

5-2014

# Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping

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WHIRL-WINDED: STRESSED AND COPING

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

Michelle Elizabeth Colbaugh

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

May 2014

Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
School of Graduate Studies and Research  
Department of Art

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The thesis exhibition *Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping* explores, through the language of painting, the way stress is embedded into our culture and how art can stand as a vehicle for expression of these emotions.

It examines how highly competitive university programs and culturally instilled norms influence and reinforce perpetual stress. The exhibition draws upon personal stressful experiences and utilizes formal techniques used by artists throughout history, employing the image of the human figure and expressive mark making to investigate the cultural pressures for perfectionism. The paintings address the ever-changing communication between the intention of the artist and the viewer's relative understanding of their world based on the principles of their culture.

The work exposes rules embedded in our society that promote the continuation of stress and pressures and advocates the need for change to address the causational epidemic of depression and other illnesses.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The MFA Thesis Exhibition, *Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping*, critiques our culturally embedded need for perfectionism and the resulting stress that affects us both physically and psychologically. Sociologist Corey L. M. Keys in his 1995 study, *Gender and Subjective Well-Being in the United States: From Subjective Wellbeing to Complete Mental Health*, identifies the state of life satisfaction and mental health in the United States as, “Just over one-half (54.5%) of the adult population was moderately mentally healthy” (9). His study also finds the rate of major depression in the US reveals that women are two times more likely to develop depression than men (Keys 2). His studies suggest that this is likely because women often place greater importance on social relationships and therefore are exposed to more social stressors (Keys 2). I will discuss ideas on the art historical subject of the disappearing body and how the modern interpretation disregards gender issues, like in the feminist art of the 1990s, and addresses ideas of trauma and memory that connect to the negative consequences of prolonged stress on the body. He goes on to explain that in 1996, global depression was one of the top five sources of disability and premature mortality, and in fact, by 2020 it is expected to be the leading cause of premature mortality (Keys 9). He considers these stressful factors to be determined by the individual’s circumstances and cultural norms (Keys 2).

This thesis will examine my creative research, which explores through the language of painting the way stress is embedded into our culture and how art can function as a vehicle for expression of these emotions. Chapter Two, Cause and Effects of Anxiety and Stress, examines how competitive university programs rooted in stoic philosophy reinforce our societal emphasis

on perpetual stress. Chapter Three, Formal Strategies and Techniques, draws upon personal stressful experiences and utilizes formal techniques used by artists throughout history like the image of the human figure and expressive mark making to investigate the cultural pressures for perfectionism. To this end, artists influencing of *Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping*, will be referenced, such as Berry McGee whose comic style and graphic imagery allow him to communicate complex meanings through an accessible language. Additionally, it will discuss American conceptual artist Mel Bochner, whose diagonal lines dominate the canvas surface creating a purposeful feeling of intense activity and stress. Finally, this thesis will discuss the philosophy of Relativism and how it creates an ever-changing communication between the intention of the artist and the viewer's relative understanding of their world based on the principles of their culture.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF ANXIETY AND STRESS

Up until the 1930's stress was a term reserved for engineers to explain "the effects of force acting against a resistance" (Selye 45). Then in the mid-30s Dr. Hans Selye, one of the great pioneers of medicine and Director of the Institute of Experimental Medicine and Surgery at the University of Montreal, conceived the well-received definition of stress as "*the nonspecific response of the body to any demand*" (55). These demands can be the result of both positive situations, like an enjoyable birthday party, or in my recent experiences, negative factors such as pressures for perfectionism in graduate school or a loss of a loved one. For this reason, Dr. Selye describes these "stressors", or causative agents, as "*demands*" and the resulting "stress" as the "*nonspecific response of the body*" (51). He calls the entire nonspecific response (stress) the General Adaptation Syndrome, or G.A.S. The syndrome evolves through time in three stages: (1) the alarm reaction, (2) the stage of resistance, and (3) the stage of exhaustion (Selye 38). Dr. Selye goes into much greater detail of how G.A.S affects the nervous system, adrenal glands, and hormones but my interest lies in the emotional responses that occur as a result of stress.

Dr. Selye explains, "Stress shows itself as a SPECIFIC syndrome, yet it is NONSPECIFICALLY INDUCED" (66). By this Dr. Selye means, science recognizes the common symptoms of stress although the reason each of us experience stress is unique to the individual person. Jiong Li and Jorn Olsen, researchers in the psychology of stress, explain why each person experiences stress uniquely, "Both a person's interpretation of an event as stressful or not and his/her response to it depend on one's personality, prior experiences, attitudes, coping capacity, culture, general state of physical health, and genetic susceptibility" (Oxington 55). This

points to the realization that stress is not only a psychological experience, but is also a sociological phenomenon because it has ties to societal factors.

