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# Mythos for the Mortal

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# MYTHOS FOR THE MORTAL

by

STEPHANIE ELAINE KOLPY

Under the Direction of Pam Longobardi

## ABSTRACT

My Thesis body of work, *The Mythos for the Mortal*, presents visual interpretations of mythic mythoi—past, present, and future. These works are both a conscious and unconscious response to childhood exposure to apocalyptic stories and form a visual record of social, political and religious interpretations of the apocalypse. The overarching theme of apocalypse (from the Greek word *Apokalypsis*, meaning ‘to unveil’ or ‘to reveal’) has allowed me to reconnect to my youth and heritage and has driven me to articulate more clearly a perspective regarding the future and what it will ‘reveal’ to us. I use the landscape as a stage to create narratives and metaphors expressing these ideas. These paintings and drawings are divided into four categories of apocalypse: historical, future, ecological, and personal.

**INDEX WORDS:** Thesis, Painting, Apocalypse, Mythos, Masters of fine arts, Ecological, Landscape, Mythoi, *Apokalypsis*, Biblical, Myths, Mortal, Revelation, and Tower of Babel

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STEPHANIE ELAINE KOLPY

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Masters of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

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2010

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College of Arts and Sciences  
Georgia State University  
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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis project and my Master of Fine Arts experience is in dedication to and loving memory of my mother, Linda Burnett Welch, who never stopped believing in my art.

Also, to my Big Brothers who picked up where she left off.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

My present body of work involves the creation of images that respond to my childhood exposure to apocalyptic stories. These biblical myths, told to me by my mother and interpreted by me as a child, persistently appear, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, in my recent work. The paintings and drawings I produce are a visual record of my social, political and religious interpretations of the apocalypse, using the landscape as a stage to create the narratives or metaphors expressing these ideas.

As I question the dogma of my youth, my own interests in geological studies and philosophy deeply influence my personal view of the world and beyond. I look for parallels between two opposing constructs of time-- biblical and geological. The account of Genesis, in which God creates the world in seven days, is in stark contrast to what scientific evidence tells us, which is, that it took the earth hundreds of millions of years to develop. That said, however, I think that both have something to offer --especially in terms of the mythoi they support. I conceptualize the geological landscape as a stage for historical narratives from the past, as well as fictitious visions of the future. We live our lives through our interactions with the landscape, through the ways we walk through the world, and by the ways we do or do not respect nature and our fellow human beings. The world and landscape are where we organize the whole of our existence. It seemed obvious to me that I could convey a message in a landscape format or with recognizable imagery taken from our current landscape. By using symbols, cultural icons, or even everyday objects from the landscape, I encourage the viewer to have all kinds of associations spurred by the objects I place within my paintings. I work to subtly guide the viewer toward my narrative or message.

In my current work, I have broken my interests down into four categories of apocalypse: historical, future, ecological, and personal. These possibilities have inspired many of my paintings and driven much of my research. The overarching theme of apocalypse (from the Greek word *Apokalypsis*, meaning 'to unveil' or 'to reveal') has allowed me to reconnect with my youth and my heritage and has

driven me to articulate more clearly my own perspective regarding the future and what it will ‘reveal’ to us. Such revelations carry the weight of the beliefs we have and shape, the various mythologies we develop to make sense of our world. In short, an apocalypse drives, and is driven by, *mythoi*. A mythos is a set of interrelated beliefs, attitudes, and values that a society or cultural group holds. I believe one of the *mythoi* underlying the apocalypse is that it stems from the fear of death. Anything that requires abundant faith, however, may also have the power to manifest itself as a mythos and even become a psychological reality. My current work, *The Mythos for the Mortal*, offers visual interpretations of apocalyptic *mythoi*—past, present, and future.

## 2 A HISTORICAL APOCALYPSE

My concern regarding how humankind’s past actions might determine our fate informs my concept of *historical apocalypse*. The Book of Revelation has been the most influential source for how I think about this issue. For me, the Book of Revelation’s ability to blend seamlessly with political, sociological, and environmental concerns of any generation is its strongest characteristic. It is an inherent aspect of Christian psychology and acts as a constant in narratives of the ‘end’ generated in the Christianized West. The Book of Revelations interests me the most in its use of symbolism and metaphor. One nagging question for me, however, is whether or not these metaphors and symbols were clearer at the time in which they were written than they are today. If we filter these symbols and metaphors through our own societal constructs (and all that defines us individually and collectively), how different is our interpretation from that of someone living in 60CE to 80CE when Revelation was written? It is difficult to know for sure, but it seems likely that the specifics would be very different even though the general contours of the story would be relatively the same.

