Decisive Moments In Fiction

2009

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DECISIVE MOMENTS IN FICTION

by

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B.F.A. University of Central Florida, 2005

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art and the Computer in the Department of Art in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

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ABSTRACT

I approach artmaking with a sense of intrigue, portraying the human condition as seen through my own eyes. The results that surface are female forms combined with subliminal subjective symbolism – a fusion of my personal experiences and influences created through a partially subconscious process. I use this artistic process to help me understand myself and I dare my viewers to seek their own answers within the implied narratives I choose to paint.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE BEGINNING</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIGITAL RESURRECTION</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REVIVAL OF THE TRADITIONAL</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRIAL AND ERROR</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MY WORK</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SYMBOLISM</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Treehugger</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Self Portrait 2007</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bane</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Isle</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The Mask (sketch)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Watchful</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Whisper (sketch)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Sleeping Awake (sketch)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Pandora (sketch)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Dead Bird Study</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Sleeping Figure Study</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Sleeping Figure</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Deer Skull Study</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>A Naiad, John William Waterhouse, 1893</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>The Bower Meadow, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1872</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Orpheus, Gustave Moreau, 1865</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Hope, Gustav Klimt, 1903</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Goldfish, Gustav Klimt, 1902</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Siren (sketch)</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Siren</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Sweet Whispers</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Sleeping Awake (diptych)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Fallen</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Ghost Orchid</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>The Gift</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Duality</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>What You Left Behind</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Pandora</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>The Messenger</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Eternity</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Radiant Decay</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Damnation</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Deliverance</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Winter</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

"Whoever wants to know something about me, must observe my paintings carefully and try to see in them what I am."

- Gustav Klimt
I was an odd kid. I was fascinated by those elements of nature that most young girls would shy away from. We lived in a wooded area, so there was this seemingly huge world for me to explore and I wanted to bring everything home. My parents didn’t discourage my taste in collecting and in a few years, I had quite an accumulation of pet lizards, skeletons, feathers, leaves, sea shells, and dead insects – my own cabinet of curiosities.

In my youth, I would study my father’s National Geographic magazines more often than I’d look at my own picture books. When I did read my own books, I would gaze at the illustrations from every angle in which I could manage to rotate the pages, searching for something I alone could see differently – everything just looked more interesting from odd angles. I viewed everything in my own unique way. I would see eyes and figures in wood grain patterns; creatures would fleetingly emerge from leafy shrubs outside the car window; hair in the bottom of the bathtub would form into some kind of sea monster as it made its way towards the drain; I even played “connect the dots” with my popcorn ceiling long before I had any knowledge of constellations.

Since my youth, I have been attracted to female faces and forms. These female figures began to appear early on in my sketchbooks; certainly by my middle school years.
These memories and imagery combined with my childhood imagination have remained with me to this day, and I feel they are a key to the concept and form that is revealed in my current body of work.
DIGITAL RESURRECTION

When I started my MFA, I wanted to get back into digital media in some form. I felt as though I owed it to myself to use the knowledge I had gained during my undergraduate years and apply it towards an art form that interested me and could open new doors for me in emerging media.

I began by drawing: sketching figures, animals, objects from nature, creatures, plant life and portraits of people. From that point, I began to develop a better understanding of Adobe Photoshop and introduced myself to Corel Painter. Painter mimics traditional painting using unique digital brushes, art materials and textures helping artists achieve the perfect
composition, color palette and brush stroke. With the aid of a tablet and a stylus to imitate drawing with a pencil or painting with a paintbrush, I began to create new digital imagery.

Figure 2: Treehugger
Figure 3: Self Portrait 2007
Figure 4: Bane

Figure 5: Isle
Despite all my efforts, it was an intense struggle to get these mediums to do what I wanted; pouring hours of labor into a piece and never being satisfied with the results was stressful. The computer felt too sterile – it lacked that tactile feedback that is so warm and welcoming in traditional media. You can’t manipulate virtual polygons in your hands – you can’t smear digital colors with your fingertips. More than anything I felt this medium lacked the “spirit” that traditional mediums have in spades – and this I find to be one of the most appealing aspects of art as a practice. I had spent several years honing my skills toward digital mediums yet they still felt so foreign to me. I wanted to get back to my roots.
REVIVAL OF THE TRADITIONAL

I returned to all of my drawings and sketches, looked at them as a whole, and noticed a common theme within the images I had created. I kept intuitively returning to graceful, quiet females with minimal environments, many of them exuding a dream-like quality. Most are paired with animals or objects from nature, all of which are reminiscent of my childhood.

