, visual art. This is likely because the language side of calligraphy is so blatant. While many

would consider calligraphy an art form, this brings an interesting distinction to the surface. This distinction shows that art with such deep ties to language is not as often considered visual art.

William Bohn, author of *Modern Visual Poetry* defines visual poetry as “poetry that is meant to be seen—poetry that presupposes a viewer as well as a reader” (Bohn, 2001). This definition is somewhat limiting because it does allow only for those pieces that can be comprehended and read. In my experience and exposure to visual poetry, I have seen some pieces that were called visual poetry by the artists, where the words were deformed or modified to the point that they were under no circumstances understandable. With the allowance that this definition is limiting, it also helps to narrow the view of what should be included and discussed here. It is also important to acknowledge that Bohn does give some examples of visual poetry that are incredibly difficult to read. In this way he briefly tips his hat at the poetry that relies more upon the form the words have created rather than the words themselves. Here we see one of the complex relationships between visual art and language. Even as a visual art piece, the type of art created by words and language can be debatable. In this way, a person could actually argue that the definition presented earlier is broad, as it allows for the inclusion of poetry both within an image and as creating the image. These are two important distinctions, which I briefly explored when I created visual poetry myself.

The relationship between the written word and visual art, and the written word as art is a complex one to say the least. The examples of visual poetry and calligraphy are in themselves rich in history and tradition. This demonstrates the intricacies of the different ways that words and language can be not only shown to be related to visual art, but included within the category of visual art. It is not enough to merely state this however, which is why in addition to this

portion of my project I created three art-pieces combining visual imagery and the written word to explore the relationship myself.

Artist Statement

Overall Statement

For this project, I wanted to continue exploring, and continue on a project that I had begun while taking *Modes of Cultural Diversity* a little over a year ago. While taking that course, I was exposed to various art exhibits at The University of Wyoming's Art Museum. Among these exhibits was one titled *Language as Art*. This exhibit was a compilation of art pieces by various artists, each of which included some sort of language or written word within the visual artwork. As a student studying linguistics, and various languages, this was an especially powerful exhibit that I found myself drawn to time and time again. I stated in the paper associated with an earlier project: "This exhibit gave me the idea of combining words with visual art to form a complete piece, and not to leave the two segmented apart from one another" (Pass, 2015). It was this exhibit that initially sparked my interest in the relationship between the written word and visual art, and I did complete a small project for this course that briefly explored this relationship, specifically that of visual poetry. This earlier project was also what sparked my interest and inspired me to explore the idea of visual art and written, or language art, being part of the same piece and not separated as is so commonly found (Pass, 2015).

However, I was not satisfied with the short amount of time that I'd had to work on this project, as I had only begun to barely scratch the surface of this complex and interesting relationship. For this reason, I chose to revisit the theme, again examining the relationship between the visual and written arts, and looking beyond visual poetry. With this in mind, I chose to create multiple pieces of art as a way of exploring this relationship, while also doing more research, discussed earlier, into other art that utilizes visual and language elements. Eventually, this led to the creation of two overall art-pieces, which actually numbered three individual

pieces. These two overall pieces that combined language and visual art elements, were titled *Resilience*, and *Landscapes*. *Landscapes* was comprised of two smaller pieces, respectively entitled *Love* and *Hope*. Here is my statement on these artworks, the correlations between written word and visual art that I discovered through their creation, and how I found myself working in and with traditions of art that I had studied in my research.

Resilience



Resilience, pictured above, is a visual art piece that is comprised entirely of words, with a quiet grey and blue pastel background. Right from the beginning of the process with this piece, I decided the entirety of the image would be made from handwritten words. The idea of making my image a woman's blank face with her hair fanned out behind her came almost immediately after that. The words that I used to form the image all fit within the theme of resilience, which is