It is possible that the Revelation narrative’s ability to account for the weaknesses and destructive nature of humanity throughout time is its greatest strength. We, for example, still have not figured out

how to be completely tolerant as a society – an inability that comes to the fore time and again in our government’s decisions. Despite our technological and scientific advancements, that our society tends to use as indices of our intelligence and enlightenment, we remain mired in our intolerance for the ‘other.’ We readily give up our freedoms in response to fears, both real and imagined, and happily set aside reason while doing so. We lash out at the things or people who seem to be the cause of our fear, whether or not they actually are. This aspect of human nature, unfortunately, seems to be ever present in our civilizations throughout time. Such intolerance may be rooted in the fear of the future – a future in which the apocalypse may manifest itself at any time and become reality.

I reference the concept of *historical apocalypse* in my work by using what I see as ‘enduring’ historical genres. Often, I draw inspiration or make an unambiguous reference to a specific iconic work of art that contains ‘universal’ emblems or metaphors that still resonate today. A good example of this is my work “The Tower of Babel,” that drew inspiration from the version Pieter Bruegel the Elder painted in 1563. The Tower of Babel itself, as a metaphor, has come to represent many things since medieval times. Various artistic depictions of the Tower of Babel have given visual form to the story and have provided interpretations that end up embellishing the biblical account. In these stories and images the tower represents human concerns with communication, the use of power, and the original sin of pride. This iconic image may also be read as a metaphor for the convergence of religion and science. What makes this myth especially pertinent today is the importance of technology in building the tower. Humankind hoped that technology would allow it to stand as an equal to God. Our contemporary view of science and technology often assigns it the same reverence once reserved for religious practices. Whether that goal is building a tower to reach God or creating a scientific system in the attempt to acquire God-like power, we, as the human race, perennially struggle with the ramifications of our arrogant nature.



Figure 1 The Tower Of Babel

In my painting of “The Tower of Babel”, I use a triangular composition, which causes the tower to reach into the heavens in an upward, thrusting gesture. The phallic nature of this composition represents mankind’s hubristic conquests. The tower, however, is imperfect in its construction – it breaks apart as it leans away from the viewer’s perspective and seems as if it may topple over at any moment. The flesh tones of the palette represent the body. The surface of the tower is encrypted with the mathematical notations that describe Einstein’s discovery known as  $E=mc^2$ , which led to science that

eventually became the H-bomb. The history of this formula is written metaphorically in the stone, the cracks of the tower pulling it apart as it reaches into a stormy sky. This foreshadows the apocalyptic future toward which our ambitions may lead us as a result of our arrogance, our attempts to be God-like.

### 3 A FUTURE APOCALYPSE

The impending apocalypse seems to be culturally ingrained in our psychology and informed by the myths of the past. *Mythoi* are born predominantly out of a fear of death and influence humanity's vision of the future. George Orwell writes, "Myths which are believed in tend to become true."<sup>1</sup> This sentiment influenced the first painting of my 'The Future Apocalypse' series, "Beyond 1984."



Figure 2 Beyond 1984

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<sup>1</sup> George Orwell, *A I please*, Volume 3 essays, Journalism & Letters, (New York, Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc. 1968) 6

In this painting, ants act as a metaphor for human society. They are builders, have armies and are a scattered, directionless population. The landscape in which they live and move is deformed, dysfunctional and toxic. I provide a cut away view of the earth to show the remains of human architecture, buried and useless like fossils, pointing to past human civilizations. Ants scatter about in a frenzy that shows their confusion as the ground level morphs into living muscles that both menace the landscape and parallel human buildings that have become deformed and taken the place of our cities.

In the next painting from *The Future Apocalypse* series, “Faulkner’s Dream,” influenced by the works of William Faulkner, remnants of civilization are organized in alien holes in the cracked and desolate landscape.



Figure 3 Falkner's Dream

Faulkner wrote that, “Since man is mortal, the only immortality possible for him is to leave something behind him that is immortal.”<sup>2</sup> In *Faulkner’s Dream*, this quote becomes a nightmare and all that remains is the worthless detritus of our selfish existence, which pushed us into a world where we can no longer exist.