Figure 6: The Mask (sketch)
Figure 7: Watchful
Figure 8: Whisper (sketch)
Figure 9: Sleeping Awake (sketch)

Figure 10: Pandora (sketch)
Figure 12: Sleeping Figure Study

Figure 13: Sleeping Figure

Figure 14: Deer Skull Study
In addition to researching my personal work, I started thinking about key artists who had inspired me over the years. I loved the art of the Pre-Raphaelite movement – John William Waterhouse and Dante Gabriel Rossetti were some of my favorites. Their graceful figures and tragic folkloric and mythological themes typically flooding their imagery had always intrigued me. Like the Pre-Raphaelites, I strive for the honesty of my imagery, studying from life and from many alternative reference images when a model isn’t available.

Figure 15: A Naiad, John William Waterhouse, 1893

One unique aspect of Rossetti’s paintings is that I feel my paintings share a similarity with is that they are neither narrative, literary illustration, nor portrait, yet they managed carry an element of each. (Barringer 146) Also similar to my own paintings, his women are often surrounded by symbolic items, and they often bear a pensive expression on their faces. Although the motives behind the expressions and symbols included with the luminous
beauties of Rossetti’s differ from those in my own paintings, they still play a key role within my narratives.

Figure 16: *The Bower Meadow*, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1872

I identify with the work of Gustave Moreau, who laced much of his personal life experience within the biblical and mythological themes he often portrayed. As a painter of literary ideas rather than visual images, he appealed to the imaginations of some Symbolist writers and artists who saw him as a precursor to their movement.
Gustav Klimt’s portrayal of females, from the sensuous ‘Femme fatale’ to the view of woman as the ‘holy mother’, reveals a wide variety of subjects and individuality among the figures in his paintings. Some of his portraits have even been compared to late mediaeval Italian madonnas; these paintings contain an aloof, unapproachable quality of mother as object of worship so frequently found in the portrayal of women. (Partsch, 244) Klimt’s unique way of combining the sensuous with the sacred is a unique element that continues to draw me towards researching Klimt’s work.
My first exposure to Alphonse Mucha’s beautiful, graceful goddess-like female figures was through a framed poster one of my neighbors had in her home of The Seasons. Upon further research later on in life, I discovered more of his work – all revolving around the Mucha Woman, her gaze half-focused as if she is herself emerging, posed at the moment of awakening, suspended between her loving viewer and some faintly remembered image of another world. (Mucha) This ethereal quality of his figures greatly inspired me.
TRIAL AND ERROR

When I realized that so many of the pieces I aspired towards were made by painters, I concluded that painting was the next obvious step towards my new body of work. I started with a sketch recently made at that time that had charmed me, a sullen female figure with octopus tentacles draped over her head and partially concealing her face. I chose to paint on wood due to the natural grain acting as an underpainting, not just to enhance the image, but also to direct the composition. For some reason, I’ve always had a difficult time breaking the white, sterile field of a blank canvas. The ability for wood to be sanded completely smooth and yet not affect the physical nature of the surface is also appealing. By comparison, canvas can rip with too much abrasion.

Figure 20: Siren (sketch)
I chose to start working in acrylics, since I was most familiar with that painting medium. Initially I thought the painting was going well, however the further along the painting went the more I realized how dull the colors were. Blending tones together became exceedingly difficult due to the fast drying time, and the end result wasn’t anything like I had envisioned in my head. I wanted the paint to be sheerer, allowing the grain to shine through. The acrylic came out so opaque, however, that the only wood grain that could be seen was in the watery background behind the figure. Through my struggle to control the paint, I didn’t realize until much later that my sullen siren had lost her attitude, giving way to a much blanker stare than I had intended. It was at this point I decided to take on oils, as the extended drying time allowed for additional modeling and development of form that was not possible working in acrylics.
Figure 21: Siren
MY WORK

As an artist, my personal experience informs everything that I do. It’s vastly important to me; the one thing that truly defines me as an artist is my own subjective experience.

My art is born from a mishmash of dreams, memories, and subliminal imagery that surface within my sketchbook pages. Ideas also emerge from the influence of music lyrics, scenes in films, and from literature. It is with this arsenal of ideas and images that I create my paintings and sculpture, existing like decisive moments in fiction and echoing my subjective views on life. Art-making acts as a release for anxiety and stress occurring in my life. My imagery reveals hidden emotions; both my own as well as those of the viewer as they decipher the meaning of the pieces. I enjoy leaving the interpretation of my imagery up to the imagination of the viewer. With a little self-examination, the viewers come to a conclusion or decide that there may be several endings to the same story. The fact that my work allows open interpretation by viewers definitely separates it from my 19th and 20th century influences that tended much more to lead the audience – to treat viewers as a wholly passive entity.
In my work *Sweet Whispers*, multiple interpretations of the painting have been voiced. It is often interpreted as the typical Adam and Eve tale from Genesis: Eve being tempted by the snake to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, and then giving the fruit to Adam. In this image, it looks like the woman is
being deviously whispered to by the snake, but she is hushing it with a finger to her lips. Is she attempting to resist the sweet whispers of the snake? Or is she trying to quiet the sound so that Adam or God does not hear about their plan?