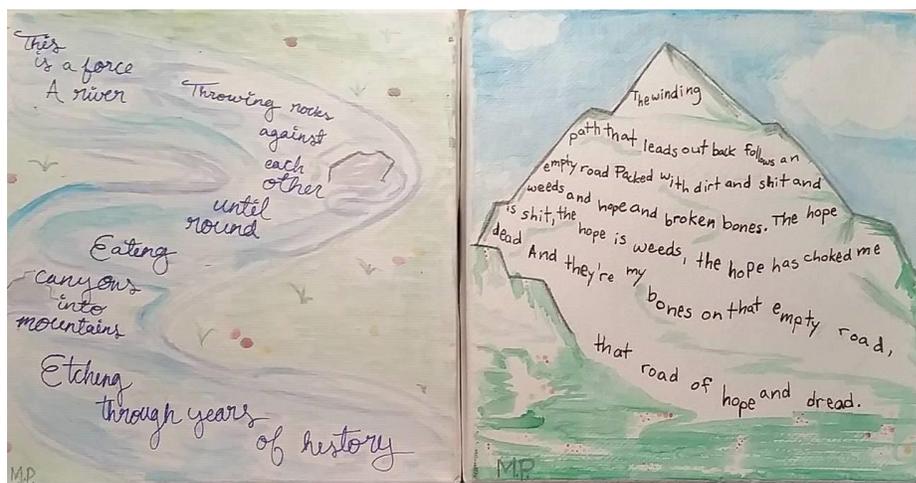
where the title of the piece came from. I wanted to show the words and invisible, intangible aspects that go into a person's performance and embodiment of resilience.

Resilience is an emotion, a state, that is something I feel deeply and personally connected to, so I wanted to focus on the ways that this resilience holds up a person without it necessarily showing. This is why there are no facial details. The figure is enshrouded in anonymity because all you see in the art is their resilience. This is a depiction of the underlying emotion that people cannot see, and I stripped away the face in front of that to show the bare bones of the emotion, and the way the words tie everything about them together. In this way, we are seeing everything that would not be available for people to see at the surface, or face, level. Much of the writing is purposefully obscured so that it cannot be read; this was done in part because this is not visual poetry, and the writing was not something to be read, and also to show the depth and obscurity that an individual may themselves experience in the construction of resilience.

Resilience began as an idea of simple strings of words making a larger picture, making an image of the figure of a woman. It was much later that I decided on the actual words to use in the detailing, and this was one of the biggest differences between this piece and *Landscapes*. The purpose of the writing and language that composes the entirety of *Resilience* is not to be readable; it is to convey a larger meaning than the words alone can. The purpose of the words in this piece is more symbolic, and that symbolism is tied more to the way the words create the image than their exact content, which is actually fairly repetitive. The words themselves were chosen by me, from a list of titles, phrases, and individual words that to me embodied both resilience, and the upholding and performing of that emotion.

In the creation of *Resilience*, I had initially planned on using calligraphy in order to make the language of the outline. I wanted to handwrite, or draw, the calligraphy in a way that they would create the image of the woman's hair fanning out behind her. I had been looking at a lot of Arabic calligraphy to try and see how the letters lent themselves to further shapes and images, and practiced writing in calligraphy for quite some time before I was even comfortable trying to make the words into an image. However, before the first draft was even fully completed, I discovered that using calligraphy to make the image drew too much focus away from the overall image, and so I moved away from working within any sort of calligraphic tradition. This was probably the case because this was my first attempt with making an image out of calligraphy; still I believe that the overall effect would have been very different had I stuck to the original calligraphic representation of the words. After the decision to move away from calligraphy, I began just writing the words in the outline by hand. In this way, *Resilience* began to become something closer to visual poetry, though with the definition Bohn presents, and with how I created the piece, I do not think it completely falls into this genre. This is because while I created this art with a large visual base of words, there was no intention on my part of people reading it. The audience that I created *Resilience* for is largely an audience of viewers, and while I acknowledge that there will inevitably be people who do try to read the words, the words are not a poem, and as such this is not poetry. In this way, *Resilience* moved out of the artistic traditions of both calligraphy and visual poetry, and is something different.

