

A BRIDGE BETWEEN WORLDS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

of

Laguna College of Art & Design

by

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In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

May, 2010

ABSTRACT

A Bridge between Worlds is a series of narrative paintings that explore symbolism and allegory. They are executed in a traditional, representational style, synthesizing the classical, naturalist, symbolist, and contemporary genres of painting. The aim of these works is to seek connections between humanity and nature, as well as our hidden selves, while hoping to find a deeper understanding of our place in this world.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express the deepest appreciation to my husband, family, and friends for their continued support and encouragement.

I would like to thank my mentors Darlene Campbell, Jon Swihart, Joseph Gerges and Perin Mahler as well as advisors Peter Zokosky, Wes Christensen, Randall Cabe, Betty Shelton, and Bonnie Blackburn for their support and guidance.

Thanks are also due to the numerous faculty and staff at Laguna College of Art & Design, who have helped me along the way.

DEDICATION

To you.

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INTRODUCTION

This series is concerned with the exploration and application of a symbolist language in order to create narrative paintings. Allegory is used to highlight the abstract concept that our internal and external worlds are connected. I wish for parallels to be drawn with the understanding of symbols that ultimately create a connection between the figure and its environment, as well as to other themes. Ultimately painting these images is a means for me to reconnect to the natural world, from which I feel increasingly removed.

I grew up spending more time outdoors than in. My family vacations often consisted of exploring nature in hikes and camping excursions which included the excavation of artifacts and the teachings by family and friends of what our findings meant. I was intrigued by what events took place to geologically shape our natural world and what the artifacts and fossils we found used to be when alive. I grew up with a deep respect and fascination of nature and wildlife. There was something magical about being so absorbed by nature that allowed me to forget about myself and to strongly connect to the greater world outside.

As I've grown up and become a part of modern urban life, living in cityscapes far removed from nature, I've increasingly undergone a sense of alienation from the magic of the real world. As a result, I've felt a pressure to migrate further within myself. Many find an escape in contemporary technology, spending hours trying to connect with others who are also disconnected from their literal surroundings. By trying to gain back my own connection to our natural environment with the use of metaphor and symbolism I hope to help others reconnect as well.

I can remember times while out exploring and searching for hidden treasures as a child, a sudden change in the atmosphere, the wind, the clouds, which so clearly mirrored my

internal psychological state. I have always felt very deeply this sense of oneness with nature, that we are deeply connected beyond what one can see. I believe this may be why I attempt to create these paintings that draw parallels between our interior and external worlds. The two major phenomenons I felt these deep connections with, throughout my life, have been nature and art.

As a child, I felt a similar feeling of enchantment while watching one of my mother's drawings come to life. It was a pastel drawing of a boy going through the stages of life, watching himself age as he appeared older and older in front of a mirror. The image was so lifelike; the message was clear and even felt sad to me. To create this sense of reality, this life on a page, was the closest thing I experienced to that deeply felt, meaningful connection. In retrospect, I see now this was my first introduction to allegory.

The understanding sought with use of allegory in painting is a way to elicit the same unseen but perceived connections that one makes while intellectually understanding or with comprehension reached while feeling. In the larger aim of its use, I attempt to create a similar experience to the connections I personally felt within nature and hope to guide the viewer through the work to understanding something deeper. With this mode of storytelling I seek to explore the interpretations of meaning that exist within us and ultimately create meaning and connection. This mode of visual metaphor has been an important vehicle throughout the history of painting that successfully conveys deeper content within the superficial image.

Through the study of historical works, I discovered many artists who were also concerned with similar concepts and found correlations as to why this was also important to them. The idea of personally reconnecting with nature is a part of a larger concept within my paintings. I also wish to draw connections by seeking parallels between humans and nature,

to discover truths about our own being, by studying the design, order and attributes of the flora, fauna, and scientific makeup of the larger ecosystem.

This form of study, drawing parallels between the singular human being to the beings within nature and the larger entities—such as society, earth and the universe—can be defined as microcosmic theory, or the microcosm-macrocosm analogy (Leclerc; Conger). Leonardo Da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* is an example of this theory applied to the design of man as a link to the divine design of nature rooted in geometry and science (Gorman). Da Vinci wrote many thoughts in manuscripts using the microcosm-macrocosm analogy:

By the ancients man has been called the world in miniature; and certainly this name is well bestowed, because, inasmuch as man is composed of earth, water, air and fire, his body resembles that of the earth; as man has in him bones the supports and framework of his flesh, the world has its rocks the supports of the earth; as man has in him a pool of blood in which the lungs rise and fall in breathing, so the body of the earth has its ocean tide which likewise rises and falls every six hours, as if the world breathed; as in that pool of blood veins have their origin, which ramify all over the human body, so likewise the ocean sea fills the body of the earth with infinite springs of water. (Richter, 179)

During ancient times and through the Renaissance, it is easy to see how humanity could be fascinated and preoccupied with such insightful ideas, due to their proximity to nature combined with less diversion. In our recent times of distraction, it seems few have the time, or make the time, to even consider the powerful truths revealed by nature and science. I hope to highlight a need to see similarities between what is perceived as separate parts of this

existence, to show unification, to highlight an idea that we are not separate but are a part of nature and the larger whole.

The nature of painting about such abstract concepts allowed for a natural exploration of symbolism, a pictorial language I had specifically wanted to use for this project.

Symbolism is the language utilized in my paintings because I feel it affords the opportunity to layer multiple meanings within a single image. I also feel a great joy with the deliberation spent researching symbols to include in order to elicit interpretation and meaning. Although I am at the beginning of this adventure in narrative picture making, my hope is that I may become proficient in the language of symbolism to communicate with others on a deeper level.

Through this project, I have drawn inspiration from the arts of the Greco-Roman era through the Renaissance, and to the academies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Within all of these periods, there is a synthesis of classical ideals, allegory, and symbolism that, combined, work to elicit a deeper understanding of the world around us, and ourselves.

Description

Fall (see Fig. 1) was the first painting in the series and my first real attempt at storytelling. A couple of years before this journey I had developed an interest in renewable energy, which probably stems back to conversations I had with my Father while growing up. Being a utility accountant, he was a great resource with a wealth of knowledge on the subject. My increasing awareness of climate change and how we might be able to exist in a more harmonious way with nature had become important subject matter to me as well.

