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Rochester Institute of Technology

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the College of Imaging
Arts and Sciences in candidacy for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

Fragmentation and Presence:
Direction of the Emotive Moment

by

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July 16, 1999

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July 16, 1999

My thesis relates to moments of epiphany. These are spiritual moments when we come to an epoch in our lives and realize we must change our course. In this group of works, I have investigated the idea of involving the viewer in the depicted experience by employing various means of fragmentation. The grouping together of varying scenes/elements share through fragmentation a more complete perception of the experience of the moment. In painting, this is expressed either through differing visual perspectives, time and space sequences, or dimensional elements that allow for focused sensory experiences. The sculptures are fragmented by the changing materials employed in the portrayal of their body parts. This variation of materials reveals the personality of the figure, the emotional experience of the moment, and the focus and potential energy in the work.

The juxtaposition of imagery and materials against each other intensifies and expands the breadth of the experience in a moment of being. Through the separation and manipulation of elements, the visual and visceral experience of the works is directed. The view is edited and the hand of the creator of these works is clearly seen in the choice of what is kept and what is missing. I focus on certain aspects of these fictional moments to direct the viewer's involvement and experience with each piece. The direction is achieved not only through editing, but also in the use of compositional organization to convey the symbolic meanings and rhythms in the experience. Although the pieces are fragmented, they are composed to read like a book of imagery with no beginning and no end. They have a wholeness of intent enhanced by the phenomenon of gestalt.

Fragmentation is not a new visual device in our postmodern society. The fragmented view stems from the denial of modernists' belief that there are absolute truths. Postmodernist thinkers argued that with a changing and expanding society that has become increasingly global, it is no

longer easy to believe that every human can or should agree about what constitutes the minutiae of human life. Our identities have become fragmented as we realize that everyone comes from different backgrounds and brings a different relativity to the same experience. These societal changes could not help but be reflected in popular culture and in the art world. The loss of metanarratives meant the loss of common meaning. "This approach, [criticizing modernist thought] which became more familiar in the late 1980's, suggested that there could no longer be one theory of society, no one 'big picture.' At best there were a number of snapshots of the same view, each aware of the limits of its own field of vision."¹ In a way, this is similar to the dynamics of my artwork, providing different snapshots of the same view to expand the experience of that view.

Various artists have worked with the combination of segments and fragments in both the form and concept of their art. Once the boundaries of what art had traditionally consisted of began to crumble, the new forms of thought began to emerge visually. While the intense analysis of spatial relationships began in the Renaissance, the reconsideration of the relationships of form, space and time began in the Modernist era with Cubism. Artists such as Picasso and Braque began to deconstruct the planar geometry of forms in space and reconfigure them on a two-dimensional surface. They managed to display almost all sides of a form simultaneously, flattened out across the canvas. Such attention to displaying different perceptions of space and time in reality has continued in art, in reaction to the changes in reality artists face. "Through a multitude of stages, the work of art's form and the whole concept of a work of art have undergone a fragmentation from an easily conceived entity and have become multifarious and conceptually vague. The change could be described as a process of opening up, in which Modernism signified the merging of forms within the subdivisions of art and Postmodernism the final fall of the barriers among the arts and between art and 'everything else.' . . . Permanent works of art are fragmented: an image

¹ S. Connor, *Introduction to Postmodernism: Postmodernism and Postmodernity*, Fu Jen University, Department of English; available from http://www.eng.fju.edu.tw/Literary_Criticism/postmodernism/intro.html

moves into space; linear narrative becomes simultaneous, superimposed levels; roles become situations; the stage becomes life.”²

I have utilized the loosened boundaries of current art into my works by creating individual parts that relate to an intentionally structured whole. Each part is important, not only onto itself, but also as it is situated in the piece. The organization of the separate pieces forms a symbolic and loaded relationship among them.

Upon accumulating research on other artists, it had become evident that a few of them have come to influence the formation of my thesis work. Each had contributed some shared vision of my own intent. The sculptors I found to be kindred spirits along my journey were: Magdalena Abakanowicz, Manuel Neri, Deborah Butterfield, and, in retrospect, Joseph Cornell.