In their book, *Social Stress in the United States: Links to Regional Patterns in Crime and Illness*, Arnold S. Linsky and Murray A. Straus explain, “The events that place people under stress are, for the most part, a result of how society is organized” (3). Their tests link stress to factors in society such as unemployment, cultural norms, beliefs, mental health support, family integration, and number of high school dropouts as well as individualistic factors such as our inability to cope, succeed, and gain financial stability. They explain, “Stress has at least as much to do with the culture of their groups as with the personality or motives of the individuals experiencing the stressful event” (137). Therefore, because our society stimulates perpetual stress, in turn, it also perpetuates ideals of perfectionism because studies have shown the link between perfectionism and mental illness such as stress and depression (Frost et al. 460-63).

Specific factors such as “concern over mistakes” and “doubts about performance” are the circumstances commonly associated with distress in perfectionism (Frost et al. 461-63). Research indicates the high degree of psychological stress in college students is due to the constantly inflated amount of socially prescribed perfectionism (Chang et al. 878-83). We can see that perfectionism and its consequent stress, especially in college students, is shown to be so abundant. Thus, anxiety is perpetuated through the institutional system, and therefore a condition of society. In fact, Linsky and Straus explain the underlying problem with stress in society; “Populations that are undergoing high stress are the very populations most in need of supportive social arrangements and special resources for coping with that stress” (62). One of the examples of America’s broken systems for coping with distress in our society is the act of somatization.

In a different study by Keys and Rachel A. Askew, *Stress and Somatization: A Sociocultural Perspective*, the authors expand upon how the negative associations of somatization, the translation of emotional or psychic distress into physical symptoms that have no identifiable organic cause, and mental health are mitigated by culture (Askew and Keys 129-30). We can relate this term back to Dr. Selye when he illustrates that stress is a specific syndrome but that its cause of induction is nonspecific. This exposes another problem in our American culture for individuals suffering from anxiety or depression because Western medicine focuses on the physical symptoms and less on the psychic distress that patients display when visiting their doctor (Askew and Keys 131). Non-Western cultures see the connection between mind and body and treat both with respect to one another (Askew and Keys 132). Clearly, in our Western society there is a disconnect between the two and solving the originating problem often goes unresolved for individuals struggling with anxiety. Those struggling with stress are trapped within a culture that fosters a stressful environment, while at the same time lacks the medical capability of treating stress and associated health issues.

Askew and Keys explain, “Yet when they [somatizers] present to primary care doctors, they are led through a long and costly series of medical exams, procedures, and, in some cases, unnecessary surgeries that potentially exacerbate their symptoms, and tend to lead only to more questions about their condition” (135). They go on to say, “Even more disconcerting, after their doctors exhaust the range of diagnostic tests available, somatizers are literally confronted by medical staff, friends, and family with the possibility that their pain may be all in their heads” (135-36). This brings to light the socially accepted misunderstanding that stress is inevitably something we have to live with and those who realize their own poor well-being are considered isolated complainers, often suffering on their own without the support from the community.

My personal experience with stress has many sources including relationships, death of a loved one, and finances. But my symptoms of weight gain, frequent headaches, and cloudy memory did not originate until the pressures for success and perfection in graduate school became my main priority. I am not alone in my suffering. The journal article, “Students’ Stress” by Arie Shirom, sought to systematically identify university students’ perceptions of causation stressors in the institutional setting. Among the top stressors, highly competitive university programs and time constraints ranked highest (Shirom 673). The drive to be among the top of your colleagues creates a highly competitive situation and mental well-being often suffers. This cutthroat environment extends to the work environment, and in turn, stress endures as part of our society.

Robert Sapolsky in the documentary film *Stress: Portrait of a Killer*, observed patterns of stress in a herd of African baboons for over four decades. His findings confirm that stress is determined by hierarchical groups especially in societal institutions such as businesses and their subsequent systems of ranking workers (Sapolsky). Sapolsky’s dominant baboons showed clean arteries but the arteries of subordinate baboons in the group had formed plaque buildup. He determined that this is due to the social and psychological stress in hierarchical societies and relates this to the stressful hierarchies in humanized societies (Sapolsky). When we especially look at lower income communities, their life expectancy is lower due to lifelong struggles and stress (Sapolsky).

The Whitehall Study conducted in England found clear evidence that lower ranking in the chain of command leads to higher risk of coronary heart disease due to higher job stress. The study beginning in 1985 follows 6895 male and 3413 female civil servants who are still being observed today (Kuper and Marmot). The study found that because of two central components,

“high job demands (the need to work quickly and hard)” and “low decision latitude (lack of control over skill use, time allocation and organizational decisions)” workers could not moderate the stress due to the high demand put upon them (Kuper and Marmot). This prolonged strain due to the high stress environment in low ranking individuals showed an increased risk in coronary heart disease due to social position (Kuper and Marmot). We can see from this evidence that socially created order reinforces workplace anxiety. The problem embedded in our culture is that we admire and value the multi-tasker (Sapolsky). We forget that stress is a choice and we learn to live and accept it as a normal fact of life. It is easy to see that living an anxious life becomes a culturally “adopted” reality of social acceptance.

