

Art and Symbolism
The Technique of Applying Hidden Meaning and
Communicating Specific Ideas Through Art

Andrea Caresse MacBean

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Todd Smith, M.F.A.
Thesis Chair

Will Honeycutt, D.Min.
Committee Member

Paul Reynolds, M.F.A.
Committee Member

Brenda Ayres, Ph.D.
Honors Director

Date

Abstract

Symbolism is an artistic style frequently used in the arts. Through the course of art history, it was its own artistic movement as well. The incorporation of specific symbols, shapes, colors, or identifiable images communicates to the viewer an intended message or statement. Frequently, symbolism appears to be hidden or initially unperceived by the intended audience. In some works, symbolism is so abstract that it needs explanation or clarification to be understood completely by the viewer. This thesis will analyze a few techniques of symbolism that can be incorporated in a work of art to communicate truth, entice thought, point the viewer to a particular concept, or draw out an intended emotion.

Art and Symbolism:

The Technique of Applying Hidden Meaning and Communicating Specific Ideas Through Art

Symbolism is incorporated in many forms of art including sculpture, photography, and painting. The myriad of ways in which meaning can be made are virtually endless; some methods are more conventional in nature or have a source of insignia. The definition of symbolism according to Merriam-Webster is “the art or practice of using symbols especially by investing things with a symbolic meaning or by expressing the invisible or intangible by means of visible or sensuous representations: as artistic imitation or invention that is a method of revealing or suggesting immaterial, ideal, or otherwise intangible truth or states.”¹ The origin of the word dates back to 1654 according to some records², and has been employed in a variety of ways throughout the centuries.

Often the concepts of emotion, mood, or of a certain thought are expressed in the techniques of symbolism. For example, justice, freedom, charity or other emotional ideas can be represented in a way that communicates to the viewer their intended meaning. Symbols such as a balance of weights, an eagle, and an open hand can depict these concepts respectively. Frequently figures possess elements of what they refer to in a more literal way. An example of this would be the use of an apple³ to represent temptation as in

1. Merriam-Webster, “Definition of Symbolism,” Merriam-Webster, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/symbolism> [accessed November 23, 2013].

2. Ibid.

3. “The Latin word *malum* means both apple and evil, which may be the origin of the apple symbol. When Adam and Eve are shown with the apple, it is a symbol of their disobedience and of original

the story of Adam and Eve, or the insertion of a hammer and sickle to represent the industrial worker and the peasant – the two symbols for Soviet Russia.

Not only does symbolism include particular shapes, objects, or discernible figures to represent a meaning, but the position and stance of a work can also shed light on a nuance of the piece's intended purpose. In sculpture, the way in which a figure is standing, sitting, postured, or leaning could also express certain concepts that the artist is wishing to communicate. The materials chosen or the manner in which something is created also gives meaning and possible symbolism to a piece.

Within the art of symbolism, there are several offshoots of other styles that incorporate symbolism in different ways. Conceptual art is a type of art that focuses on “getting a concept across” in the image. While not all conceptual artworks contain a specific meaning, they all inspire the viewer to think. Sometimes there is a specific message, and other times an observation of space, color, and line are all the artist wished the viewer to consider. Conceptualism⁴ became somewhat of a movement in the late 1960s and highlighted the technique of abstraction to cause contemplation. Usually these works center on a thought or wish to express opinion or make a point. Typically the artist

sin, of indulgence in earthly desires and sensual pleasures. Conversely, when near or held by Mary or the Christ Child, the apple signifies acceptance of man's sins and salvation.” Gertrude Grace Sill. *A Handbook of Symbols in Christian Art*. (New York, NY: Touchstone. 1975), 25.

4. “Given the complexity of genealogical strands and avant-garde strategies that combined to comprise what came to be referred to as conceptual art, it is not surprising that conceptualism during the mid to late 1960s was a contested field of multiple and opposing practices, rather than a single, unified artistic discourse and theory. Be that as it may, there are several aesthetic theories or models of conceptual art that can be discerned to have a certain preeminence or predominance as shaping or influencing forces. One of the most significant of these is represented by the work of Joseph Kosuth, Christine Kozlov, and the Art & Language group. Kosuth describes the distinguishing characteristics of this aesthetic theory that I will refer to as a ‘linguistic conceptualism’ in his three-part essay ‘Art After Philosophy’ (1969), where he advances an exposition of conceptualism undergirded by the tenets of logical positivism, in particular A. J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936).” Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999), 8.

will put a variety of objects/people into the scene to create the intended meaning by means of symbolism and association. Much of conceptual art needs no explanation, and the intended meaning is discernible by the viewer in most cases. With modern technology, computers often assist photographers and digital artists in preparing these types of images. An artist can take a variety of images and merge them together into one scene as desired. Many however try to achieve their intended conceptual work using already existing tangible items on-sight in the taking of the picture, or producing the work itself. Conceptual photography is considered one of the most creative types of photography because of the imaginative connection of ideas with images. When viewing many conceptual pieces, it is evident that the artist put much thought into developing the work – not simply a point and shoot picture. With conceptual work, the photographer makes precise use of graphic symbols to represent various ideas, movements, moods, and anything else the artist may wish to include. Typically these symbols are understood by the viewer and clearly portray a message. The title usually also portrays what the artist is trying to communicate and assists the viewer in understanding the message.