Magdalena Abakanowicz, the Polish sculptor, imbues her work with a sense of the sublime. Each of her cycles and individual works attempts to describe inexpressible aspects of the human situation and its function in the world. Her strivings toward universal symbols of humanity give her work a strong emphasis on social consciousness, while keeping the formal aspects of her work powerful and intriguing. Her attempts at describing the human experience and her and others' interpretations of the work are what interests me greatly about her art in addition to the work itself. Her work is seen simultaneously as expressing the frailty of the human condition and exposing the horrors elicited by humans. However Abakanowicz's works are interpreted, they are always solemn totems to the sacred and the sublime in the human experience. The interiors of a body form evoke mystery. Even when she reveals the interior of a piece, as in her *Backs* cycle, the fragmentation of the body still provokes the question of what has been omitted and why. Abakanowicz writes, “at the very beginning of every creative process

² The Finnish National Gallery, Kiasma - The Museum of Contemporary Art. *How Did Art Burst Open Its Contours?* Helsinki, Finland: available from <http://www.fng.fi/fng/htm14/en/kiasma/guide/cont/chap1/sect0/page1.htm>

is mystery, the inexplicable . . . One of the strongest motives of our time is the search for explanation, the need to explain everything away. Explanation is one of the means to tame the mystery of art. Talking about mystery has become indecent. Many people consider it pure mystification or a lack of intelligence. They want to identify mystery with a problem. And a problem is something which can be reduced into details susceptible to explanation. Mystery cannot be reduced to details. It is a whole which embraces us.”³ I respond strongly to Abakanowicz's work and share with her a desire to imbue my pieces with a sense of sacred mystery. I also have learned from her respect for materials—the importance in choosing the most appropriate material to convey your message and that certain materials carry with them an inherent sense of weight and presence.

Manuel Neri also works with the figure and shares with Abakanowicz a need for his pieces to feel raw. This rawness evokes a notion of truth that cuts to the essence of nature and the human experience. It betrays a strong sense of emotion, from the creator and in the piece itself. Neri has also shown a great deal of freedom in experimentation when working with the figure. He plays with both the form and the manner in which it is constructed. This aided me tremendously in being able to see how another artist thinks and assembles. Many of his pieces do not seem finished in the traditional sense, and Neri also works with media that is thought of as less permanent, such as plaster, yet there is a deep sense of honesty that pervades his work and inspires me.

Deborah Butterfield is another artist that works with “base” materials. She has been known to have composed pieces entirely of mud and sticks. Though, mud and sticks have their own valuable voice and message. They carry an intrinsic understanding of the presence of earth, of ancient artifacts and present day droughts. In essence, they convey an earth that we cannot

³ Rose, Barbara. *Magdalena Abakanowicz*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.) 34.

survive without. These and other base materials, loaded with significance, are used to portray animals—most often horses. These horses exude an incredible presence which is fostered by their scale, the ingeniousness of their construction—in media and in the manner in which they were assembled, the simultaneous economy and complexity of their form and the emotions they express.

All three of these sculptors create works with a strong presence. Their pieces engage the viewer in a primal way. The works have life; they have spirits.

A sculptor that works in an entirely different manner than the sculptors previously mentioned is Joseph Cornell. I have included him as an inspiration because I found it very important that my sculptures share one form. This form would not only connect the pieces that relate to each other, but would also connect all the pieces together. The form is the wooden box—where secrets are kept inside. Cornell created a large series of boxes, filled with symbolic items and keepsakes. They are sacred places, shrines. My boxes also intended to reflect a sacred space, yet this space is placed within a larger context. They are codes to the interior workings of the figures as they exist in a particular moment.

There are several painters that I have investigated while working out ideas for my thesis. The one I felt most kinship with at the time was Ida Applebroog. Applebroog's canvases assemble odd assortments of images, yet her ironic agenda is always strongly conveyed. " . . . her paintings offer a fierce portrayal of the often frightening social and psychological dysfunctions that dwell beneath the calm veneer of everyday life. The themes that have long possessed her—sexuality and power, the loss or corruption of innocence, guilt and penitence, and personal isolation in an intrusive world—also reflect contemporary issues of gender, sexuality, and individuality that preoccupy many younger artists working today."⁴ Applebroog's formal

⁴ Sultan, Terrie. "Ida Applebroog: Exposing the Personal," *Ms.* March/April 1998, 71.

solutions in bringing together various images, or various sequences, especially in her most recent work, facilitated my search for the most appropriate manner to assemble a selection of views. She juxtaposes canvases containing seemingly unrelated material and combines them into one piece. At first she achieved this while still working in the greater rectangle, but her latest pieces have abandoned the rectangular shape and are now composed of asymmetrical modular compositions. Applebroog combines her pieces in such a way that seemingly random elements are combined and the one, unifying principle between them is a general feeling of irony. My pieces differ from Applebroogs in content and in the formal and conceptual purposes for fragmentation. I take elements that relate to one narrative or "moment" to assist the viewer in a greater sensory and emotional perception of the occurrence.