My painting installation, “Plato’s End,” refers to Plato’s *Allegory of The Cave*, which describes shadows on a cave wall as being the only reality available to the prisoners held there. He describes the prisoners as being dependent on this form of information since childhood. They know nothing else and, as a result, this illusion constitutes their perceptions of reality. Plato raises an intriguing question. If the prisoners could turn and see that the fire is casting the shadows of the people and objects from behind, would they still consider the shadows the reality and the reality as illusion? Plato argues that if someone forced one of the prisoners into the light the captive would not only be blinded by the sun (representing reality, enlightenment, a coming out of “the fog”), he would also likely hate the man who had dragged him to the surface.

Plato’s Cave is an instructive allegory because it demonstrates the social unconscious and the effects of isolation on “group think.” The tale even speaks of a prisoner in the cave who would be praised as clever because he could guess what shadows would come next and, therefore, claim to have more knowledge of the World than his fellow prisoners.

The painting installation, “Plato’s End” visually describes a future World that has never evolved beyond the psychology of the people in Plato’s metaphor. In this future, suburban houses – representing the general populace – fall down as the sky turns toxic and the landscape gives way to an icy wasteland. The only place for those left behind in this cold, lifeless, broken world is below in the caves. The cave spaces have become a world in which humanity returns to its primordial existence. A new mythos presents itself in the metaphorical spaces of the caves. In the most central cave sits a fire circle, a symbol

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<sup>2</sup> Lothar Honnighausen, *Faulkner: Masks and Metaphors*, (University Press of Mississippi, 1997) 50



for communion and a place for storytelling where myth is born. In the cave above the fire circle is a single bed, a metaphor for dreaming. To the left of the bed hang hogs (Swine), a symbol of the inevitable sins of humanity. In the cave beneath hangs a white cord that offers an escape route for the redeemed. To the right of the cave with the bed, sits an empty cave and beneath is a cave with a leaking well, representing the deficiency of our ingenuity.



Figure 4 Plato's End

#### 4 AN ECOLOGICAL APOCALYPSE

The works within the *Ecological Apocalypse* series relate to the environmental challenges we face. Changes occurring in the earth's ecological systems, which many of us have witnessed within our own lifetime, convince us that a man-made ecological apocalypse is capable of becoming more than just a myth.

Even before I was conscious of it, the idea of 'Ecological Apocalypse' was present in my works, starting with my *Natural Disasters* series, which I first presented in a solo exhibition entitled *Deluge* in 2005. This show consisted largely of works that included depictions of tornados and flooded landscapes.



Figure 5 Tornado Landscape

I recall thinking that this body of work was incomplete. Over time, and through the completion of more works related to this subject, I realized that my interest in natural disasters held a much deeper connection to my childhood and culture than I was able to see at first. In essence, I was engaging in a type of psychological behavior called ‘transference.’

One definition of transference is “the redirection of feelings and desires and especially of those unconsciously retained from childhood toward a new object.”<sup>3</sup> What interests me most about transference is that it helps explain how something that is generally invisible within my psyche is completely visible in the creative process of my paintings. In the past, when ‘real’ issues in the world began to influence my work, I never could be completely honest about the power of my early influences. I passed them, instead, through a veil of contemporary, liberal political concerns. I was, and am, concerned with these issues, but my personal connection to their symbolic meaning was more than I was able to admit.

My realization that the work is about the apocalypse, the powerful myth that influenced my imagination when I was a child, has allowed me to develop a personal relationship with the work and express a narrative derived from my youth. It released the imagery that I had previously hidden in cryptic symbols and communicates a story of environmental apocalypse using (and taking ownership of) the stories told to me in my childhood. This revelation is clear in the visual changes I made to the work. In the process of clarifying my core concerns, I felt as if I had reclaimed a part of myself that I had denied for many years. Embracing what I denied has allowed me to delve into a whole body of possible works based on potent narratives that I no longer need to reject.