The great metal windmill fields in the desert between Arizona and California had made an imprint on my mind as a child. And again they appeared in greater abundance

throughout Spain. It was while living in Spain as an adult that I started to consider creating a series that could correlate a type of renewable energy to a certain Season. The attempt was to use a particular Season as a backdrop for one of the four major elements: air, water, fire, and earth. Each element could also be related to a form of renewable energy and, at the same time, I could use each season to examine the current balance or imbalance of humans with nature. I also wanted each to work within a certain hue family that I felt corresponded to that particular Season. The dominant hue was to correspond to the time of day I thought the season best paralleled. My thought was that by compressing the long span of an entire season into a smaller time of day I could evoke a similar characteristic of the two units of time.

Traveling even further into my past to discover the roots of why I wanted to paint these particular works, I can recall a conversation I had with one of my Mothers' artist friends when I was around eleven years old. She asked me what type of paintings I wanted to create as she knew I was beginning to pursue art. I told her my idea for a painting of a boy sitting on the entry steps to his old beat-up house that sat alone in a field. He sat holding a pinwheel to his mouth, blowing on it as the clouds brought a storm. The wind in the background formed a dust devil which mirrored the action of his breath and the circular motion of the pinwheel. I told her how I wanted the look of the abandoned house to mirror his sadness and the storms outside to mirror the turbulence he felt inside. I knew then that I had a deep desire to tell stories with the pictures I made. I believe the pinwheel I used in *Fall*, that mirrors the windmills in the background, and the strength of the figure's breath, that mirrors the action of the wind coming from the approaching storm, grew from that idea.



Figure 1

After I had researched the symbols to support the various themes to layer in *Fall*, I began the composition with the use of the Fibonacci Spiral. Knowing its connection to the growth patterns in nature I wondered if it could also be used to support the idea of growth in humanity as we strive to use more sustainable energy. Rather than just using the golden section because of its geometric divisions, I thought it might be best to use the spiral that could again work to mirror the circular motion of the pinwheel and windmills.

I began the origin of the spiral at the figure's heart, but it was not only for my own sentiment that I located it there: it also served as an important design in the composition. However, I would like to touch briefly on this idea of sentiment in the contemporary art world before moving on. I feel the word sentimental or sentimentality is often applied to

works of art that touch on emotion, whether the emotion is disproportionate to the situation or not. There seems to be an extreme distaste for almost any type of emotion a contemporary work of art might portray, unless negative or awkward. As a product of our contemporary world and perhaps a result of age, I too find myself less emotionally attached to the world around me, but as a means to regain that connection I intentionally chose to embrace emotion in this series. That is one reason why it was important to begin the origin of the spiral at her heart. As a compositional tool it allowed the figure's head to reach the top of the spiral and her feet the bottom, which made her more monumental in size as she takes up nearly the height of the canvas. I wanted her to dominate the picture, hoping that she would become a personification of Fall and wind, rather than just a figure. The design pays homage to Leonardo Da Vinci, Georges Seurat, Salvador Dali, and many others who used the golden section in order to create a sense of balance and beauty. I also hoped to gain that type of aesthetic and design.

For the next piece I gravitated towards an even more formally balanced design with an enhanced emotional subject matter.

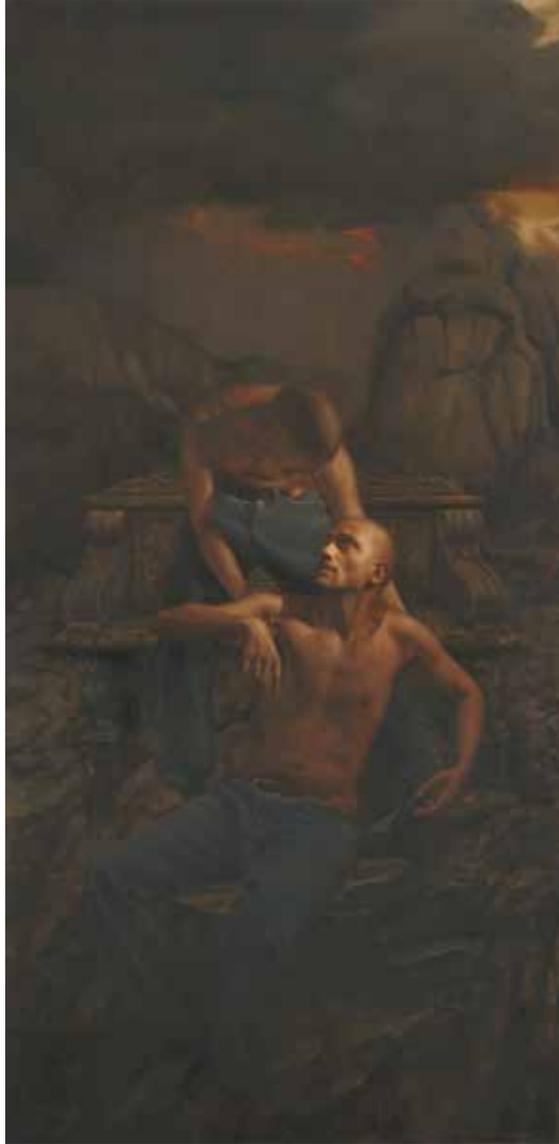


Figure 2

Savior (see fig. 2), began with a fairly simple idea – a sort of *pi eta* – a man (or woman) holding himself – saving himself; “within us is the savior we seek” is the concept I wrote, a few years prior. This one also relates back to that idea I had as a child of the boy’s external environment being a mirror of his internal world. But this time I chose not to use any compositional devices, like the golden mean, and decided to let the image evolve more intuitively.

In the preliminary sketch for this painting, I set the figure low within a narrow format, beginning the two figures' heads near the center of the canvas. This allowed more balance in the ratio of figure to environment. I kept the drawing dark with just a bit of bright light shining on the face of the man being saved, an indication of his enlightened state. The dark atmosphere was used to generate emotion, along with the figure's pose.

Though the central composition, the pose, and even sentiment, are more classically constructed, this piece is meant to show a contemporary man. However, dealing with an internal struggle is a timeless event that could occur to this man or someone else a thousand years ago. Like the *Pietà* by Michelangelo, emotions must be heightened in the pose; the sentiment becomes the key player, rather than the date it was created.

Here the parallel between external and internal worlds is portrayed with the mountains and the rocky, jagged environment that mirror his internal struggles. Perhaps he sought to find his way to the top of that distant peak but gave up until a deeper part of himself became his rescuer. In my perspective, I feel most often that when we are truly low, the only one with the power to save us is ourselves. This can take a tremendous amount of courage, an idea that is expressed symbolically by the carved lions in the marble bench. The light breaking through the clouds is symbolic of hope and of the figure breaking free from this dark time. This idea of looking within remained with me for the next piece as I tried to explore a similar theme in a more contemporary manner.