A partial list of other painters my work derives from and relates to are: Matisse and Picasso, German Expressionist painters, such as Franz Marc, Emile Nolde and Max Beckmann, and more recent artists, such as Francis Bacon, David Hockney, R.B. Kitaj and Susan Rothenberg. From Matisse and Picasso I take the flatness of the picture plane, the emphasis on drawing and elements of their color use. From the German Expressionists, I take the use of symbolic color, the emotional charge, the heaviness and weight of the drawn image and the desire to transform through art. I admire Bacon's ability to juxtapose a finely drawn element with a broad sweep of color and the sense of life and movement pervasive in his canvases. I respond to Kitaj's capacity for conveying a definable message and feeling in his works without violence. I esteem David Hockney as a painter, but it was his multiple photographic portraits of a single view that led me to repeat a similar sort of combination of altered perspectives of one phenomenon. Susan Rothenberg and I share a desire to convey presence through drawing—relying less on a refined resultant image and more on the presence of that image.



fig. 1
 "Poised Between"
 oil on canvas, 1998
 94" x 65"



fig. 2
 "Poised," 1999,
 wood, plaster, iron, wire,
 63"h x 27"w x 20"d

All of these artists have assisted my search for the perfect means of expressing the messages I wished to convey, yet the resultant images and constructions, in the end, are wholly my own. I have created four paintings and four sculptures that elaborate on four different themes.

There is one painting and one sculpture that express each of these themes, yet in different ways. I have chosen the number four as it relates to the four elements. The four are not ordered into a hierarchy, but are equal and interchangeable in position and number. All of the themes relate to moments of epiphany, moments of baptism—a spiritual realization of change.

Baptism by air takes place in "Poised Between." (see fig. 1) I began with this image of a woman bending down with her arms outstretched, much like the wings of a bird. There is a piece of blue fabric stretched out behind her, and even though the surrounding area is beige and white, the fabric recalls the stark blue of a clear sky. The feel of the wind lifting the fabric is almost palpable to the viewer through the lift and ripple of the fabric and the charged marks of the yellow/beige sky. Below this main image are three smaller paintings—a time/space sequence. The first is of feet, lifted above the earth, perhaps jumping. This is preceded by a smaller version of the door on the box of the correlating sculpture, indicating that the three smaller paintings are part of the secret, what's kept inside. The second image is of feet standing, quite stably, on the earth. The third image is of the same feet, jumping towards and facing off the canvas, into the unknown. The woman is dancing her feelings. She is poised between earth and sky. She would like to soar, to fly, to take off—unfettered, yet the demands of the earth keep calling her to stay rooted. The last image of her jumping off the picture plane is a hopeful one - she has chosen to attempt to reach the sky. The painting is an analogy of the pressures on women of today. The choice is between setting her goals aside to attend to matters of domesticity and social standards, or trying to achieve everything she can. It is a tough decision to face, as there are sacrifices on either side, yet we must not give up. We, as women, need to take the necessary risks to further ourselves and our fields without neglecting our loved ones, yet that balance is a difficult one. The woman in the painting is alone—it is a singular decision.

The sculpture that elaborates on the same theme, "Poised," approaches the same debate, yet in a different manner (see fig. 2). The figure is made from many different materials. The head consists of copper wire, drawn around the perimeter of where the volume of the head should be—an indication that it is already part of, or dreaming about being in, the air. The torso is made of painted plaster, with the occasional copper wire running vertically through it—a visual reference to electrical current, to conductivity, to blood, to veins of life leading up to or down from the head. The plaster is applied in much the way the paint on my canvas is applied—with rough strokes, showing the emotion of the mark and the texture of the earth. It is also painted an earthy terra cotta/brown color to further connect the viewer with a notion of the earth. The arms are made of wood, one side of driftwood and the other side a combination of a branch and cut wood. The driftwood piece has a shape that is a metamorphosis between the upper part of a human arm and a wing. The need to transform and take flight is already evident. The other arm is made of two pieces of wood that imitate the dual function of the radius and the ulna in the lower arm. The dominant, outside piece on this arm is made of a branch of a tree, strengthening the connection between the figure becoming tree-like, becoming rooted to the earth. The two legs are also juxtaposed against each other—one is seemingly very heavy, the other is quite graceful and light. The graceful and light leg is made from another piece of driftwood, creating a connection diagonally across the figure with the graceful driftwood arm. The driftwood leg appears as if it were dancing, in a similar pose to the figure in the painting. The other leg is made of a long, tapering box with a doorknob in place of a kneecap and terminating in a cast iron foot. The girth of this leg, the heaviness inherent in the iron foot and the fact that the weight of the body is shifted onto that leg all contribute to the idea of gravity, of the inability to take flight. However, inside the leg box hangs a fluid piece of silk, dyed a gradating blue, indicating that the secret need of this leg, and of the figure herself, is to shed these burdens and become airborne.