This painting is a prime example of the interesting questions that arise in my pieces. It is this kind of ambiguous and multivalent dialogue that I enjoy creating in the art – viewer relationship. By leaving interpretation open, I respect each viewer as an active participant in the artmaking experience.

I allow the wood grain to act as a substitution for painting an environment for the figure to exist within. The implied, shifting movement of the wood grain and the subtle tonalities create a more ethereal, dreamlike landscape, almost forming a radiating aura or mandala shape around the figure. It allows her to exist within her own realm. I use a minimal wash of color to help subconsciously inject mood into the image and this can add an implication of atmosphere or light source direction. Oddly, the wood grain can both flatten out and give depth to the image; the figure seems to hover just over the natural pattern, however the linear pattern gives way to landscape-like forms, shifting sand, wind or water existing behind and around her.
Figure 23: Sleeping Awake (diptych)
Figure 24: Fallen
Figure 25: Ghost Orchid
Figure 27: Duality
Through the progression of some of my paintings, the wood grain becomes less obvious underneath layers of paint, implying more of a dark, brooding or ominous feel. In *Duality*, the wood grain is almost entirely concealed, only showing through along the head of the figure on the left in a halo-like form. The dynamism between the figures and the dark background causes tension that isn’t found in prior pieces.

Figure 28: What You Left Behind
Figure 29: Pandora
Figure 30: The Messenger
Despite my love for painting on wood, I have also produced paintings on stretched linen canvas. The process was different from painting on wood due to the flexible nature of the painting surface of linen verses the flat unyielding surface of the wood panels. I was not able to paint thin washes of pigment on the linen; it required more paint to avoid having the “waffle” texture of the fabric become apparent. Also, the canvas doesn’t have the ability to lend its natural texture to the appearance of the painting in the same way that wood does; however the raw unprimed linen proved itself to
be a good substitute. I like the results of painting on linen canvas, and I will most likely continue to learn to work with this surface.

Figure 32: Radiant Decay
I have also experimented with painting on copper plates. In the early days of oil painting, artists would paint on sheets of copper rather than on canvas due to its incredibly smooth surface. I have discovered that painting in thin layers on bare copper allows for the natural glow of the metal to shine through the paint, providing my paintings with a level of radiance that I haven’t been able to achieve with either the wood panels or canvas.

Figure 33: Damnation
Painting has not been the only medium in which I have created work; some sculptures have emerged during my creative process. The option to physically build and manipulate an idea into a three-dimensional object is as equally
gratifying as painting, and I hope to fully render more of my ideas into three-dimensional forms in the future.

Figure 35: Winter
SYMBOLISM

Personal symbolism informs my work. For a lot of objects, there isn’t a single definition; it can vary from painting to painting. The trees that continue to occur within my work can represent strength, wisdom, life, death and rebirth. Animals, plants and insects are spectators, acting as witnesses to events occurring just out of view.

Ravens, vultures, owls and sparrows continue to populate my sketchbook pages and appear in some of my paintings. They act as watchful, intelligent beings, messengers bearing silent wisdom for my female cast of characters. They are also shape shifters: the dark birds resonating against the textured sky in *Fallen* swoop and dive, their silhouettes about to merge together to form some different entity. In *The Messenger*, a perceptive barn owl perches just over the shoulder of a maiden gazing into the distance, as though arrested by some thought of the moment.

In *Sleeping Awake*, eleven grey and brown moths flit above a draped female underneath a radiating sky. Flies cluster around a disembodied eye in *What You Left Behind*. Insects signify metamorphosis. However unlike the caterpillar turning into a butterfly (or moth in this case), wriggling maggots soon turn into flies.
CONCLUSION

I intentionally lead the viewer on an ambiguous journey. I cut off scenes and supply perplexing symbolism. I want my imagery to delve into the viewer’s subliminal memories, vexing their thought processes into reminiscence. There is an array of implied subjects in my work, however my paintings lack a singular meaning; the moment a new viewer lays eyes on the piece the meaning morphs to complement his or her own life.

Art-making provides me with a release for past memories; I often don’t even realize what my painting is about until after I’ve painted it. Through my use of symbolism I allude to many of these issues, however I keep the subjects vague enough to prevent my art from losing its allure.

Whether this touches on a childhood memory, a dream or a strange sense of déjà vu, the pensive elements of my paintings allow for the viewer to make it into his or her own. The tales are in a constant state of flux.

I’m interested in the role of narrative but I’m not always interested in simply telling stories.
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