Figure 3

Intuition (see Fig. 3) also combines the outdoors with a figure and draws parallels between the two, though its focus was more concerned with looking within and having trust in oneself. It is essentially about the importance of listening to your own intuition. And like the importance that the heart of the figure played in *Fall* it played an even more outwardly important role here. The external environment and internal struggles are expressed in the arms of the tree and the arms pulling the central figure in all directions. The space is flattened and compressed, which may have made for a natural progression to the next painting, which also crops the figures and works within a narrow space.



Figure 4

Freedom of Worship (see fig. 4) is after Norman Rockwell and is also the evolution of an earlier idea. The previous idea was about showing humanity's quest for false idols. Most importantly it was about our obsession with money. The quick sketch I had first drawn was an almost aerial view of intertwining freeways overloaded with cars and people on sidewalks all traveling great distances to arrive at this enormous statue wrapped in money, showing the populous blindly altering their lives to pursue it. The final painted version, combined with the earlier idea stemmed from an assigned class project. The class was "Graduate Topics in Group Figure Composition" taught by Perin Mahler, who showed us several books and imagery to help guide our decisions in building this final project composed of multiple figures. One of the ideas that stood out for me was of recontextualization.

The desire to build upon a previous work grew from this exposure. I chose Rockwell's *Freedom of Worship* to build on and reinterpret. I chose to adhere to the composition of profiles and praying hands composed in a shallow space because of its sophistication and clarity of message. I adapted the design by adding symbols of our modern technology and pursuit of a monetary goal to be shown as our subjects of worship. Although it may look very different from most work in my series—not being composed within a natural environment—I hoped this would also be a way to show our disconnection from nature as we become increasingly absorbed by our man-made constructs.

The next painting was *Zeus* (see fig. 5), which brought me back to exploring a connection between man and nature. Again I used the Fibonacci spiral, only this time it more clearly mimics the spiral of the hurricane image tacked on the wall, which itself follows the Fibonacci spiral. The image of the hurricane can be seen as the storm Zeus is conjuring up in his head, and the water rising in his own room is a result of the actual storm he is creating outside. Along the same lines as *Freedom of Worship*, I hoped to interpret an idea from the past, this time a myth, in a contemporary manner in order to tackle a current issue.



Figure 5

I wished to show Zeus as the same cloud gatherer and God of the sky from past legends, but also as a contemporary being dealing with climate change. I layered other ideas with symbolism that can relate to the main theme but can also create almost entirely different story lines. At this time, I was beginning to enjoy the various readings from friends and colleagues. I like that ambiguous symbolism can evoke several interpretations, allowing a more open-ended concept.

Even though I felt I was beginning to understand my intentions with the use of symbolism, a problem was consistently appearing in my work, which was a lack of space, and it needed to be addressed in my future paintings. The solution was so simply stated by Perin Mahler, Chair of the MFA program, who suggested rather than beginning the composition with the figures and building the environment around them, or in my case behind them, that it's best to start with the environment first. This little gem of feedback is how I now start to build a composition.

Although I had already taken the reference images of the model for *Spring* (see Fig. 6) I knew it wasn't the right environment to support the main theme. So rather than jumping in as I had previously done without completely working out the preliminary steps, I waited until I had found the perfect environment to place the model in. While envisioning the piece, I was certain that there was a waterfall flowing from a mountain in the background. The reference shots of the model in a park with the ocean in the background just did not hold the meaning I wanted or work as a strong composition. I wanted the energy source to be water, as I felt spring fit well with the idea of harnessing the power created from the melting snow that becomes waterfalls during spring.

That summer I visited my brother in Seattle. We went on a road trip, but he didn't tell me where we were going. We took a long hike through a luscious green canyon. When we arrived at the base of the mountain, I looked up to see the perfect waterfall and rocky cliffs that I had envisioned for *Spring*.