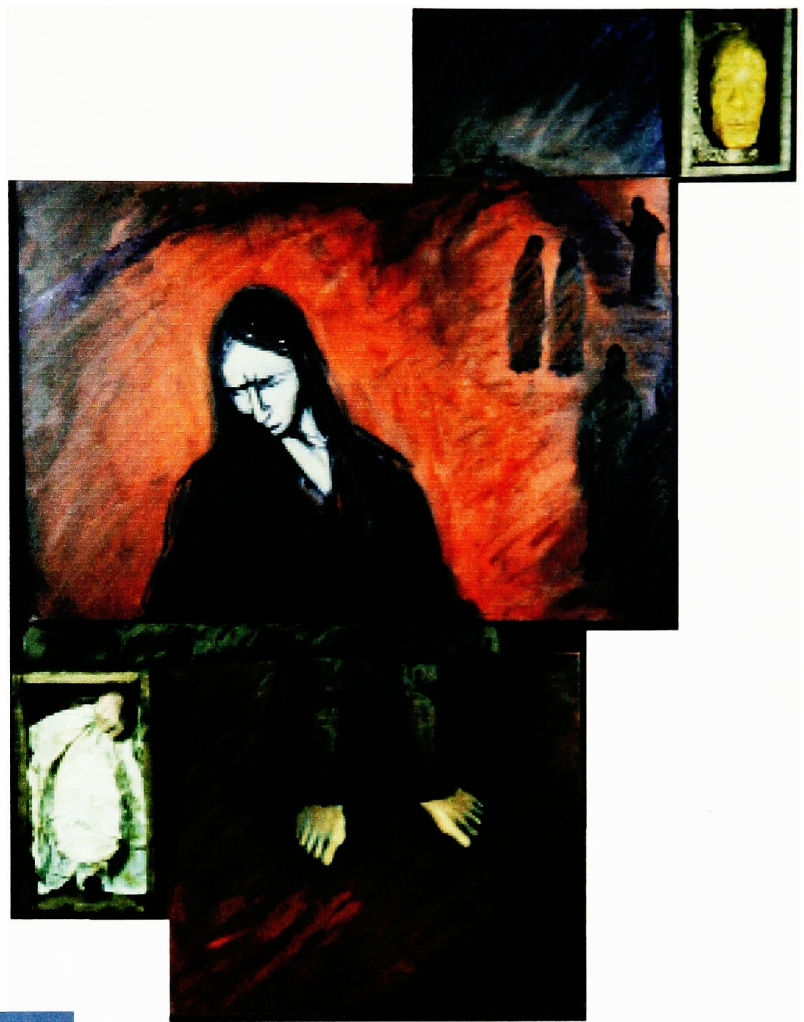


fig. 3
 "Vera Icon: She Took a Stand"
 oil on canvas, 1999
 59" x 74"

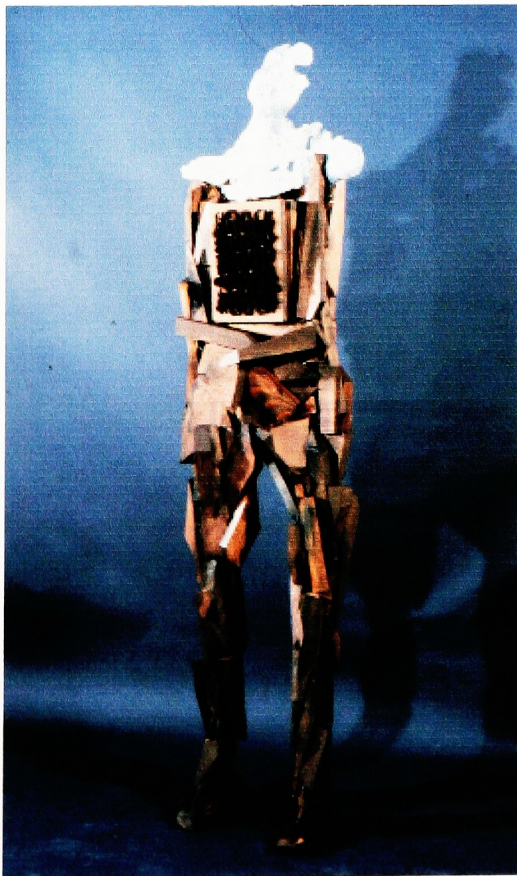


fig. 4
 "Vera Icon: Hairshirt," 1999,
 wood, aluminum, fabric, hair
 67"h x 17"w x 12"d