Likewise, color is a highly resourceful tool in conceptual and other symbolic artwork. Colors are typically classified into two broad categories: warm and cool colors. It is clear by the description that the two spectrums of color create two very different responses: feelings of warmth (energy, joy, excitement, fire) verses feelings of coolness (peacefulness, stillness, unity, water). There are then multiple shades within those spectrums that individually stand on their own with mood or meaning.⁵ Whether people

5. Leatrice Eiseman, *Color: Messages and Meanings: A Pantone Color Resource* (Gloucester, MA: Hand Books Press, 2006), 5-17.

realize it or not, they place emotions or feelings on certain colors. This can often be subjective, but in general there is a consensus⁶ on what a color is implying.

Red denotes excitement, energy, love, war, strength, blood, and other concepts associated with intensity or passion. Pink embodies romantic feelings of tenderness, caring, and acceptance. Beige and ivory represent unification; ivory is more representative of quiet pleasantness, while beige suggests a calm simplicity. Yellow symbolizes joy, happiness, optimism, imagination, sunshine, gold, and hope. But as with other colors that have double meanings, it can also represent dishonesty, deceit, illness, and hazardousness. Blue reflects peace, tranquility, coldness, calmness, unity, trust and truth. As well as security, loyalty, sky, water, depression, and is an appetite suppressant. Purple evokes feelings of royalty, nobility, spirituality, ceremony, wisdom, enlightenment, and mysteriousness. Orange symbolizes energy, balance, enthusiasm, warmth, and demands attention. Green represents nature, the environment, healthiness, good luck, youth, spring, generosity, fertility, and renewal, as well as jealousy, inexperience, envy, and misfortune. Brown denotes earth, stability, hearth and home, the outdoors, reliability, comfort, endurance, and simplicity. Grey signifies security, intelligence, reliability, modesty, maturity, dignity, practicality, and old age; it can also represent sadness and boredom. White embodies purity, reverence, birth, simplicity, cleanliness, peace, humility, precision, innocence, winter, snow, goodness, sterility, marriage, and coldness. Finally, black represents power, sophistication, formality,

6. Leatrice Eiseman, *Color: Messages and Meanings: A Pantone Color Resource* (Gloucester, MA: Hand Books Press, 2006), 5-17.

elegance, sexuality, mystery, and fear, as well as evil, sadness, remorse, anger, anonymity, mourning, and death.⁷

So often the message portrayed in art is conformed to the cultural perception⁸ that surrounds the image or symbols used. In many countries certain colors may represent entirely different meanings than in other parts of the world. Many religions also utilize various colors in ceremonies and see specific ones as more important than others. Take for example two Native American people groups. The Navajo Nation holds Turquoise, white, yellow, and black as more important than others because they reflect their four sacred mountains.⁹ The Iowa Nation also has four colors that it considers important, which are black, yellow, red, and white; these are shown in their flag and are considered to be the four races of man.¹⁰

Just as individual people have favorite colors, different people groups often have preferred colors as a whole. Often these color choices match the cultural fashions, foods, natural elements, and personalities of the people. Colors tend to say a lot about the people who prefer them. An example of this is that in western culture, red is associated with anger and speed. One popular myth promotes the idea that “car insurance companies charge more for red cars than other colors, because the owners of red vehicles are more aggressive or are risk takers.” Obviously this isn’t true, just like red cars do not get

7. Leatrice Eiseman, *Color: Messages and Meanings: A Pantone Color Resource* (Gloucester, MA: Hand Books Press, 2006), 5-17.

8. John Gage, *Color and Meaning: Art, Science, and Symbolism*, Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press 1999), 7.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

pulled over any more frequently than other cars. This does however clearly show that color has a greater impact psychologically than many people realize, and the use of specific colors in art can help achieve specific moods.

Symbolism is a powerful tool to the artist. The application of various colors, image, and often the implication of emotion is imperative when creating an image that displays a concept and idea, or makes a statement. When done properly, symbolism, conceptual imagery, and the application of color can create an image that vividly communicates to the viewer. This brief study of a few of the aspects of symbolism in art shows that an understanding of this subject is an enormous resource to any artist to create impactful and meaningful work. While this may not be the priority of all artists, communicating a concept, even minutely, is often a major factor in art. Each should utilize these and the other techniques of symbolism to capture and create works of art that make an impact on the world.

Artworks that incorporate symbolism often aim at attracting a viewer that seeks to answer questions. Many subjects deal with concepts of love and hate, war and peace, death and life. But this style is not limited to a certain population of individuals or artistic preference. Symbolism is a technique that can be incorporated into many different styles of art: Post-Modern, Classical, Art Nuevo and others. It is a tool that can be transmitted across a broad variety of mediums as well, such as photography, painting, mixed-media, digital art, and sculpture.