In the painting “The Keystone Species,” I reference the disappearance of honeybees. A keystone species is a species that has a disproportionate effect on its environment relative to its abundance. Such

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<sup>3</sup> Felluga, Dino. "Modules on Freud: Transference and Trauma." Introductory Guide to Critical Theory. [Last Update: Nov.28, 2003]. Purdue U. [Feb.9, 2010]. <<http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/freud5.html>>.

species effect and support many other organisms in an ecosystem and are analogous to the role of a keystone in an arch. Honeybees are disappearing at an unbelievable rate all over the world, but this disappearance is more pronounced in the United States due to the effects of global warming, pesticides, and other environmental issues. The term *colony collapse disorder* (CCD) was first applied to a drastic rise in the number of disappearances of Western honeybee colonies in North America in late 2006. In her book, *A World Without Bees*, Alison Benjamin states, “In America alone, one in three hives was left lifeless at the end of 2008; in France, the death rate is closer to 60%.” The numbers are daunting: one-third of everything Americans eat, from nuts and onions to berries and broccoli, depends on nature's master pollinator. If CCD continues unchecked, there could be a world without bees by 2035.<sup>4</sup> Without bees much of the world food supply would disappear within a matter of months.

“The Keystone Species” uses the honeycomb pattern to represent the breaking down of this microcosmic system, which affects the larger natural order. Towards the center of the painting fleshy wounds spread decay outward. This decay, this hungry darkness, tears apart the honeycomb. A battle goes on within the painting. While the queen bee, motionless and separated from her few surviving workers, looks on, the natural forces of health and light, represented by the white light and white cords spreading outward, try to pull the pieces of the honeycomb back together again. The honeycomb breaks apart into islands, referring to the disintegration of the landscape at large. Within this painting dark meets the light in such a way that it transforms the honeycomb into a panorama of galaxies, making a visual connection between the molecular and the celestial.

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<sup>4</sup> Alison Benjamin and Brian McCallum, *A World Without Bees*

(New York: Pegasus Books, 2009) 336

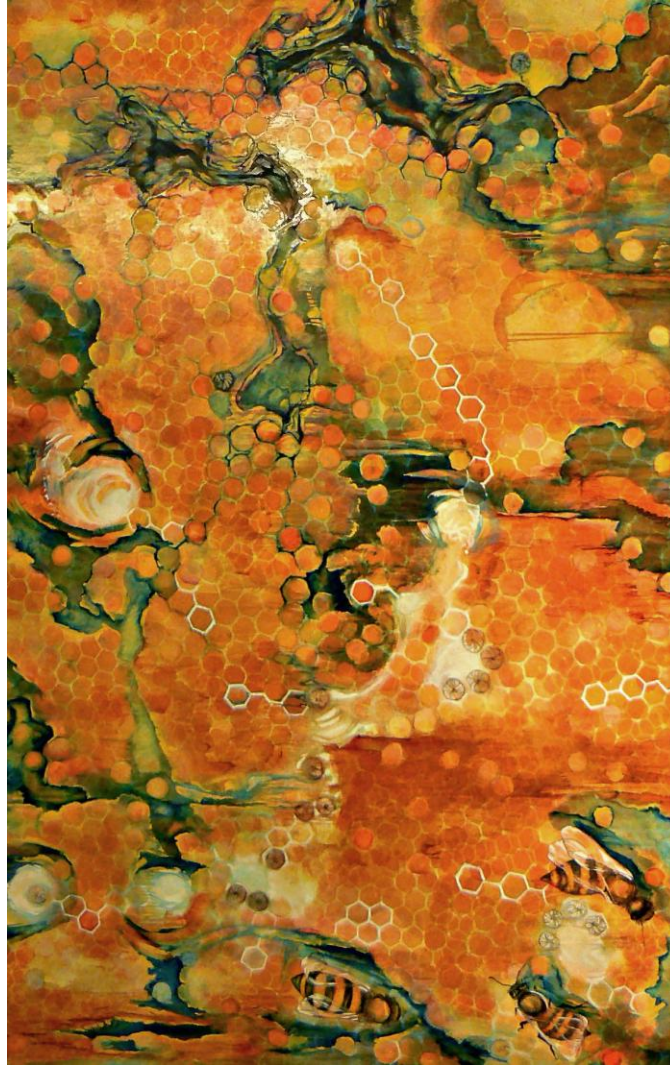


Figure 6 The Keystone Species

## 5 A PERSONAL APOCALYPSE

Many of us need to fortify our sense of identity in the face of tragedy. A mythos can be an invisible armor, a psychological shield protecting us against the terrors that confront us when we think about the end of the world. A mythos will not only help us establish identity, but in the face of catastrophe it can reassure the individual and reinforce the cohesiveness of group identity. There is less chance of feeling wrong about any ideology if everyone else in your community shares your beliefs.

In Christian dogma, for example, the goal is to reach paradise, which is decidedly not in the present. Ironically, the power of this belief allows for *Thanatos* a word used to describe ‘the death wish’ in the Greek Mythos, and further theorized by Sigmund Freud. If we are too busy wishing ourselves into the afterlife, then we can easily neglect our present world and, ironically bring about some type of apocalypse.