To add to our struggles with anxiety, in our culture it is unprofessional to show our emotions in certain settings, such as work, no matter how distressed we are. This can be linked to the Greek philosophy of Stoicism, still prevalent in contemporary American culture. Stoic philosophy values the idea of maintaining virtue that is free from emotions (Stock 19). Stoicism holds that humans should achieve the highest perfection in logic. St. George Stock explained, “The Stoics identified a life in accordance with nature with a life in accordance with the highest perfection to which man could attain. Now, as man was essentially a rational animal, his work as man lay in living the rational life. And the Perfection of reason was virtue” (6). Much like Stoicism, our culture values professionalism in the workplace and university that is free from personal emotions and issues in order to become successful. My work is inspired by the stress that I have experienced in the university setting and seeks to connect with others similarly struggling with anxiety.

*Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping*, draws from the culturally accepted norms in our society, which dictates that we are expected to hide our feelings in order to remain professional

in industry and institution. Suppressed feelings build up and increase the stress in our everyday lives. This chronic daily stress often leads people down the path of taking anti-anxiety medication in order to manage their continual anxiety. In the painting *Hydroxyzine Hydrochloride*, for example, the light blue indicates a calm environment and our professional public life, whereas the falling figures' energy as shown through the diagonal bursts of colors radiating from the bodies expresses our internal struggles with anxiety. Our unsettled emotions are to remain hidden inside to control a calm environment on the outside. This can be connected to Stoicism's value of maintaining virtue that is free from emotions.



Fig. 1. *Hydroxyzine Hydrochloride* (diptych). 2013. Oil on canvas, 26 x 60 in.

## CHAPTER THREE

### STRESS AND THE BODY

The titles of paintings in *Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping* are the scientific names for anti-anxiety, anti-depressant, and sleep drugs that are all commonly prescribed to those suffering from stress. The figures in the paintings display bodily symptoms from anxiety that the medication is supposed to alleviate. Addressing the body is an essential component in contemporary art including, but not limited to feminism and queer theory. My work focuses on how the body is used to address issues of health and anxiety through representation. Author Christine Ross explained, “There is no contemporary art without a fundamental concern for the body” (378). She outlined the key range of seven trajectories of embodiment in contemporary art to include performance art, minimalism, and the cyborg, which were characterized at the end of the 1980s as a reaction against previous art where the body was removed in order to address its influences. Themes of body identity in my work, however, can be classified in her other trajectories: aesthetics, the disciplined body, abject art, and the vanishing form.

Ross expressed that there is no body in contemporary art that is not sexed, gendered, or oriented in relation to nationality, class, and health (380). A personal struggle with healthy well-being is something that drives *Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping*, specifically, how stress leads to feelings of being out of control as well as adverse health concerns. *Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping's* focus on illness, loss, and trauma is similar to other reactionary art such as that created out of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. Donald B. Kuspit explains in his article “Pop Art: A Reactionary Realism”, that Reactionary art portrays the duality between embracing

public images and our inability to actually escape the battles with our reality (31). *Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping* exposes the traumatic experiences of stress through the use of the figure but, like pop reactionary art, realizes our battles with well-being are deeply embedded in our culture.

In the contemporary theme of the disciplined body, artists use the idea of disclosure to expose the genealogy of social rules through history that prescribes normalcy to sexuality, gender, and race (Ross 390). Author Chrlotte Mullins in her book *Painting People: Figure Painting Today*, explains how contemporary artists like Margherita Manzelli and Philip Akkerman use themselves as subject matter and by repeatedly painting themselves, explore how our public identity and how we present ourselves to the world in a variety of guises change over time (21). Manzelli and Akkerman's work identify with the theme of the disciplined body because they use themselves as a form of empowerment and disclosure of their identity. *Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping*, which directly responds to my identity as an anxious being, is a form of agency in that it also acts as an articulation of individual exposure of emotion. It allows a sense of release and empowerment by disclosing my struggle with weight and its negative impact on my health. This concept of 'exposure' is related to Michel Foucault's thoughts of the disciplined body and how we are conditioned to think in culturally manifested ways.

Foucault questions the order of things and our understanding of the world as a product of a bureaucratic power. He questions systems of regulations in the history of science, institution, and our societal way of thinking (Foucault xiv). He infers that these bourgeois placed systems of power create a unified way of thinking though the specifically structured and developmental way that history is defined by scientists and historians (Foucault 11). By this he means that our way of thinking about history, society, and our placement within the community, are constructed by

bureaucrats who define history by creating a unified view of the world that we all in turn understand. He questions if we the historians and scientists are creating an accurate picture of history and our world (15). By disclosing the rarely discussed subject of stress and its subsequent effects, *Whirl-winded: Stressed and Coping* breaks the norms of the disciplined body by exposing a somewhat hidden subject.