Symbolism in art tends to succeed more often than not because it is an art form that requires viewer participation. Usually symbolic pieces are not displayed without the viewer acknowledging and experiencing it individually. It is for this reason that symbolic

works are well received and understood, as well as appreciated by amateur art lovers. Often, if the message given by the artwork is in agreement with the viewer, it will be accepted and loved instantly. Likewise, if the message is in disagreement by the viewer, the art piece is questioned and disliked. An example of both respectively are Chicago's *Cloud Gate* sculpture by Anish Kapoor, and Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* which is simply a signed urinal. *Cloud Gate*, affectionately known as "The Bean," was created to simulate the clouds that often appear in Chicago's skyline, and reflect the city's beautiful surrounding architecture. Duchamp's *Fountain* was made to challenge the art norm and make a statement about what could be called art (it was debated over and removed from its first exhibit an hour before show's opening¹¹). This is the careful balancing act of using symbolism in art if the artist is trying to create a marketable or accepted work. However, if the artist wishes to make a particular statement, popularity is not necessarily a priority.

The projects included in this thesis (given below) focus on the use of symbolic art to express the truth of God, as well as show emotion and mood. Included in this project are a variety of mediums to show the diversity of the symbolic technique. These works highlight commonly understood expressions, speak the truth, and explore emotion. Their purpose is to evoke thought by the viewer, and cause individuals to ponder the truth.

11. Martin Gayford, "Duchamp's Fountain: The Practical Joke That Launched an Artistic Revolution." *The Telegraph*. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3671180/Duchamps-Fountain-The-practical-joke-that-launched-an-artistic-revolution.html> [accessed November 19, 2013].

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webster.com/dictionary/symbolism [accessed November 23, 2013].

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The following images are examples of artwork that incorporate symbolism in their design. Before reading the descriptions associated with the work, take a moment and examine the art for yourself to see what meanings you discern from them.

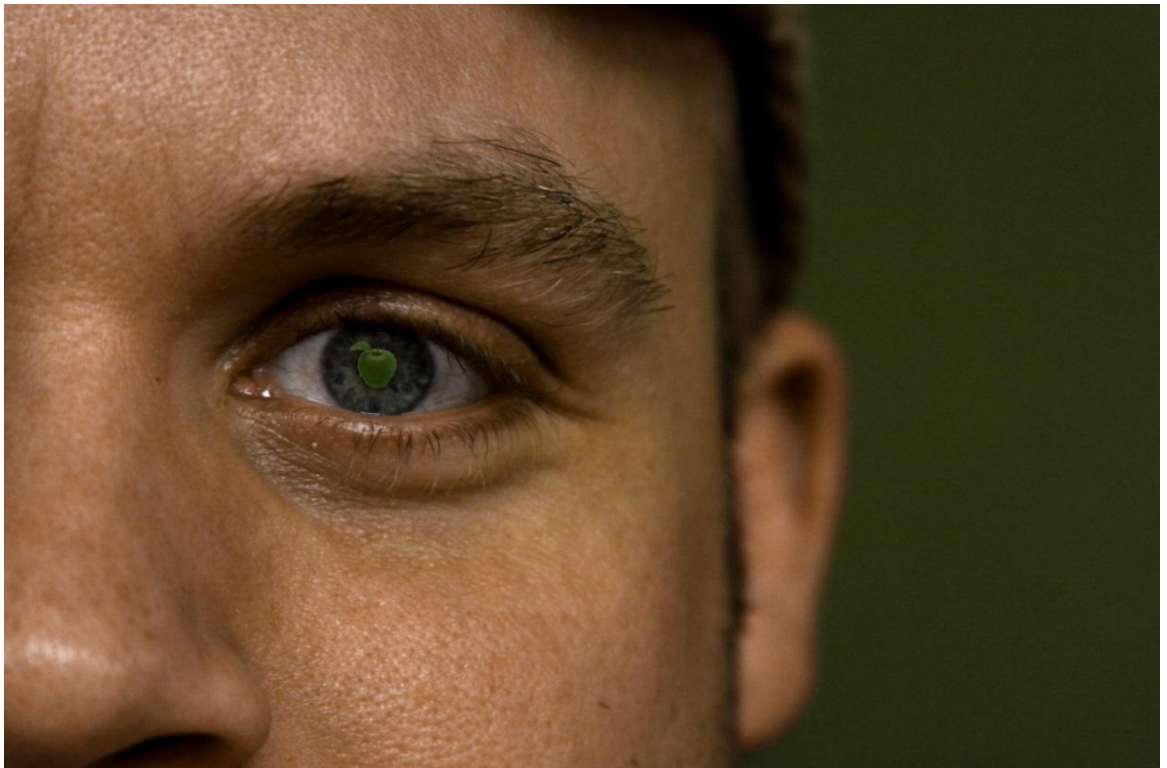
I've Been Framed

This is an image in a series of environmental shots taken of an artist in her studio. I used a frame to help demonstrate her field, as well as to “frame” her face. The scarf was left as its original color to accentuate the artist’s joyful personality.

Light at the End of the Tunnel

This image is pretty self-explanatory. The open end of the tunnel ahead cast its rays down the corridor of the tube, creating a mystical glow ahead.

Apple of My Eye



We've all heard the expression, "You're the apple of my eye." This is a photo of my fiancé that I have superimposed an image of an apple on his eye.

Bite the Bullet



Another cliché commonly heard is “Bite the bullet.” This image simply puts that concept into reality for an instant mental picture.

A Wall Is a Door



A slightly less well-known expression is “A wall is a door.” The meaning is that what appears to be a wall in your life, might actually be an unopened door to new possibilities. This image helps express the concept of cracking this unknown door and seeing what lies on the other side.