My mother’s recent death leads me to consider the inevitability of personal apocalypse. My mother was a very religious woman. As a writer, she was educated, creative and very articulate in her evangelical beliefs. She believed herself to be a prophet, and though I respected her more than any other human being, I remained skeptical. I did not doubt that she believed what she said to be true, but I wondered whether or not the things she believed as prophecy were real visions or simply a deep rooted mythos, passed on to her by previous generations. Such a mythos has within it an ability to have purpose for all the “trials and tribulations” in life. My main question, however, was not why one needs to find relevance for one’s own life, but why people need to have a traumatic end to civilization when there is already a definite ending to their individual lives. My interest in this epic end, as opposed to an individual end, has brought me to the conclusion that most of us cannot admit that we are ultimately alone. Creating a mythos with many characters helps us to pass through this world and feel that we are part of it. Being part of the mythos adds more purpose to life and makes death a less lonely prospect. I am left wondering if belief in this mythos was the foundation of my mother’s spiritual dogma.

I created a narrative painting in honor of my mother, depicting my interpretation of a personal apocalypse. In the painting entitled, “She is Gone,” I created a reliquary beneath the painted landscape. My use of a reliquary allows me to comment on the historical depictions of the beliefs surrounding the deaths of saints. In a strict sense a reliquary is a container or shrine where relics such as the remains of saints are kept. This reliquary holds eighteen jars of natural pigments mined from the earth, displayed in the order of the color wheel. The pigments held there suggest the most natural cycle in all creation, a

coming from and returning to the earth. I symbolically filter the moment of my mother's death through her religious practices and I present her as a saint by doing so.

Above the reliquary are painted pathways for each individual pigment making its way through the gold leaf-covered underworld (suggesting timelessness) to the world above, symbolically connecting all that is buried to all that is alive. The golden underworld encases a hollow space where a great figure has been laid to rest, but all that remains in this cavernous space is a golden crown. The crown cannot be taken into the afterlife but is left as a symbol of a leader here on earth. In the world above we see a literal depiction of the cycle of life. An elephant mother (the most matriarchal of wild animals) lies dead beside her baby as the vultures come to feed, returning the mother's fragile body to the earth once again. The type of visual story telling I utilize in this painting still affects how we understand religion, and more specifically, how we imagine an Apocalyptic Mythos today.



Figure 7 She Is Gone

## 6 CONCLUSION

Within this thesis I described and discussed how the complex subject of the apocalypse may be experienced and understood from a variety of different perspectives that may often be bracketed within one, or more, of four categories of Apocalypse: historical, future, ecological, and personal. I am not sure that many people consciously understand that the elements of the original apocalyptic narrative that conceptualize individual mortality are possibly engrained within them. I believe, however, that the relevance of apocalyptic themes is almost universal. In creating the artworks for this exhibition, I have relied on my own first and secondhand experiences to make visual interpretations of past, present, and future apocalyptic *mythoi*.

Beyond their narrative and metaphoric content, the artworks that comprise my thesis exhibition demonstrate my dedication to a hands-on approach to painting, as well my belief that art is an exquisitely subtle form of communication. These works are a testament to my conviction that painting is a uniquely powerful form of language and instrument of expression. Paintings, in their semiotic and semantic complexity, have the ability to be enigmatic or even contradictory, saying one thing to one person and something different to another. Like any complex system, this form of communication depends on various factors, not the least of which are the personal and historical particulars of the viewer and the viewing context. Painting has the ability to change, inspire, subvert, and alter social, religious, and political structures. Each new painting is like a word or phrase added to a language – it alters and expands the lexicon, often in unpredictable ways. Like lexicography, if we understand how the themes, emblems, and ideas in modern painting came to be over time (as well as their transformations and alterations), we can better understand why we are, and how we became who we are today.





Figure 8 She Is Gone, Mono-print



Figure 9 The Confessional

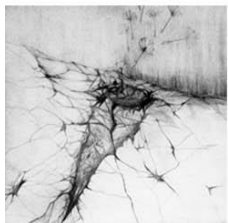


Figure 10 Big Wish



Figure 11 The Water Museum



Figure 12 Wishing Wells



Figure 13 The Last Tipping



Figure 14 Dropped



Figure 15 She Is Gone, Silver-point