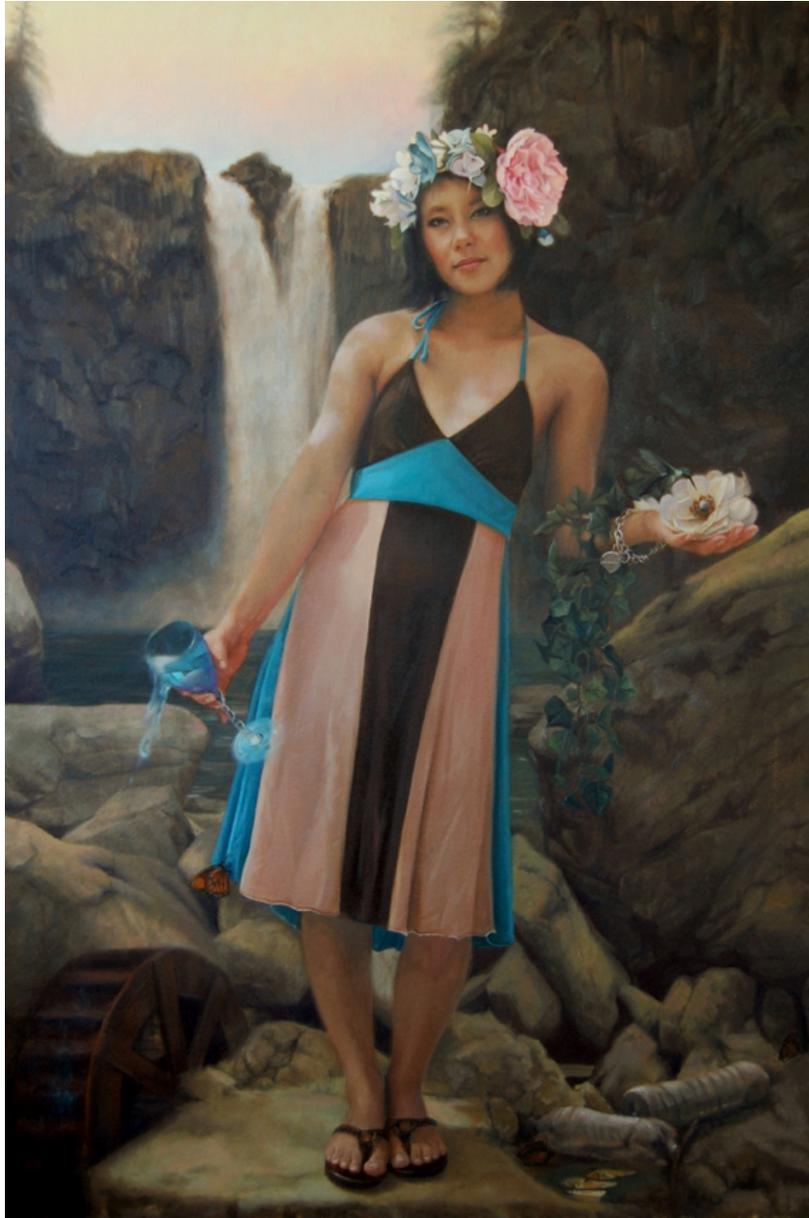


Figure 6

I was careful this time to work out the setting first in Photoshop before placing the figure. I decided to let the structure of the cliffs and rocks dictate the composition and frame the figure. The composition is a series of repeating shapes and lines, for example the waterfall in the background and lines of the dress work to mirror one another, as they create verticals that fall between the angles of the cliffs and rocks which frame her torso and head. The sky and rock platform that the figure stands on work as repetitious forms that help move

the eye from top to bottom. The pastel colors of the flowers, dress and glass are colors of our contemporary celebrations of spring.

The layers of meaning attempted with use of symbols are numerous. For example, the specific type of magnolia in her hand signifies spring but is also a low drought plant that requires much water for its survival—which parallels the same necessity in humans. The waterwheel is meant to speak of our contemporary issue of finding a more harmonious balance with nature as we begin to use more renewable energy sources. And like the sparrows that migrate in *Fall*, monarch butterflies are used to show migration patterns in spring. The butterfly is also used to hint at the effects of climate change. With the shifting of seasons butterflies migrate earlier and as a result have met new predators and are dying at faster rates. They can be seen as a symbol of extreme sensitivity to the slightest change.

Although *Spring* feels more believable and unified in its environment, I was becoming increasingly aware of other areas that needed work throughout the series and tried desperately to figure out a way not to fall into any of the same traps in the next painting. I spent more time giving thought to how I could improve and grow past these shortcomings by trying to work the idea and image out in my head, allowing it time to gestate—to grow and become clearer. I needed to start with a fresh concept rather than going back to old ideas. Using ideas from the past gave this body of work a definite direction and was a driving force behind it, as I had always wanted to see the ideas become painted images; however, the gap in time between completely forgetting and readdressing them created a sort of detached viewpoint that didn't retain the clarity of a fresh idea.

I had also begun with such an overzealous use of symbols that they tended to crowd the image and appear as though they were meant to oversell an idea. I realized with the help

of instructor Randall Cabe that this kind of busyness and complication may not have been the best way for me to communicate as poetically as I would like, and may even dissuade the viewers from attempting to unlock the images' meanings and ultimately hinder my goal of connecting with them. As time progressed I began to pare back the symbolism as was generously suggested by my mentor Darlene Campbell. This has provided an extremely important step in my growth as a painter and story teller. The paring back to only include what is absolutely necessary for the idea to be expressed through the formal structure as well as the details can create a more sophisticated image. My hopes are that my final painting has begun to show a substantial move in this direction.

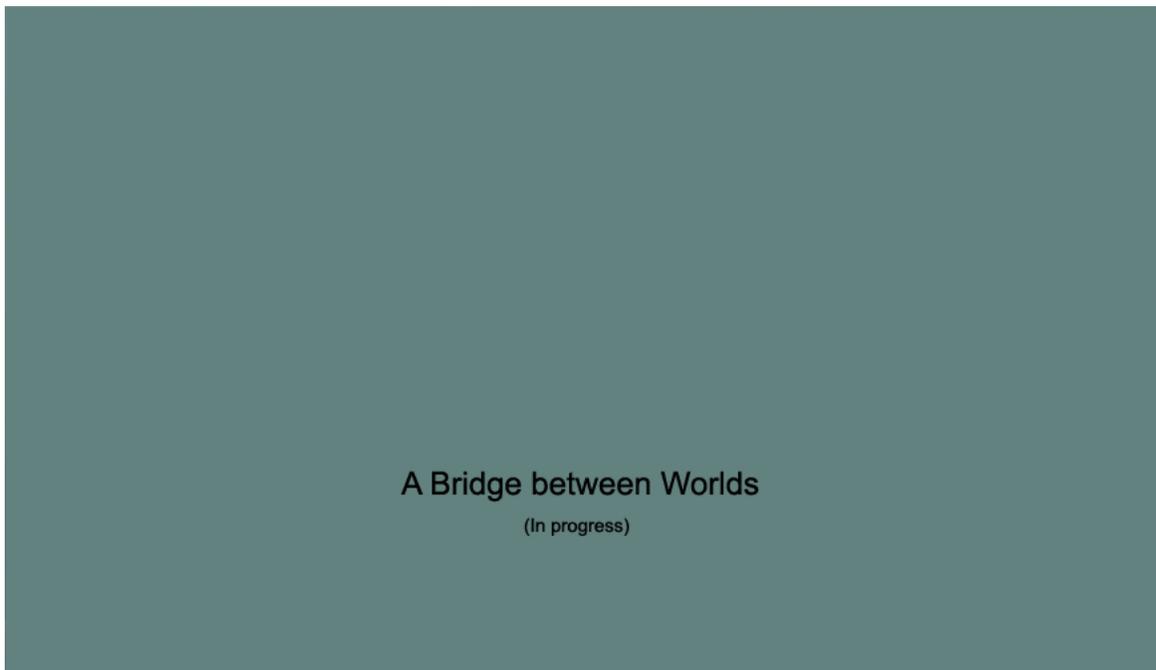


Figure 7

In *A Bridge between Worlds* (Fig. 7), the final painting in this series, the aim was to incorporate all the knowledge gained within the program into a singular piece. The hope was to incorporate personal ideas as well as the concepts of microcosmic theory, to combine them with the fundamental principles of design and construction, the ideals of the classical and

naturalist movements, as well as the incorporation of symbolism, in order to create a unified symbolic image. I decided to expand the space and extend it as far back as possible, which combined the formal and conceptual goal. Second, I tried to pare back the symbolism and be mindful that the formal construction and larger elements that create the composition are just as much a part of the narrative as the smaller symbolic objects. In this piece the environment is just as symbolic as the figures and symbols within it. And finally I knew this piece needed a solid construction, which, in painting, is mostly composed of a significant value structure. I spent an incredible amount of time composing this piece and thinking of just what to include and exclude.