A Little Bird Told Me



This image captures the mood of a secret exchange between the teller (bird) and the hearer.

Stop



This image has a dark and almost foreboding sense of anticipation.

The viewer isn't sure what the subject is looking at, or why she is signaling a motion to stop. The intensity of light and shadow helps create this dramatic mood.

Shine the Light



In this image, a simple everyday object of a lamp post comes alive with the addition of color and movement. The concept (given in the title) is that when we shine the light (of ourselves or of joy) there is an innate sense of happiness or optimism (given the choice of pastel and joyful colors such as pink, blue, and green). This is merely a visual representation of those emotions.

A Moment in Time

This image is simply an observation of time and how the art of photography can capture a moment that is otherwise unable to be relived.

Ducks in a Row

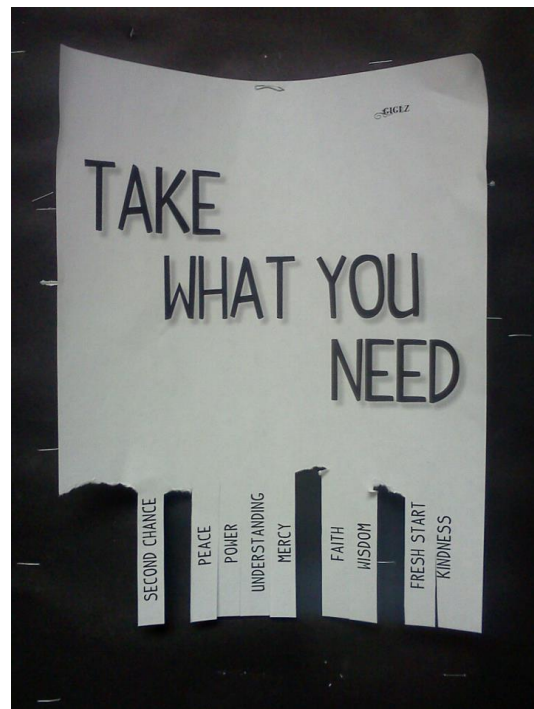
A humorous visual of the concept of “lining your ducks in a row,” (a colloquialism for making sure things are in order.)

Alone

In this image we see a lone figure in the midst of an open space. He is looking and facing away from the camera creating a sense of disconnectedness. The colors are grey and somewhat melancholy, creating a sense of isolation and boredom. Together with the title we sense the man's loneliness, with his only company being his reflection on the floor below.

What Are You Looking For?

An interesting look at the needs all people have, and what individuals seek out when given the opportunity. This was posted on a bulletin board along with items for sale and want ads. Instead of pulling a slip of paper with a number, people had the option of taking whatever need or emotion they desired.



Back to the Drawing Board

When envisioning a writer or artist trying to come up with a new concept for his/her latest work, we imagine an individual hunched over a desk burning the midnight oil with a pile of wadded up papers in the trashcan behind the chair overflowing to the floor.

Here we have a pile of such papers in the distance and one lone wad closer to the camera. There is almost a sense that this paper is different from the others, perhaps it is a concept to be revisited by the creator, or maybe it was just a bad shot and landed away from the rest. No matter what the reality, it causes a tension that needs satisfaction, thus causing the viewers to create a story in their minds as they view the piece.

Flaming Phoenix

From the midst of fire we see a phoenix aflame as it emerges from a fire pit. This theme of a phoenix is a recurring image in some of my work, as it means many things which are important to me. It symbolizes life rising from death, hope emerging from disaster, and in ancient times was a symbol of Christ because of His death, burial, and resurrection.

Old and New Testament

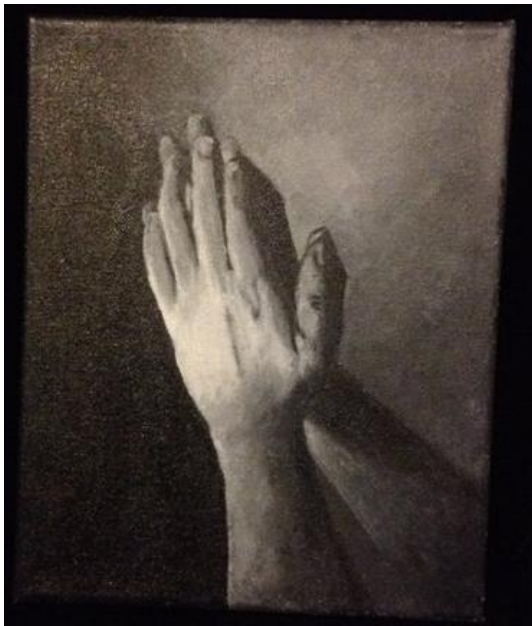
This book sculpture reveals images from within the book from the Old and New Testaments (front and back respectively). Simply by holding the book and looking at its cut-out pages from the outside, the viewer is able to discern the stories and characters revealed within the original text of the book.

Eternal Flame

This work is “eternal” because the flames are cast from plaster, which will never be extinguished. The abstract nature of the work lends itself to feelings of ethereal continuance, and the white color accentuates the purity of this never ending fire.

In The Presence

The inspiration for this statuette was the feeling of complete reverence of God's holiness when we come before His presence in prayer. The figure is seen as white because Christ's blood has made him pure. And he kneels on a gray and black ground that lends itself to the realization of fallen earth.