Both the abject and the vanishing body, two themes in Ross's seven trajectories of embodiment, can be viewed as related in that they both constantly threaten to dissolve the unity of the subject. The abject, in the 90s, moved from the postmodern representation of "reality as an effect of representation" to the contemporary view of "the real as a thing of trauma". As theorist Hal Foster put it in his article "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic", the function of the image "has dissolved itself to reveal the real as traumatic and repulsive, truthful in its abjection" (107). *Whirl-winded: Stressed and Coping* uses the idea of trauma to produce a truth in expression of feeling overwhelmed. There is a trauma understood in the movement of the figures in *my* paintings and the unsteady way they are painted. Chrlotte Mullins expresses how Cecily Brown's paint application threatens the figure because of the energy in her process (21). Mullins Explains, "The paint reinforces the physicality hinted at by the confusion of limbs that can just be made out in many of her paintings" (20-21). In *Chlordiazepoxide*, the figure of a child is painted with the energy of an agitated line. Like Brown, *Chlordiazepoxide*'s distressed energy of the line represents the torment of the solidity of the figure and reinforces the unsettled nature of stress. Multiple views of the face are compressed together to express the threatening state of the figure who is about to unravel at any moment. The collective images of the face are not in a stagnant state of singular representation, but rather, they are illustrated in multiple views in a single painting to show a movement of disruption or trauma of consciousness.



Fig. 2. *Chlordiazepoxide*. 2013. Oil on canvas, 40 x 40 in.

In Ross's last trajectory, the disappearing body, the human form is not used to address politics of the gaze or gender, like in mid-20th century feminist art, but instead the absence of the body is a different form of empowerment to explore ideas of memory, place, and absence. Artist Ana Mendieta puts imprints of her body into the ground and allows nature to reclaim her impression as a statement of exile. Ross explains that this performance is a form of bonding and disappearing to express a memory of life and hinting at its ultimate dissolution (393). Memory is accessed by the body's absence.



Fig. 3. *Prochlorperazine*. 2013. Oil on canvas, 30 x 26 in.

*Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping* also utilizes the idea of dissolution of the body to represent loss of memories and to express the feeling of being incomplete. The disappearing body implies loss of control due to the chronic nature of stress. To achieve this, the figures such as those in *Prochlorperazine* are painted using outlines to suggest a gesture of the body whose fragility is made up of thin, shaky lines that threaten to shatter them at any moment. Because the figure's form is not solidly defined, its indeterminate edge appears impermanent like a memory.



Fig. 4. *Prochlorperazine* (Detail)

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FORMAL STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES

My interest in an expressionist style allows me to explore the relative importance of certain formal strategies to communicate emotional content and evoke an emotional response from the viewer, an experience of feeling anxious. What is relevant is the specific tools I use to convey cues that work together to create an equated meaning. These are described as denotation, what we can plainly see, and connotation, what we can read from the information that is given.

In his renowned treatise on color from 1963, *Interaction of Color*, Josef Albers discusses the formal attitudes of the Bauhaus, “As we begin principally with the material, color itself, and its action and interaction as registered in our minds, we practice first and mainly the study of ourselves” (52). Albers theories on color impacted how generations of painters for years to come would study and understand their own practice.

Color is actually perceived in our brain. David Williams, Allyn Professor of Medical Optics and Director of the Center for Visual Science at University of Rochester, developed an experiment to prove that our brain is what allows us to define color. Each participant in the study was asked to turn a disk that pictured all colors of the spectrum to a pure yellow color without leaning toward a greenish or reddish tint of yellow on the disk (Sherwood). Almost every participant chose the same wavelength of yellow even though he observed that all of their long and mid-length cones in the makeup of the eye were of very different numbers and placements in the retina (Sherwood). William’s assistant Heidi Hofer explained, “That points to some kind of normalization or auto-calibration mechanism—some kind of circuit in the brain that balances the

colors for you no matter what the hardware is” (Sherwood). When we are young, pure colors are defined to us by our teachers and even if these colors do not look exactly yellow to us because of our visual makeup, we learn to adjust to this understanding. This is defined as color constancy by Yale psychologist Brian Scholl (Kolber and Margol). The ability of our brains to hold identity to the specific colors of objects that we are introduced to since our birth. The color choices in *Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping* are not entirely realistic to address the idea of visual inconsistency. For example, many paintings use complimentary colors to emphasize the traumatized form of the face of a person struggling with stress, while in reality, the human face does not consist of complimentary colors.

Johannes Itten, another important figure who influenced how color was taught at the Bauhaus and is still taught today, in 1919 instructed the Basic Course where he would have students mix colors like red and yellow to their exact “pure” color without leaning toward a red-violate or yellow-orange. To calibrate our minds to the action of sympathetic constancy, teachers like Itten check their students work to make sure they have painted the “correct” yellow or red (Itten 41). Therefore, our idea of exact, pure colors are defined by our instructors and once our brain associates objects in the world with that particular color it will compensated for it in the mind to keep it the way we were instructed it should be (Kolber and Margol).

