

Introduction of William King Regional Arts Museum Exhibition

By Curator Adam Justice

Vaughn Garland is a self-portraitist. At first glance his large fields of color and texture appear more like studies in formal aesthetics than portraiture, but once his process is understood as it relates to his concept, his role as reflective artist is undeniable.

On a crisp, sunny afternoon I visit Garland's converted garage studio which sits just beyond his house in Richmond, Virginia. Stacks of stretched canvases and braced panels lean against one wall, their skeletal backs facing out. They rest in stepped layers, their dimensions varying from the large to the very large. The way in which Garland has them stacked resembles the pattern made by a loaded shelf of books, undulating forms of various heights, widths, and depths. This analogy may be all too accurate considering these paintings act more as pages in Garland's memoir rather than autonomous works of art. Together they tell the story of a man and artist quite aware of the consistent growth and maturity in his perceptions of the external world and of his own existence in that externality.

As we stand facing his painted memoir, Garland begins explaining his process, his hands whisking as if attempting to grasp and cradle the intellect behind his explanation. He talks to me about correlations between past, present, and future and how the most current state of anyone's character is directly influenced by yesterday's stimuli and tomorrow's potential. He explains that the present is never static because the past and the future are only considered and/or experienced through the present. This is the point where the beauty of Garland's artistic concept is fully revealed and his paintings most adequately clarified.

Similar to an autobiographer who may loom above a confessional body of work that is constantly scrutinized by its creator, Garland stands parallel to expanses of painted canvas, working and reworking the surface to best reflect his graduations into newer understandings of himself. Substituting brush for pen, Garland applies painted layers, or 'veils,' of different colors and consistencies that interact with each other and interject modernity into previous brush strokes. These veils of paint can be described perhaps more as layers of thought and experience that are sometimes added to, and sometimes peeled away like the proverbial onion. This combines surface detail with underlying strata of paint to eventually form an overall surface of differentiating colors and textures that work in concert to produce a visual metaphor for a life's history defined by transforming ideals and perceptions. In this manner, Garland not only reflects on and reacts to his chronology as a human being, but also allows himself to submit to the inevitable changes undergone during his chronology as a painter.

Garland's paintings are arenas for controlled change. Their surfaces are altered according to Garland's shifting interpretations of himself and his external environment. One moment Garland can be adding a thick layer of shimmering oil paint, and the next he

is scraping away layers of blacks and blues to reveal a brash shade of red. This shift in painting technique from additive to reductive represents a shift in Garland's understanding of himself. What results are variable topographic records of his attempts at understanding and visually translating the maturity undergone during the days spent revising an individual painting. His paintings are more like metaphors for his own development: beginning as crisp and clean surfaces that eventually become containers for a flurry of mental and physical actions that ultimately consume and define the resulting art object. He explains, "My paintings are a grouping of thoughts evaluated, examined, and checked off. The acts of brushing, wiping, abstracting, and isolating parts of the space correspond to the ability to question identity."

Other paintings, those less textured and usually measuring 5'x5', hold different content not solely pertaining to Garland's intrapersonal existence. These works focus more on both global and local external events and the impact they have on Garland as an artist and an indirectly affected bystander. These paintings hinge less on process and more on visual elements such as form and color. Floating cloud-like forms are given volume and mass through contrasting values of color and placement within an illusory three-dimensional space. Garland's chosen palette and placement of the forms depend on his perception of the social and/or political event he has chosen for the subject.

As a contrast, Garland's 'drawings' are not intended solely as self-portraits but instead serve as visual commentaries on depicting three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface. When approaching one of these works, it is imperative that you view it not merely as a sheet of paper, but as a defined dimension of positive space. By injecting quick flecks of black graphite into the white space, Garland minimally yet deliberately alters that given dimension of space. This transcends the general act of drawing and correlates these works with Garland's much larger paintings; just as Garland alters the painted surface to better reflect his deepening understanding of himself, he alters the white space in his drawings to better associate his physical position in relation to that space. Additionally, by doing this Garland directs our attention more toward what is not there rather than what is. What is usually viewed as "blank" or "empty" becomes a larger space defined by the small pencil marks and is transformed into an infinite space in which the marks exist. The white space is not limited by the planar surface and becomes an infinite depth, having no indication of a perspective endpoint. The pencil marks are not applied at random, but are strategically placed and are intentionally heavy or light in order to allow us to begin to form an idea of the infinite space that surrounds them. In other words, as viewers, we are meant to associate ourselves with the smaller marks and experience the sublime nature of the much larger white space. It is an exercise in what some scholars refer to as the *Kantian sublime*, named after the pioneer aesthetician Immanuel Kant. According to Kant, the sublime occurs in nature as an overpowering infinite force that links with the human conscious and reminds the individual of his/her minute existence in an infinite universe. Grains of sand on the shore, the stars in the night sky, or the depths of the seas are all examples of the Kantian sublime in nature. It is when the incalculable vastness of these natural occurrences is related to the existence of the viewer that the sublime interjects into the human consciousness.

Garland is an Abingdon native and alumni of Emory & Henry College where he received his Bachelors of Art degrees in art and English literature in 1999. He attended graduate school at Virginia Commonwealth University and earned his Masters of Fine Arts for painting and printmaking in 2003. His exhibition experience is extensive having participated in group and solo exhibitions from Bristol to New York. Currently he is an adjunct professor of art at George Mason University in Fairfax, VA and J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College in Richmond VA. Garland is also the Curator of Collections at Virginia Commonwealth University's Arts Library, the Chair of Exhibitions at Richmond's 1708 Gallery, Chair of the Richmond Public Arts Commission, and remains a producing artist. He has helped to curate numerous exhibitions and served as the juror for 2007's Art in Public Places sculpture competition in Bristol, TN and VA.