It began its evolution with a continued exploration of the elements that comprise our world. My original intent for the series was to create paintings for all four seasons and link them to each element: air, water, earth and fire. However, my work within the program took many interesting turns and I did not complete all four seasons. Nevertheless, I saw an opportunity to explore these concepts again within the final painting, which allowed an incorporation of each element as well as a fresh idea to include: the fifth element. In many cultures there are not only four main elements that make up our world, but a fifth—one that transcends the material realm.

It was a surprise to me that I could layer just as many concepts and meaning within the piece, as I had previously done in others, however here they were not confined to objects of symbolism, but could be stated in more unified and complete ways by color, composition, and shape. Some of the meanings may be reached by the viewers while others may never be recognized. I am happy with the idea of open interpretation and the discoveries made

throughout the program. I believe the major goal of connection that I have sought throughout each piece is finally achieved in *A Bridge between Worlds*.

METHODOLOGY

The methods and procedures I use have been largely influenced by a desire to obtain a look similar to the French academics. This is not to say that I am being ignorant of the time in which I live and the important lineage of artists who have led us to where we are today. On the contrary, having been exposed to an almost endless amount of styles and movements throughout history, I see this as an important choice that allows a clear style that best suits the types of ideas I wish to communicate. From ancient Greek pottery, illuminations, the numerous awe-inspiring Cathedral paintings, from unknown artists to the Dutch miniatures, Romanticism, Surrealism, History Painting, Realism, and even Abstraction, the list goes on of styles of works that have stopped me in my tracks. In several ways the end product of my work is a hybrid of many, but the conscious style I connect most to and wish to emulate stems from the French academies.

This style speaks to me for two major reasons: one being the life-like illusionist world that is created on a 2-D surface, the other is the clarity of the message most often seen in the use of allegory that is easily obtained by painting in this realistic, yet highly illusionist manner. The Realists and Impressionists who rebelled against this slick style often stated that the smooth idealized surfaces did not give a true sense of reality, but what I believe they were most concerned with was the immediate emotion of reality that color and texture and brush stroke gave to their painted interpretations. When working with allegory, a clear smooth style does not detract from the messages of the symbolism and story. For me I see it as the clearest way to try to convey an idea over the importance of the artists' mark or their own feelings while painting it. This is also not to say that those styles are not valid. I love many Realist and Impressionist works and adore the feelings they reached with the bravura of brush stroke

alone, but for the concepts I hope to convey I feel the classical yet naturalistic style fits my needs best. My ultimate goal is to combine this technical, illusionist style with contemporary issues, being careful to plant the work in the current world we live.

In a quest to emulate this style without having the proper training to learn those artists' ways, I have been experimenting with various methods. One was the use of a grisaille underpainting. Another was just simply working from a drawing on the canvas but painting it to a finish by sections, called "area by area" painting, a procedure that was used by many, but most notably the school of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Frederic Edwin Church (Gurney).

I felt comfortable with the grisaille technique because it allowed me to break down the important factors, such as value and color, into two separate stages, which I felt made the process more manageable. Then when I tried the "area by area" method of working more directly straight into color over a drawing, I discovered the process sped up. I liked both methods but felt the latter might work best for future paintings. However, in order to use this more direct approach, I began to realize that plenty of preparatory work must be executed for the process to be successful. In all methods I have a distaste for changing the final image midstream. There are several reasons for this, but the most important is that if you are working from section to section, wet into wet, you gain a control over the edge quality. If you change something midstream you must also repaint several parts to obtain the lifelike softer edges perceived in real life. So for me I have begun to see working everything out in preparatory stages, such as sketching or painting a study in black in white to first insure a strong value structure, and then completing color studies, is crucial. This methodical planning before the final painting is executed, is really the only way I could make this

method successful if I was not willing to alter the final piece. I look to William-Adolphe Bouguereau as a guide for this method of systematically working the entire image out in stages. He methodically did figure studies in various poses, value studies, and color studies before committing to the final image. This is one of the reasons I feel his work is so technically successful. And I know now after this experimentation that this will be the future method that I will try to adhere to most.

Though I was unsure about this systematic method in the beginning of this project, I was left to experiment more to find what best suited my personality. I use photographs and Photoshop, printers, and modern paint colors, so of course the actual procedures of the French Academics, like Bouguereau, I would never be able to duplicate. However, I will be careful in the future to do as many preparatory stages necessary before jumping directly into the painting. Even so, one step in my current methods that will remain the same is the photo-shoot.

Once I have chosen an idea and what symbolism to include, I begin the process of creating the image directly with the use of photo collages in Photoshop. I create these collages by piecing together digital photographs I've taken of the figure, environment and various symbols. I enjoy executing the photographs with an amount of spontaneity and openness towards the character of the models and appreciate how their emotions can take the shoot in a more naturalistic direction. Often, certain serendipitous events occur that make for a more telling story than I could have planned. For example, in *Spring* the model accidentally spilt the glass of water, which ended up being perfect for the painting, as it could work to lead the eye with the splashing of liquid to the water wheel.

After I have combined the photographs into a hopefully believable scene, I put the final composition into a poster program at the same size as the canvas and print it out. The completed image is printed in letter-sized sections. Having the photographic reference be the same size as the canvas but divided into easy to manage handheld sections, I can more easily draw free hand, with attention to detail and accuracy, almost as if working from the Charles Bargue plates.

The initial drawing is executed directly on a toned support, with either an earth colored paint with brush, or a pencil. I have experimented with various combinations of pigments for toning the canvas and have found that the hue best used is a variation of whatever I've determined the dominant color family of that painting will be. Not only does the color shine through the total image, but also creates a type of controlled environment for the eye to better see when color laid on top is unharmonious to the total color scheme. If graphite was used directly on the canvas, I use fixative or add an additional thin layer of gesso over the drawing to prevent the pencil from striking through the progressive layers. I consider the foundation of the drawing to be one of the most important stages for the style of paintings I hope to produce, and will take up to one third of the total time invested on the piece just on the initial drawing. Drawing freehand rather than using grids or any aids to more quickly reproduce the drawing I believe helps train the eye not only for successive layers, but for future works.

Although still experimenting with various methods, I found a comfort working with a sort of grisaille layer, created with a mix of burnt umber and white. When the grisaille layer is dry, I scumble with thin layers of color slowly covering the under painting. I've found that not only do thin veils of color allow for very subtle temperature shifts, but also create more

control when modeling over a grisaille that you can still partially see. I am also experimenting with the use of value strings or the mixing of a local color for a certain object and using that to mix into various gradients as I complete the form. The classical works I look to for inspiration all possess seamless transitions, which is also the way I perceive nature. It is a classical tonalist approach of using value strings that is bringing me closer to achieving the results I aim for.