Here we can see what Albers is talking about when he said color is mainly the study of ourselves. Because we perceive the idea of color in our minds, color, and by association its related emotional interpretations are defined in the human brain. I can now argue that because blue is proven to bring emotional calm and red is proven to bring anxiety, that blue *is* calm and red *is* anxiety because these emotional reactions from colors are truly experienced by our bodies after color is perceived in the mind.

This is important to my work because *Whirl-winded: Stressed and Coping* uses specific color choices to evoke emotions of anxiety and tranquility. Buster and Crawford explain, “Whether our responses are hardwired or culturally conditioned, color cannot help but carry with it some measure of emotional content” (51). Blue neutralized with white, for example, is sometimes used as a background color to create a sense of calming surroundings. This represents the way that we are expected to suppress our emotions to maintain a calm environment in our public relationships. The use of blue backgrounds in paintings like *Escitalopram* and *Buspirone Hydrochloride*, operate as a representation of calm public environment. It is documented that blue can have a relaxing effect in the mind (Ocvirk, et. all 195). Because this is a universal principle that has been studied and identified as proven true, its meaning then becomes fixed. Therefore, when the color blue is utilized in *Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping*, it is related to other works in art history that use blue for the same calming reason. For example, during Pablo Picasso’s Blue Period he used many neutralized blues to create a somber effect to relate to his nation’s feelings during the instability taking place in Spain at that time (Schneider 82).



Fig. 5. *Escitalopram*. 2013. Oil on canvas, 30 x 26 in.



Fig. 6. *Buspirone Hydrochloride*. 2013. Oil on canvas, 36 x 42 in.

By contrast, the color red is used to indicate an intense negative feeling because it is commonly associated with blood and death. For example, Mark Rothko, American abstract expressionist and co-founder of the New York School, utilized color fields and torn-looking edges as tools to evoke emotion from the viewer (Chave 172-73). Specifically, his early works exploited the color red to arouse a poignant sense of violence and tragedy. Often misunderstood as his cheerful period because his colors were more vibrant than his later works, Rothko insists that his reds represent morbidity (Chave 182). In *Trazodone*, *Prochlorperazine*, and *Clonazepam*, diagonal bursts of red are used to elicit a stressful feeling that is twofold. Intensity is exaggerated through the use of diagonals. Energy explodes across the canvas and the diagonals' vibrant red coloring contrasts with the more subdued background tones, creating tension.



Fig. 7. *Clonazepam*. 2013. Oil on canvas, 30 x 26 in.



Fig. 8. *Trazodone*. 2013. Oil on canvas, 26 x 30 in.



Fig. 9. *Prochlorperazine*. 2013. Oil on canvas, 36 x 42 in.

*Lorazepam*, is a painting created with two complimentary colors consisting of a mid-value blue and a mid-value red. It is painted quickly and the brush marks show where my hand has traveled. When two colors, like the red and blue that *Lorazepam* and *Clonidine*, correspond to a similar gray tone on the value scale, their lack of contrast creates agitated vibrations in our optic receptors when the two touch. Johannes Itten formulates the Seven Color Contrasts that connect to Albers understanding of complimentary colors. Itten similarly expresses that two colors opposite on the color wheel are complementary in nature - therefore when they are juxtaposed their brilliance is intensified and when they are mixed they defuse each other into a neutral grey-black (Itten 43). Then, Itten refers to the vibrations discussed by Albers as simultaneous contrast. These are based on the corresponding law of complements in that each pure color psychologically demands its opposite color (Itten 43). The agitated nature of two complementary colors of similar light intensity creates uncomfortable vibrations in our optic receptors. The use of contrasting complementary colors can be seen in *Lorazepam* and *Clonidine*, two paintings which stand as artifacts or relics of a stressful event that I experienced.



Fig. 10. *Lorazepam*. 2013. Oil on canvas, 36 x 42 in.



Fig. 11. *Clonidine*. 2013. Oil on Canvas, 26 x 30 in.

Complimentary colors are used to strengthen the emotional intensity of *Lorazepam* and its conception of stress. Albers defines a complimentary color as, “a color accompanied by its after-image” or simultaneous contrast (41). But this definition is a bit vague. He explains that complimentary colors create vibrations along the boundary line of the two colors because it appears as if there is a shadow on one side and light on the other (Albers 61). He defined these vibrations occurring between colors with contrasting hues, like yellow and purple, but similar in their light intensity (Albers 61). Therefore, the best color candidates for simultaneous contrast are direct opposites on the color wheel and also have as little contrast in light value as possible between them. Albers notes, “This initially exciting effect also feels aggressive and often even uncomfortable to our eyes. One finds it rarely used except for a screaming effect in advertising, and as a result it is unpleasant, disliked, and avoided” (61). The use of such tools can create an uncomfortable feeling for the viewer therefore simulating the intensity of emotions associated with stress. These ideas relate to the psychological experience of Op Art, which I will discuss later in this thesis.



Fig. 12. *The Whirl-Winded Series*. 2014. Oil on canvas, 65 x 60 in.