Praying Hands

This is a classic representation of hands in the attitude of prayer. The use of light and shadow creates the sense of solitude and being in a quiet place alone with God. The soft glow of light also helps to enhance this mood to the viewer.

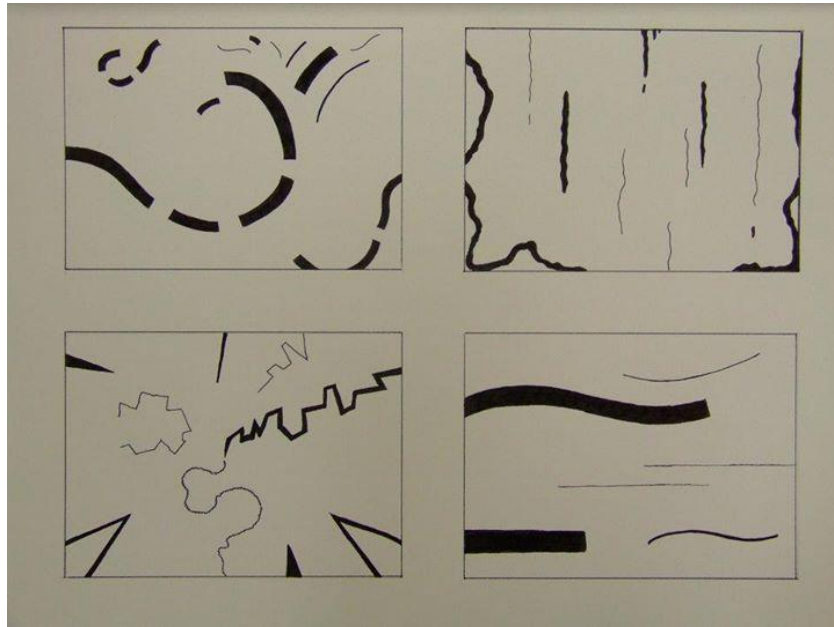
Seeking God

This figure is poised in a position of submission and questioning as she seeks to find answers in the book beneath her hand. I created this image during a time in my life where I was trying to find God's truth and answers amid a roar of uncertainty and questioning. The upraised hand and the figures upward facing head lends itself to the concept of seeking or asking to gain knowledge, while the other hand is grounded in the unchanging Word for stability and truth.

Fire and Water

*These two paintings work together to create a unit within a theme. The titles are **Fire** and **Water** respectively. **Fire** represents the flame of the Holy Spirit, and **Water** represents the baptism that follows.*