I have also recently begun using a medium, something of which I have always been terrified. It has been a revelation: the beautiful perfect edges seen in real life were suddenly attainable. The medium practically does it alone. What was such a mystery before, something I would labor over for hours, is possible in an instant. The discovery not only of what methods to use, but also of what materials are best used to acquire a certain look, has been paramount to this project.

Finally, nearly three quarters of the way through the program I converted to using good linen and high quality paints, which I resisted in the beginning, not believing the work then warranted the best supplies. Unfortunately, my resistance caused more suffering than the added expense, which has led to some incredible breakthroughs. Since the beginning of the program, my first mentor, John Swihart, and other mentors and visiting artists continually advised me regarding the use of proper materials; I should have listened sooner. The look I've been striving for, I believe will be reached more quickly. What I thought was my own technical shortcomings, was partially overcome with the use of better materials.

RESEARCH

Much like the paintings themselves, the research for this project is also about seeking connections. There are three main categories that my research has branched into: techniques or style, content, and symbolism. I hope the unification of these ideas can be seen within the works themselves.

I will begin with style, because it has been such an important part of my growth and goals as an artist. One of my earliest memories of art outside of viewing my mother's work was during a trip to the Getty Museum when I was five; at that time the only Getty Museum was the villa in Malibu. What struck me most was the Greek and Roman sculpture garden. The great sculptures that populated the mansion and garden outside held a monumental spot in my mind as to what art was, and the potential humans held in creating such beautiful representations of our reality. I walked around for quite some time after that trip with small figurines of these statues in my pocket. I was young and would not know their true significance or why they affected me so deeply until much later. However, even then they were extremely important to me.

Today, I realize much of my aesthetic tastes have not wavered far from the high ideals I saw manifested in these works. This realistic and grand style speaks most closely to the way I perceive reality and the manner in which I hope to convey that reality through the precise illusion of space and form. I search for my own potential in the creation of works with a high level of craftsmanship and technical skill. Many of the artists I revisit in museums, books, and the Internet, to glean technical insight from, are those who trained in the French Academies. What is interesting about these artists is how they and my earliest

awareness and deep aspirations are rooted in similar notions dating back to Greek and Roman art.

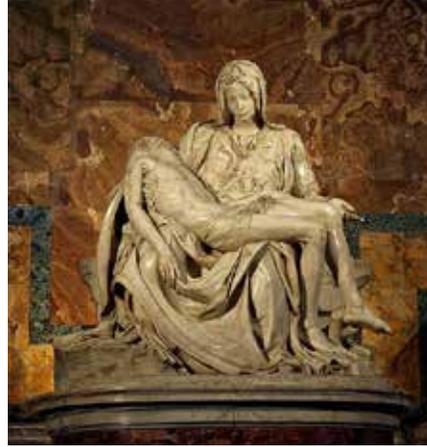
Although the painters I look to from the French academies are too numerous to list, one that has made a substantial impression on me, as a heightened awareness of his prolific body of work and working methods become revealed more and more, is William Adolphe Bouguereau. I often flip through images on my computer screen of various paintings while I work through problematic stages of my own work. Because I am still in the process of learning how to attain this highly finished style, I often refer to high resolution images of paintings that I enlarge on my computer screen to try to problem solve. Not only are these images beneficial but they also jog my memory of the works I've seen in person, and help in seeking answers to the challenges I face. One reoccurring challenge of mine is in creating believable edges of form as they soften and change temperature when they recede in space. I fight with this in every painting, and constantly pull up works from Bouguereau to address this issue. The edge quality in his work is nearly unparalleled in its accurate description of the visual phenomena we perceive in reality. Another attribute of Bouguereau's work that I have noticed just recently is an appearance of prismatic color used to elicit a true sense of light, described by subtle temperature shifts as a highly lit area moves into shade. I noticed this most in Bouguereau's skin tones and tried to apply a similar type of transition to some areas of the figure in *Spring*.



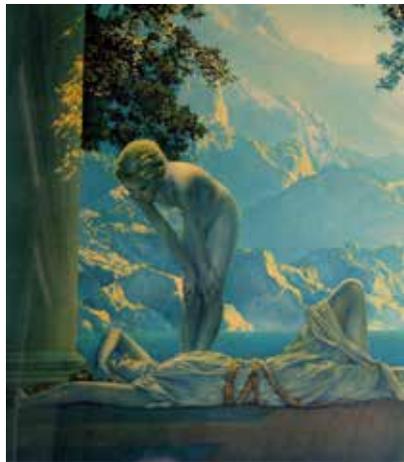
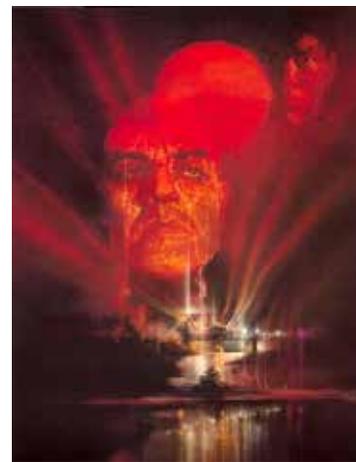
Fig 8. *La Charite* (Close Up of edges and prismatic color). Bouguereau, William.

Although Bouguereau's work has undergone a great deal of criticism for what many perceive as a lack of concept and depth, I see his careful attention to the visual laws of nature as stepping far beyond the superficial surface. His astute awareness and careful depiction of the visual phenomena that surround us all highlights this shared experience in a way that transcends the image. In creating works that so closely resemble our reality I am forced to slow down and inspect them, to literally sense the light that bounces around from surface to surface as if it were tangible, the subtle modulation of color and the fluidity of form in a way that allows me to realize in fact how beautiful and mysterious our world really is. His work pulls me out of the busyness of my own mind to notice these things in my exterior world once again. Above all else, this style speaks most deeply to my spiritual quests and helps reconnect me with the beauty of the natural world and the infinite potential within all of us.