In addition to the importance of color, the way paintings are grouped creates meaning from relationships between adjacent paintings and their proximity to other artworks. Buster and Crawford discuss configuration of meaning through presentation. They explain, “This allows for configurations that suggest tensions and affinities, affiliations and interactions” (54). For example, in *The Whirl-Winded Series*, thirty-six 12 x 12 inch paintings of varying imagery are placed directly against one another in a square format so that they create one large painting. This form of presentation forces the viewers to make associations between paintings that would otherwise have little relation to one another because of their differences in color palette and compositional content. This technique is used to create another layer of stressful tension for the viewers to experience because it does not provide them a hierarchy of placement but rather, they present the visual information all at the same time for the viewer to analyze information and imagery by association.

The investigation of the way that our brain naturally organizes and groups visual imagery is known as Gestalt principles. Robert Wenger, art educator for the School of Architecture and Allied Arts at the University of Oregon describes The Gestalt Principles, “*similarity, continuity, proximity, closure, and figure-ground* are the primary factors and forces that create and emphasize visual units, groupings and organized wholes within a given perceptual setting” (35). He goes on to say, “The degree of visual order and disorder perceived within a setting is dependent, to a large degree, on the recognition, interpretation and communication of these unifying principles” (35).

*Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping*, draws from Gestalt psychology’s universal understanding of human ordering and uses this principle to create tension through visual disorder within the presentation of the work. In *The Whirl-Winded Series*, thirty-six square paintings are hung adjacent to one another along a grid to create a single painting. By grouping the works the viewer must make associations between individual paintings, visually unifying them into a cohesive whole. The compositional contrasts that result from grouping these paintings, evokes a strong sense of tension, reinforcing the experience of anxiety. Thus, in *The Whirl-Winded Series*, the principle of Gestalt is at play because the sum of individual works is greater than its parts. The Gestalt principle is based on the universal understanding of our brain’s creation of order. *The Whirl-Winded Series* generates a psychologically stressful presentation for the viewer by drawing from their instinctual ordering processes. Color patterns, conflicting lines and imagery are unified into a cohesive whole through the viewer’s desire to create order and interpret meaning.

Kendall Buster, practicing artist and Professor of Sculpture at Virginia Commonwealth University, and Paula Crawford, practicing artist and director of the painting program at George

Mason University, talk about the surface as evidence of an act. They write, “Visible brushstrokes are signifiers of the *act* of painting. A canvas covered with gestural brushstrokes evokes in us the image of an artist directly expressing something onto the canvas. Often it reads as spontaneous emotion or movement” (21). The painting *Lorazepam* utilizes similar techniques to allow the evidence of my physical emotion through the act of painting to show the intensity of a stressful moment.

Painting is a diverse medium. The painting medium aptly expresses the complex emotions of stress because the act of wielding a brush with quick movements allows a way of interpreting an emotional moment through mark-making. Gestural marks produce uncontrolled drips, which reference the uncontrollable nature of our most stressful moments. The way in which context is constructed through the movement of paint brings into question how we navigate meaning in art.

How meaning is constructed in the work is an important part of the postmodern conversation. Meaning is defined and created through intentions of the artist and observation by the viewers. Authors Kendal Buster and Paula Crawford explain, “Meaning can never be completely contained in any work of art or in any one of its parts. That is not to say that a work of art is beyond interpretation, but simply that meaning can never be finite or stable” (41).

Meaning in contemporary art is not fixed. It is not only dependent upon the artist but also the viewer’s interpretation. This postmodern thought is connected to the idea of Relativism, which discusses the idea that there is no fixed meaning because every viewer has a unique way of viewing the world. Both principles are contrary to the universal ideologies of united thought in Gestalt fundamentals. The anxious connotation of the work in *Whirl-winded: Stressed and*

*Coping* is determined by both my intended meaning through techniques with proven universal understanding and the viewer's individualized interpretation of the information given.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### INFLUENCING ARTISTS

The thesis exhibition, *The Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping* is inspired by many artists throughout history. The German Expressionist's are particularly influential to the imagery and color within my work. In 1914 World War I began in Europe. Many German artists such as Max Beckmann, Heinrich Campendonk, Conrad Felixmüller, George Grosz, Erich Heckel, Ernst Kirchner, Paul Klee and Oskar Kokoschka either volunteered or were drafted by the German army (MoMA). Many of these artists were discharged because of mental breakdowns and nervous shock as a result of war trauma (MoMA). Symptoms like flashbacks, nightmares, and fragmented language originally described as "shell shock" are now believed to be Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder because of the remarkable resemblance to today's post-war symptoms (Higonnet 91, 92). Angst and anxiety were detected in the art that they produced after their discharge. Their work exhibited graphic, sharp edged, dark or bold use of colors to reflect their emotional distress through painting and printmaking. According to author Bernard Meyers, their aim was to, "cut through temporary naturalistic appearances in pursuit of the inner truth, by means of intensified color and twisted form that reduce the reality of objects to form and color symbols" ( 37). I am interested in their techniques used to produce emotional responses.