Emotions

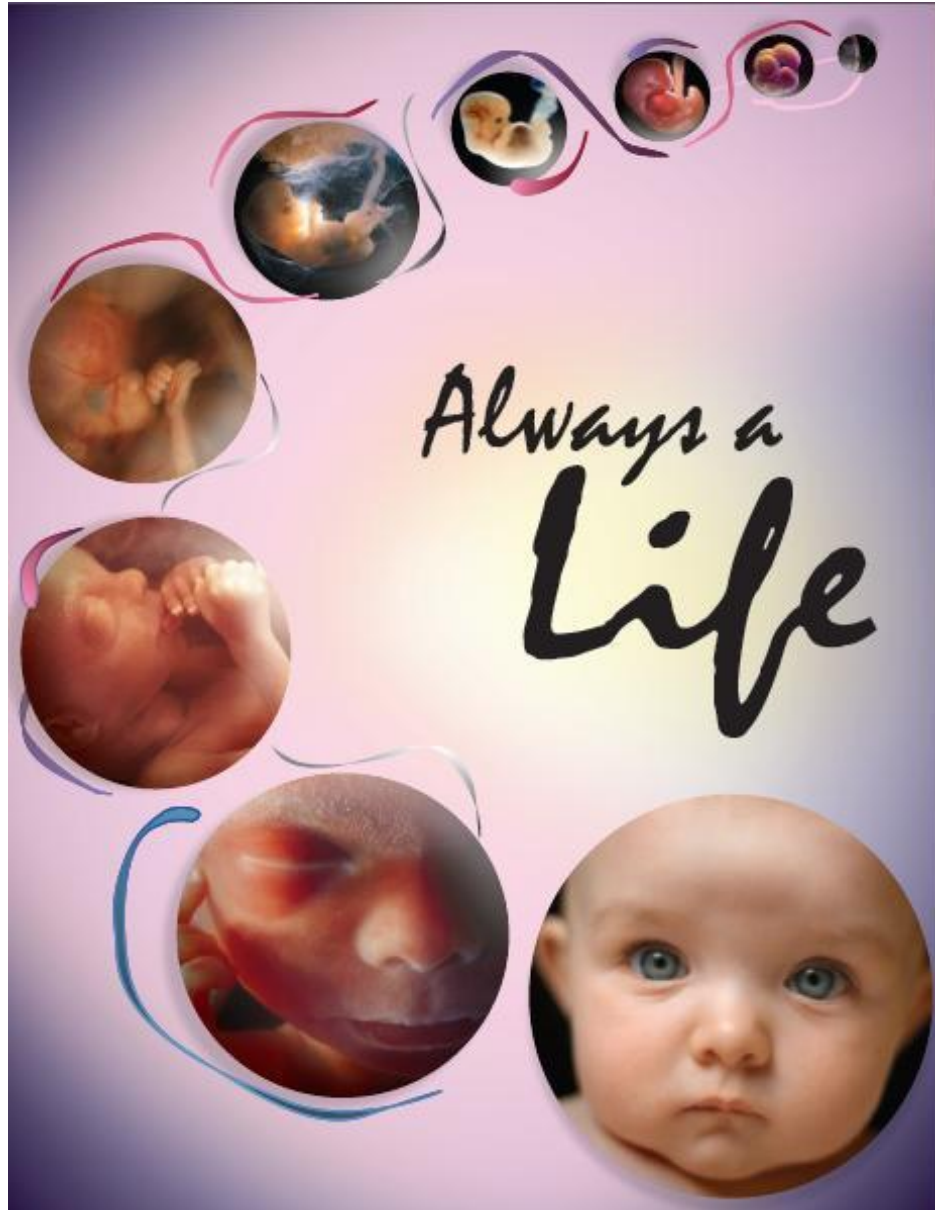


This work was a study on line and its placement to create emotion. The top left corner represents joy. The top right symbolizes sadness. The bottom left expresses anger. And the bottom right shows peacefulness.

Unchanging Focus



This mixed medium piece utilizes texture to create its meaning. Inside the eye itself are thumbnail images of manmade and natural images that are macro shots of textures. Bricks, leaves, flowers, and metal are a few of the images contained. Surrounding the eye are shards of mirror that reflect the surrounding environment of the world. Surrounding the eye are painted strips of newspaper, representing the constantly changing world around us. In the center of the eye is a mirror in the shape of a cross, symbolizing that Christ should be our focus in the midst of all the earthly distractions.

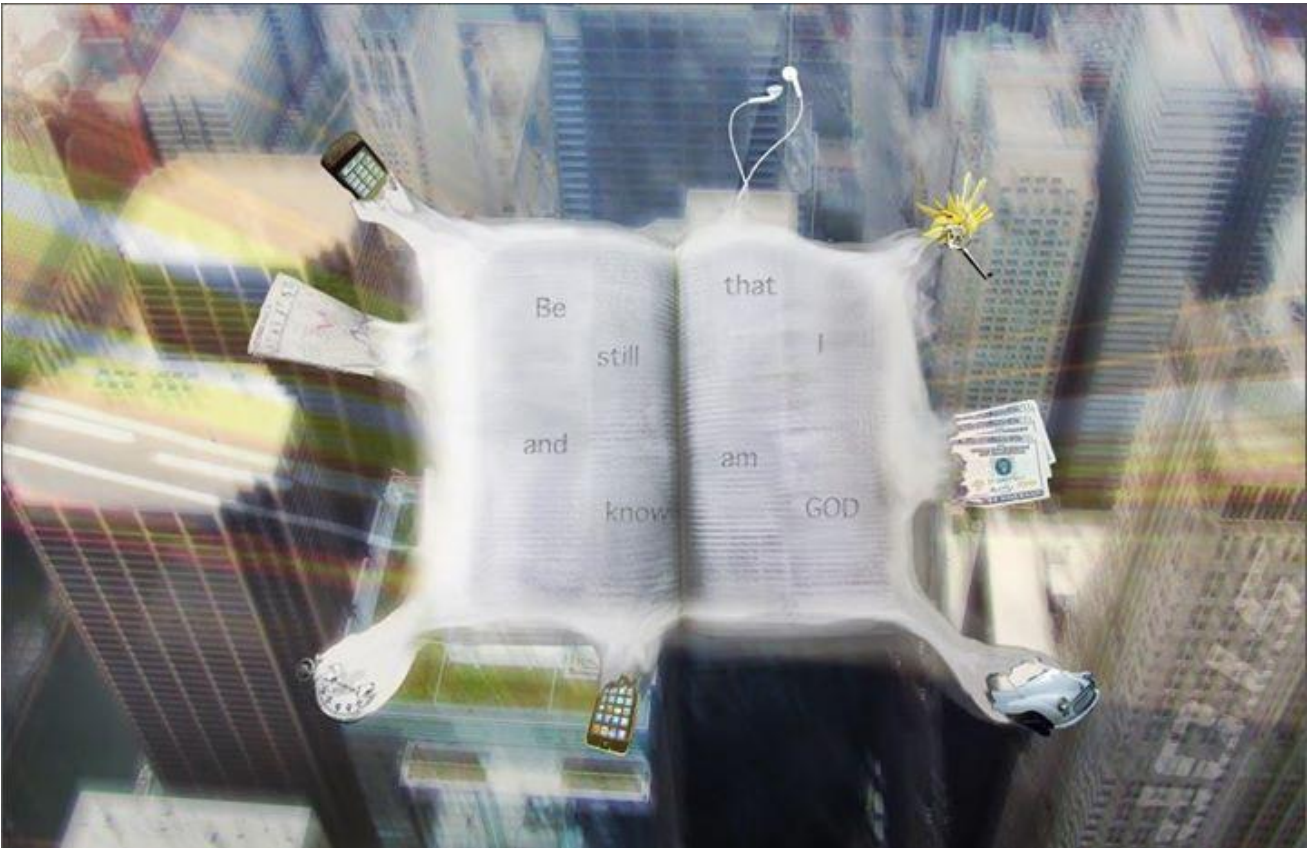
Always a Life

This prolife campaign poster was created to show the continuance of life from conception to birth and beyond. The curved line of progressive advancement is known as “continuance” and subconsciously tells the viewer that all the images are related and equal. The wispy lines help accentuate this idea of connectedness. The use of line and continuance delivers the message that a new born baby is equal to the zygote that it once was. This creates the concept of there always being a life, even without the added text.