Although the level of skill I try to attain in creating this classical style aids in my attempt to construct the highly representational images I strive for, I would be remiss not to acknowledge the evolution the style has undergone throughout time. Many of the models I refer to from the French school were a mixture of several different movements. While construction of space, composition and perspective, as well as some of the content, were classically based, the images were becoming more concerned with Naturalism rather than just reapplying a classical canon to their figures. In a quest to recreate the authenticity of the reality I live in, I also gravitate towards a more naturalistic look, especially in striving to capture the unique physical attributes of the models. Though this naturalism can be seen in the more casual gesture of our time, I try to bridge a gap between the casual pose and the expressive gestures of the classical eras. This is in hopes to strike a balance between the almost sedate, spell-like behavior we seem to be experiencing in this technological age and the desire to reconnect us back to a time and place where we are free to experience true emotion. The classical, even mannerist and Baroque gestures appeal to me aesthetically because I see more beauty in the arrangement of curves and angles, as well as the ability for the heavily composed gesture to carry more emotional weight. I looked at many *Pietàs* when arranging the figure for Savior.

Fig 9. *Pietà*, Daniele CrespiFig 10. *Pietà*, Michelangelo.Fig 11. *Pietà*, William Bouguereau

I also want to create a sense of emotion with the use of color by using dominant and analogous color schemes. A few of my influences for color outside of the academics are Alphonse Mucha, Maxfield Parrish, and Bob Peak. Many of their works dealt with dominant and analogous color schemes that can create a dramatic sense of emotion and harmony.

Fig 12. *Reverie*, Alphonse MuchaFig 13. *Daybreak*, Maxfield ParrishFig 14. *Apocalypse Now*, Bob Peak

Moving on from technique to content, this series also finds a kinship in the academics that is deeply rooted in the Greeks and Romans. Allegory was a common language used

amongst the artists of the academies. Many of these artists created works that dealt with content from an earlier age, such as mythology. *Jupiter and Thetis* by Jacques Dominique Ingres helped to inform my contemporary interpretation of *Zeus* (Fig. 15). The potential of revisiting mythology from a contemporary perspective appeals to me because of its exploration of cause and effect, especially in this time of climate change. “Myths are early science, the result of men’s first trying to explain what they saw around them” (Hamilton 18). I too feel in my interpretation of *Zeus*, as well as the other paintings in this series, a need to explain the world around me. I spent time studying many images of *Zeus*, from paintings to sculptures, and also studied his meaning throughout the ages, and accoutrements that symbolized his identity. I altered many things from the grand style to a more contemporary one, and all of the ancient symbolism to those that could speak of our current issues, such as replacing his large eagle with a small tropical parrot. As Hamilton puts it, “justice became *Zeus*’s companion” (Hamilton 19). I hope that I have also injected a similar notion, although in a more casually stated piece.



Fig 15. *Jupiter and Thetis*. Jacques Dominique Ingres

This common language of allegory and symbolism has been an incredibly important part of my journey in the program and consisted of much research. Today information is fortunately very easy to come by, however there are many discrepancies in the meaning of symbols from one internet site to the next, from one book to another, as well as from one culture to another. There are hardly any universally agreed upon meanings of a particular symbol. Knowing this, I did my best to consult a variety of resources to come up with the most appropriate meaning to fit the content of the narrative. Because I layer several themes in these paintings I believe the openness of interpretation, allowed by the various meanings of any given symbol, works to my advantage.

Matilde Battistini, an art critic, historian, and author, explains the intent and evolution of the use of symbolism in her book *Symbols and Allegories in Art*. It is in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that I began to find similarities with my work. Battistini asserts that the

“symbolic image” of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was profoundly influenced by the myths of the Greco-Roman period, Platonic philosophy, and the hermetic and esoteric traditions derived from the Kabbalah. She adds that the work of art was seen as “second nature”, as a new cosmogenesis, akin to the alchemical transmutation of matter. She goes on to say that Renaissance artists used alchemical symbols, and that their works dealt with the fundamental stages of the worlds creation and harmony, as well as a way to communicate important moral and intellectual values shared on more esoteric levels. Then during the seventeenth century a series of treatises and symbol dictionaries had been compiled and used by artists to help give them a clear and efficient means to express certain meaning of corresponding symbolism. However, this emptied the works of their mystery when the same content and symbolism was used in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Battistini states, “artists began to apply these codes in almost mechanical fashion; the images were gradually emptied of their deeper meanings and turned into simple didactic icons” (7).

Although I have used symbolism to convey some similar layers of meaning, albeit combined with contemporary issues, I never want my works to seem didactic. It is in this text that I realize that I am fortunate we do not have such commonly and universally known symbols or the work I create today could also become too commonplace and lose the potential of ever gaining that magical mysterious quality that I find in the works I love so much.

CONCLUSION

During this MFA project I was finally able to advance from the more simple portraiture I had done in the past, to the complex narrative paintings I had envisioned for the past several years. One of my main objectives was to learn how to compose many elements in a harmonious manner that could tell a story—a story that could be subtle, yet readable, and also mysterious. I believe I have achieved those goals to varying degrees, and will continue to learn how to incorporate the advice and knowledge that was imparted to me throughout the last two years to future works. Without the exposure to more artists, movements, and motivations throughout art's rich history, and the guidance of faculty, visiting artists and peers, the key successes I've made would not have been possible. Even if all the works are not completely successful, being given a keener eye to distinguish areas in my work that need most improvement is a significant advance in growth, and in itself an incredible success that will inform my future paintings.

Jumping head first into a foray of symbols was exhilarating and challenging, and through this process I feel I have found the language necessary to convey the kinds of ideas and connection I hope for. Likewise, this series has allowed me to better gauge how to use the language of symbolism more effectively. A key for me will be to continue to pare back the symbolism, to hone in on this quiet but powerful style of delivering an idea more poetically and simply.

As a cohesive body of work I can see the thematic search for connection being explored in each piece, and a desire to bridge a gap between humanity and nature and between the external and internal worlds. I also feel I have improved technically but will

continue to study all that I can to hopefully someday reach the technical skill of the great masters I admire so much.

I am excited for the future as my appetite for creating symbolic paintings has only increased through this process. Looking forward, I see a continuation of the exploration of narrative symbolist paintings and will most likely maintain a contemporary, allegorical-type story telling. I believe this search for connection by analogy and metaphor will also remain a large part of works to come.