Fig. 13. *5-Hydroxytryptophan*. 2013. Oil on canvas, 40 x 40 in.



Fig. 14. *Duloxetine*. 2013. Oil on canvas, 30 x 26 in.

German Expressionists Louis Corinth and Max Bachman influence the use of agitate line work to indicate anguish in *Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping*. Both artists expressed powerful evidence of their pain and anxiety through the use of shaky and jagged lines to express their angst and agony of a country suffering during and after the spoils of war (Myers 22, 298). The paintings in *Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping*, such as in *Duloxetine* and *5-Hydroxytryptophan*, adopt a similar graphic and sharp edged imagery as well as bold use of color to emphasize my feelings of stress through the movement of paint. Literary writer Kasimir Edschmid between 1917 and 1918 wrote that the Expressionists were interested in creating intense psychological imagery by using imagery like humans experiencing anguish that arouse emotion, and were not concerned with capturing the effect of a moment. They were intent on creating an eternal significant experience (Myers 36). *Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping's* figures and self-portraits stand as tortured symbols of humanity through our cultural understanding of stress. Personal undertones become visible through the use of self-portraits as a platform for creating the experience of a distressful moment. Artist Mel Bochner's painting, *Vertigo* (1982), uses red, brown, and black lines in exaggerated diagonals that envelope the entire composition. The diagonals and sharp points used in Bochner's art create a feeling of intense activity and stress (Ocvirk et. al 102). *Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping* similarly employs the use of sharp geometric shapes to exaggerate the feeling of activity and stress. This technique is then adapted by filling the composition with the shapes to link the intense feeling of fragmentation to the mind/body disconnection of our world perception when stressed. These diagonal elements abstractly mimic the unsettled feeling of the falling figures in adjacent paintings. In *Clonazepam* and *5-Hydroxytryptophan*, the feeling of anxiety is illustrated by

painting triangular geometric shapes that pin ball the eye around the composition. These sharp shapes address the emotional out-of-control feeling that is common during mental angst.

*Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping* is also influenced by Op Art, which overstimulates our vision by clashing full-intensity complimentary colors to make us feel uneasy (Ocvirk et. al. 202). Artists such as Victor Vasarely and Bridget Riley are interested in stimulating the retina of the eye using simultaneous contrast colors and linear perspective to evoke physical and psychological angst in the viewer (Arnason 536). This cognitive application of color is proved to create certain associations of emotion from different colors. For example, Vasarely paints simple shapes of vibrant complimentary colors along with manipulation of perspective to create vibrations in the eye. The principles of the Op artists are in opposition to the ideas of the artist's gesture that defines the art of the Abstract Expressionists because the Op artists preferred paintings that hide brushstrokes so that viewers are not distracted away from the visual illusions of well blended painting (Arnason 537). Ideas about meaning through color have become an accepted part of the academy, in art text books like *Art Fundamentals: Theory and Practice*. Books in art academia often explain how important tools like color are in symbolizing ideas and making the work stronger in content and meaning (Ocvirk et. al 205). *Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping* adopts a combination of Expressionistic rapid gesture and Op Art's complimentary colors. They energetic brushstrokes and the extreme color impact of simultaneous contrast strengthens the intense feeling of when stress becomes completely overwhelming in *Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping*.

In the book *Comic Release!: Negotiating Identity for a New Generation* by Vicky Clark and Barbara Bloemink, Clark describes the notion of identity politics and the possibilities that cartoon-like style art allow for ease of viewer interpretation. Clark explains, "International artists

are increasingly using cartoon imagery and graphic styles to address difficult, controversial subject matter that would be hard to assimilate in realistic depictions” (7). She goes on to address the fact that dramatically simplified comic styles create a common and accessible language for the viewers (26). To support her point of allowing open-ended narrative to appeal to viewer interpretation, Clark says, “Many visual artists make use of a fragmented presentation, implying a narrative that the reader/viewer must construct” (39). Therefore, the viewer must relate their own identity to the open-ended narrative that the artist begins to compose.

*Whirl-winded: Stressed and Coping* further references comic book contour lines and flat graphic style as a means to create tension between the humors associated with cartoons and the subject of emotional anxiety. Vicky Clark, writes that “Such imagery... appeals to artists wanting to communicate serious and often difficult ideas. The dramatically simplified style of comics creates a common and accessible language. It provides a vehicle to introduce serious issues in a palatable way, just as beautifully seductive images did in the 1990s” (26). In this way, it opens the work up to more easily relate to its viewers because, like stress, cartoons create a cultural language which integrate our understanding at a young age.

One artist who utilizes this graphic technique is graffiti and installation artist Berry McGee. Works such as *One More Thing* (2005), depict flat comic book style characters that bring the complexities of urban life into the gallery space to question the relationship between contemporary life and art (Smee 2013). His figures have exaggerated cartoon-style features and often look complacent in their environment while at the same time seem to be silently suffering in their habitat. McGee’s comic style and graphic imagery allows him to communicate complex meanings about urban life through an accessible language.