Crux

*This large scale work is loaded in symbolism. The black paint on the outside represents sin and fallen humanity. The red surrounding the cross represents Christ's blood. The white glowing from around the cross symbolizes the purity that we receive from Christ's sacrifice. Notice that there is no black touching the cross, and a white pure barrier separates it from the darkness. Within the cross are hundreds of pictures of individual's faces: some old, some young, from all cultures and walks of life. This represents the millions of people that are accepted and saved by God's grace through the blood of His Son Jesus. These pictures are nailed to the cross by gold nails, representing the cleansing and purity of salvation. In the center of the cross there is a mirror placed at eye level. The viewer can look into the mirror and see their reflection and understand that their sins can be equally forgiven, if they accept and believe in Christ. The title **Crux** is a double meaning, because it not only means "cross," but also means that there is a pinnacle moment, or point*

*of decision that has to be made. The phrase, "the crux of the situation" may help ring a bell at this meaning. It shows that salvation is a decision that has to be made, and is not merely available to all without thought or contemplation. It must be given **and** received.*

Falling Bible

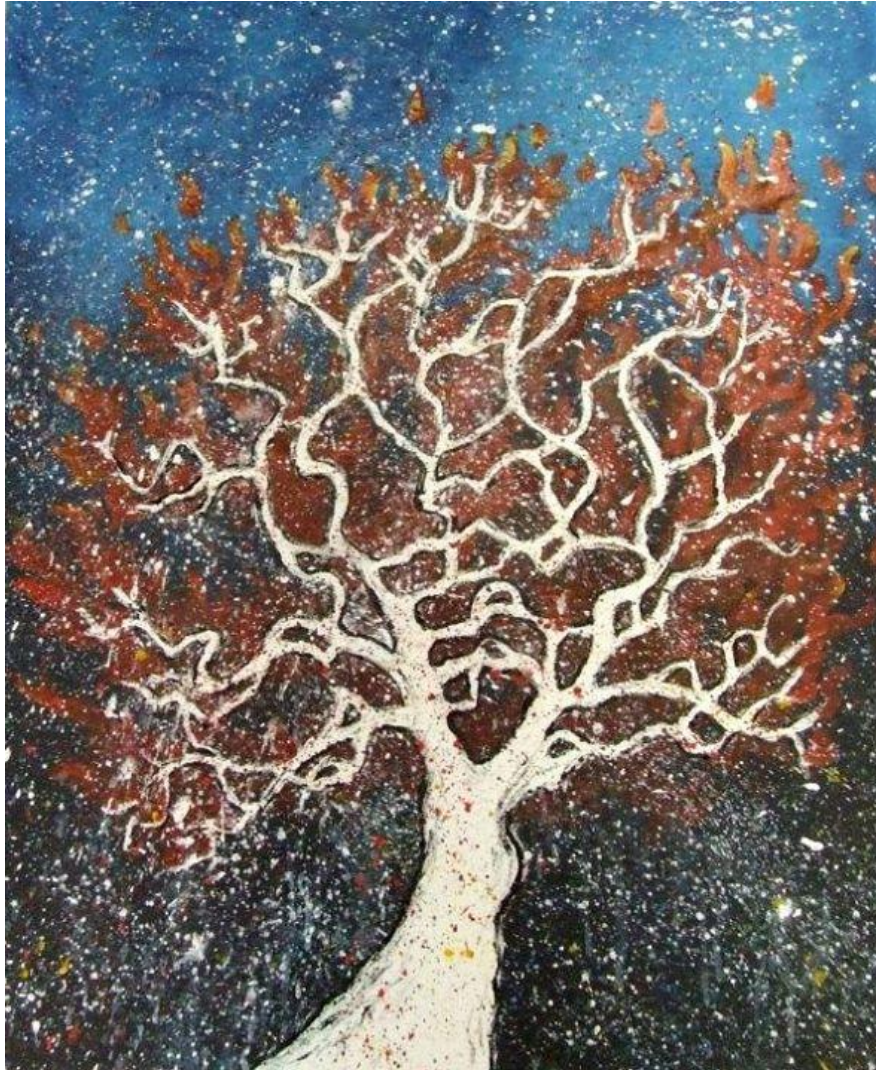
This work was made during a point in my studies when my schedule and the distractions of life were keeping me from devoting the time I needed in the Word and with God. I chose this moment to create a digital work of art that incorporated hidden meaning and symbolism to communicate a message. We have in this image what appears to be a Bible falling over a busy and dizzying cityscape. The Bible seems to glow and blur as we see objects being pulled out from it. Starting in the bottom left corner and going clockwise are a watch, calendar, cell phone, ear buds, keys, money, a car, and an iPod. All of these items symbolize the buzz and din of the average day in the life of a busy individual. They pull at the Bible almost as if they are trying to tear it apart. In the text of the Bible we see the words edged into the pages, “Be still and know that I am GOD.” In the cityscape behind we see symbols in the corners that are almost imperceptible. “STOP” is in the bottom right, a stop sign is in the top right, and a stop light is in the top left. These represent that little voice in our head that we hear telling us to slow down and stop to focus on God, but that we often ignore or pretend we don’t hear. The overall purpose of this work is to make the viewer realize that life can distract us from the one thing that is most important – our relationship and communion with God. It is intended that this piece be a cautionary reminder to the viewer to slow down, and remember Who is God.