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APPENDIX

Image Plates



Figure 1. *Fall*, 27" x 40", oil on canvas, 2008

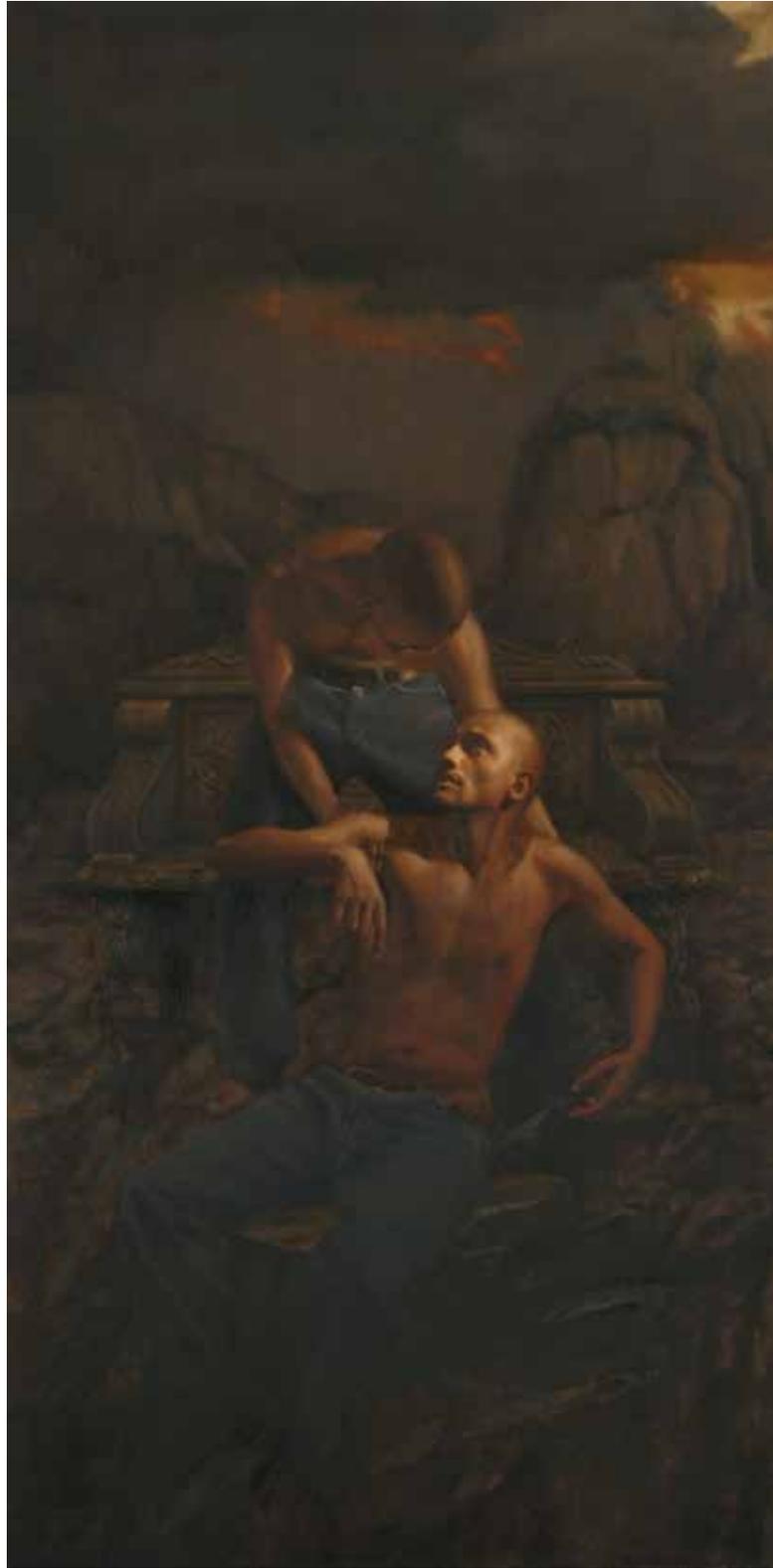


Figure 2. *Savior*, 24" x 48", oil on canvas, 2008



Figure 3. *Intuition*, 18 x 26", pastel, 2008



Figure 4. *Freedom of Worship (after Rockwell)*, 24" x 24", oil on canvas, 2009



Figure 5. *Zeus*, 24" x 36", oil on canvas, 2009



Figure 6. *Spring*, 27" x 40", oil on canvas, 2010

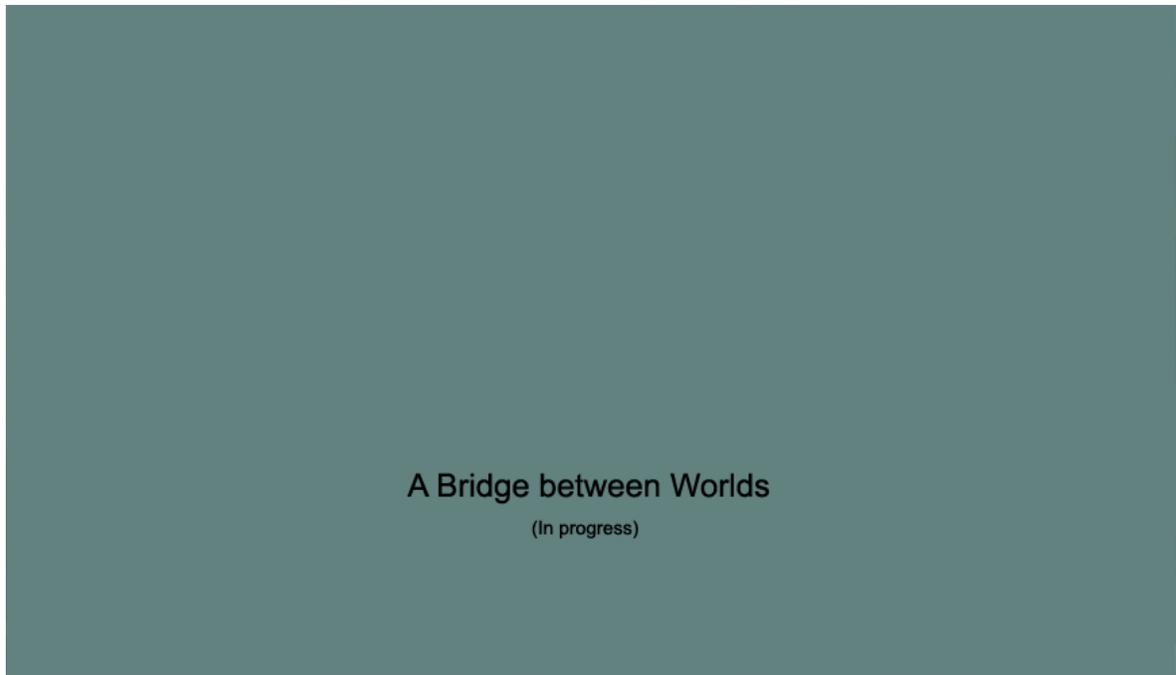


Figure 7. *A Bridge between Worlds*, 36" x 62", oil on linen, 2010