Author Caroline A. Jones in her excerpt *Form and Formlessness*, describes form as, “the ‘hallucinated’ common structure that constitutes the precondition for culture itself” (Jones 142). McGee utilizes the figural form to address these issues of our culture as Jones explained. Similarly to McGee, *Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping* uses a graphic style to represent the human form in a state of unrest. The work is then adapted by showing multiple views of a subject in a single composition to create an effect that constitutes movement to over stimulate the spectator’s perception. The visual confusion employed by the agitated line that constructs the figure creates a hallucinatory perception and plays with our observable understanding. Similar to the way our culture plays with our understanding of rules by embedding them deep in our subconscious.

*Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping’s* reference to memory and our subconscious is similar to the ideas residing in the work of contemporary German painter Gerhard Richter. Henry M. Sayre who in *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945* writes about art on the cusp of the new millennium. He talks about Richter’s use of the photograph, and the subject of memory capturing (Sayre 116). In his work, he looks at a moment of time frozen with no reference of what came before or after that instance according to Sayre (117). Richter specifically addresses how the past is left in our memory over time and how his use of paint is more important than the subject pictured by his use of blurring images. This action of smearing the subject precisely captures the capacity of our memory as a flawed tool because we cannot recall our memories as clear as a photograph. “In Richter’s work we are always at the edge of the image’s disappearance” (Sayre 117). This disappearance of memory and form in Richter’s work is much like the impermanence of the painted figures in *Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping* and their connection to the disappearing body trajectory discussed earlier.

Memory and disappearance are important elements in my paintings because I include objects that reference moments from my recollection. The human figures in my paintings are not rendered photo realistically so to convey their state of incompleteness and fragile consciousness, reflecting the condition of stress' distortion of memory. Stanford University neurobiologist, MacArthur "genius" grant recipient, and renowned author Robert Sapolsky explains in the documentary film *Stress: Portrait of a Killer*, that prolonged stress is observed to kill brain cells and affect memory. In a laboratory study conducted by Sapolsky and his mentor Dr. Bruce McEwen, two groups of lab rats, one group subjected to a life of stress and the other treated normally, observed that the stressed rats' hippocampus, the part of the brain that effects memory storage, had shrunk whereas the normally controlled rats had average sized hippocampi (Sapolsky).

In my work I express anxiety's subsequent memory loss through the use of line to frame figures and objects so that they become a suggestion of a memory that was lost by anxiety, rather than a full reality. What I mean by this is that they are painted with some of the detail in the figure, but they remain mostly a hollowed-out shell, which are never completely painted. In *Bupirone Hydrochloride*, I use myself as the subject of stress but only a small portion of detail is painted in the shirt. The rest of the figure is painted using contour lines and absent of any detail. These outlines are utilized as a formal strategy to depict how stress creates an incomplete sense of reality, an out of body feeling, and a confused physical and mental idea of the self.

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan argues that the human gaze is always being fractured because our unconscious is not structured as a whole but in fragments (Mavor 275). By leaving the paintings open to individual interpretation, the viewer understands the work in a similar way to their perception of the everyday world and the self, as fragmented. If there is no

complete idea of the world then there can never be a complete fixed meaning of the work and so its intended connotation remains in a continual play between the imagery and the viewers.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION

Philosophical Relativism is characterized as the principle that there is no absolute truth or fixed meaning because every individual understands the world from a single point of view, his personal view (Craig 3). Betty Jean Craig in her text *What is Relativism in the Arts?*, explains that even the novelist, or artist for my purposes, holds a fixed perspective when creating based on their own experiences and culture (3, 4). Just as Roland Barthes explained in his essay “Death of the Author”, Craig also believes that the reader must understand that he is a participant in the intrinsic meaning of a work of art and therefore is not a neutral receiver of the artists’ supplied information (5). This is important to my work because though I base my work on studied principles in artistic design, they can only act as a catalyst of information that then must interact with the viewer to create meaning. For example, at the opening reception for my MFA Exhibition *Whirl-Winded: Stressed and Coping*, spectators who themselves battle with stress deciphered their understanding of some of my non-objective works. I found that some of their understandings were exactly what I intended the works to mean and others were sometimes completely opposite of what I had expected, but it allowed me a way of seeing my work from a new perspective. The strategies that I use have specific intentions to aid in the investigation of my stress, but through my communication with viewers I can better understand how their experiences with stress deepens my understanding of the paintings.

Craig writes, “The artwork that holds not the secret of its creator but of its culture, the artwork whose meaning is not single and divine but plural and of this world. It is of the earth, that most coiled thorn, but that is enough for the relativist” (18). My work, though there are a

number of self-portraits, is not about myself in many respects, but rather, I use my body to connect to the viewer through the visceral physical emotions of stress. The universally experienced emotions in my paintings allow us a view into our cultural truth and expose the prevalence of anxiety in our society.

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