Rising From the Ashes

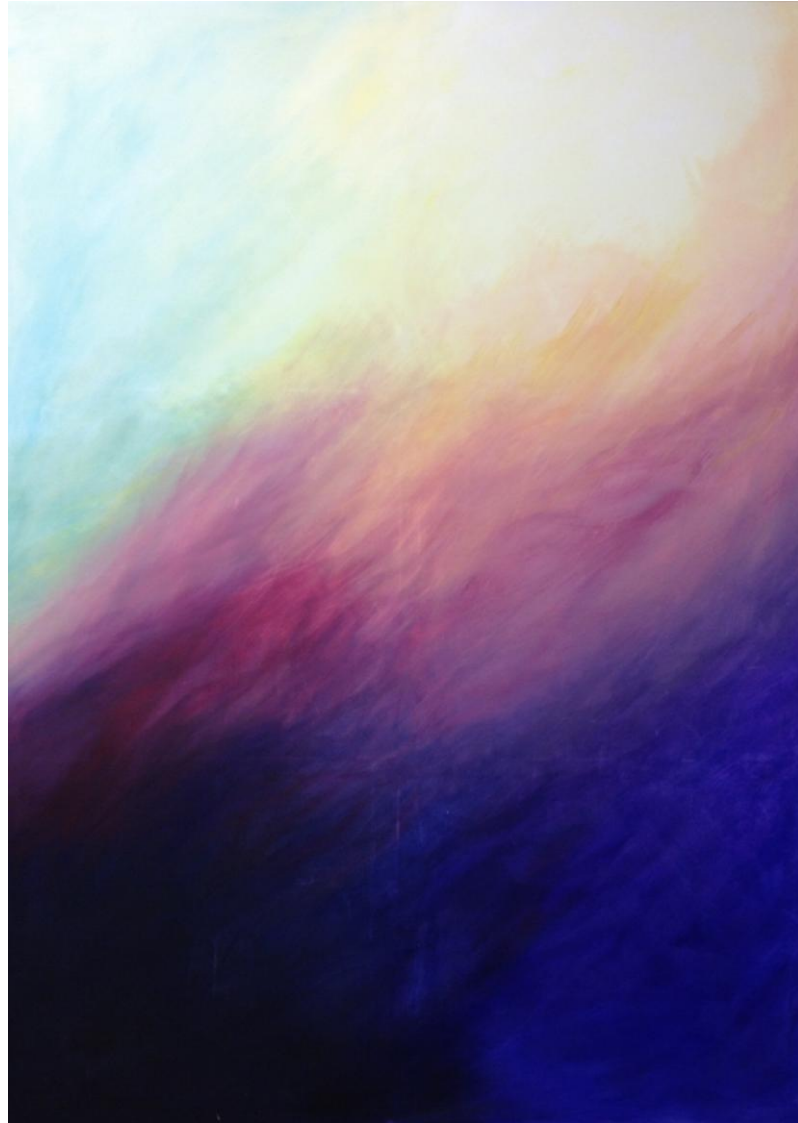
Here we see a dove, the symbol of peace, rising from a fiery column of flames and embers. The bottom half of the work is made from hard shards of painted paper with sharp edges representing chaos and pain. But above the flames where the dove is flying, the paper is soft and curved creating an atmosphere of tranquility and calmness. The curved line of continuance in the embers and smoke creates a sense of unity between the two, and tells the viewer that even though there is sometimes fire and pain in life, there is a possibility of peace and tranquility arising from that circumstance.

Hands of Truth

This sculpture was molded from a pair of hands in a prayerful pose. The paper wrapped around the exterior was taken from a biblical text resource book. The images are of ancient texts and biblical verses written in Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, and Latin. Hands are used because they are the means by which we do nearly everything in life, from acts of worship and serving our fellow man, and even to the service of self in the works of the flesh. We are reminded in this piece that no matter what we do, Scripture and a life reaching for and reflecting God's truth should be the motive behind our actions.

The Burning Bush

This painting represents the burning bush mentioned in Scripture. The white of the tree symbolizes the purity of the bush because God is resting His Spirit upon it. The viewer can see that the bush is not being consumed by the fire, as all of the limbs are still intact and white as well. The flames lick up and away from the bush showing the movement and motion of the fire.

Phoenix

This painting is one that has a great amount of emotional significance to me. My inspiration came from my life as I was going from a place of difficulty, and slowly felt myself rising to a place of freedom. Its title demonstrates this “rising from the ashes” motion and the upward brushstrokes help to evoke this sense of being uplifted. Between the darkness and light we see the red and orange representing the “fiery trial” we must go through to finally experience the freedom and joy of truth. This work hopes to inspire the viewer that hope is eternal and that from darkness can arise light and life.