Landscapes



Landscapes is actually two individual pieces. While I mean for them to be viewed directly together, they also both work as standalone pieces. The two images that comprise *Landscapes* are examples of visual poetry. The poems are both about obscure emotions and tying their meanings down with decidedly not abstract images. *Hope*, the image with the mountain, is a use of classic and well known tropes and clichés from both poetry and visual art. These quickly change into an exploration through cynicism about these tropes, and hope itself. This is the poem I wrote for *Hope*:

The winding path that leads out back follows an empty road
 Packed with dirt and shit and weeds and hope and broken bones.
 The hope is shit, the hope is weeds, the hope has choked me dead
 And they're my bones, on that empty road, that road of hope and dread

The content of this poem is much darker than its counterpart *Love*, though it still uses warm and inviting colors. *Love*, the image of the river, is in stark contrast to *Hope*. *Love* is not a dark or cynical discussion of the emotion in question, but rather a moving away from the idea of love as

bubbly, soft phenomena, and comparing it to the violence and changing force of a river. The poem for *Love* is as follows:

This is a force

A river

Throwing rocks against each other until round

Eating canyons into mountains

Etching through years of history

I intended these two pieces to be viewed together to further emphasize the contrast between the cynicism of *Hope* and the literal descriptions of *Love* while both being shown as parts of a landscape that they both are part of. Both of these are emotions and forces that are experienced through a person's life and so both of them are part of the overall landscape of the human experience.

I was inspired to create *Landscapes* when working on poems for a poetry workshop with Diane Panozzo. I was given themes of abstract concepts to write about, specifically love. The initial poem I wrote was about water in general rather than just a river, but exploring the idea of love more, I decided that love as a force was a better metaphor, and rivers were such changeable waters that it seemed an intuitive pairing. From my idea of a river I began to think of different landscapes, and the way that abstract concepts such as emotions are a sort of human landscape. This is where the idea of a visual landscape came from, and as I was working to explore the relationship between elements of visual art, and the written word, creating visual poetry based on the idea of landscapes of emotion and actual landscape scenes was a perfect fit. At this stage in the process, I wanted to create only one, large landscape, where I would include various poems

pertaining to the complex landscape of human emotions. However, when I created the poem *Hope*, I discovered that the context of the two poems was drastically different, and that it would not necessarily be appropriate for the two to coexist in the same landscape. This was what drove me to separate the landscape into *Landscapes*, a collection of two separate visual poems that express very different human experiences, in two very different landscape scenes.

This also brings me to the point that for *Landscapes* the poetry came to me long before the actual images did. *Love* was the first poem to be finished, and *Hope* followed a few days after. This was interesting to me, especially since this was completely opposite from the process that *Resilience*, my other, and separate piece used. In my project, and through these personal processes, I discovered that the relationship between written words and the visual art is slightly different depending on the type of art I am creating. With *Landscapes*, as I had specifically set out wanting to create visual poetry of some sort, creating the poems before deciding on the visual scene they accompanied was an integral step. This stemmed from my treating visual poetry as a visual art that incorporates the words and language at a much more obvious level. This was also due to the fact that I felt visual poetry still needed to be easily readable. I know that this is not an aspect of all visual poetry, and wanted to keep the words as true to their form, and as legible as possible as so much meaning was to be derived from them.

Landscapes as visual poetry is intended for both readers and viewers. This fits into the early definition mentioned by Bohn. This also allows for the consideration of how one interprets readers and viewers. In the process of creating these pieces, the poems came before their visual elements, and so many who would dismiss visual poetry would likely still consider the poems as separate from the artwork. Even with the rich history that visual poetry has, many disregard it, claiming that it is an unimaginative movement by artists who have nothing new to offer. Bohn

addresses this, disregarding it, speaking to the importance of the poems as visual expression (Bohn, 2001). In this way, despite the apparent separation in the creation of the written poems and the landscapes that they reside in, *Landscapes* is irrefutably part of the modern tradition that I discovered while researching visual poetry. While the words are distinct within their environments, there is such deep, symbolic and literal connection between them that they are no longer separate. As part of the same whole the words and images coexist to create the visual poetry that is *Landscapes*.

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