The second theme is baptism by water or liquid, in this case, blood. I was attracted to the myth of St. Veronica for many reasons. Firstly, this myth was not in the Bible and it was known definitively as to be untrue, yet it still carried on in Catholic lore and was part of the official version of the Passion of Christ as told in the twelve signs of the cross. The myth of St. Veronica is that one of the women present at the crucifixion of Jesus Christ took pity on him as he made his way up the hill to be crucified. She stopped him, took the veil off her head, and wiped the sweat and blood from his face. In return for her kindness, Christ left the image of his face remaining on the veil. This image was known as the true icon, or vera icon (hence a possible origin of the name Veronica) and actually did exist, yet its actual origins are unclear. I responded strongly to this story, for although it is fictional, it portrays a positive concept of a woman, in an ancient patriarchal society, going against the voice of the crowd to show compassion and do what was right. Another fascinating element to the story is that it may have connections to another tale from the Bible. In Luke 8:43-48, a woman who cannot stop bleeding follows Jesus and, when she touches his robe, she is healed. Jesus notices that someone has used his power, finds out it was the woman, Hemorrhissa, and blesses her. In Ewa Kuryluk's book, *Veronica and Her Cloth*, the author delves into the implications of this exchange and how it is incorporated into the Catholic religion. She discusses the symbolic sexual connotations involved in the miracle—Hemorrhissa is bleeding, she interacts with Christ, a man, and stops bleeding (i.e. pregnancy). "First, we have a bleeding woman touching the hem of Jesus' dress. Since in the New Testament his garment is associated with purity and whiteness, her touch suggests staining his cloth with blood and producing a red image on a white background. Second, Hemorrhissa's flux becomes linked with the passion of Christ, and her bloodstained skin (clothing) with his blood-covered body (garment). Out of these correspondences the medieval version of the myth is distilled—a marvel of symmetry: the man whose cloth has stopped the woman's bleeding has his own flux of blood which she arrests with her cloth. The sexual symbolism of the exchange between Jesus and Veronica was fortified by ancient beliefs that procreation results from mixing sperm with menstrual blood. But it took

humanity almost a millennium to arrive at the concept of a blood-image. The shift coincided with a growing interest in Jesus' passion and crucifixion. Abgar's old Christ portrait was given new origins in the tenth-century Byzantine 'Story of the Image of Edessa.' What had once been a painting, then a miraculous impression (made by nothing in particular, water or sweat), became now a napkin impregnated by the bloody sweat of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane (Lk. 22:44)."⁵

In my painting, "Vera Icon: She Took a Stand," the main canvas shows the bystander's view of the scene (see fig. 3). It depicts Veronica with an anguished expression, looking down, away from the direction others are walking. The vivid red of the background contrasts strongly with the black of her robe and hair and the white of her face. The red of the landscape behind her belies the violence of the event occurring. The small canvas above this depicts the tempestuousness of the sky and is her impression of what is happening behind her. To the right of this small canvas is a box with a painted plaster relief of a face—the actual Christ. Below the main canvas is a rectangular strip of woolen fabric with strands of hair woven in. This is a hairshirt—the garment of humility. The same sort of weaving is continued in the canvas below this—an image of Veronica's legs and feet as seen from above. It is her view and awareness of herself—standing in and being in the moment. To the left of this lower canvas is another box. This box contains a plaster relief of Veronica's hand, holding her veil that has both a painted and dimensional impression of Christ's head. The veil contrasts compositionally with the other box with the relief of Christ's head—the actual vs. the impression, the reminder.

The sculpture, "Vera Icon: Hairshirt," approaches the same subject in a very different manner (see fig. 4). Instead of presenting the story and the physical reality of being in the moment, it elaborates on the emotional aspects of the experience. The main body of the figure consists of

⁵ Kuryluk, Ewa. *Veronica and Her Cloth: History, Symbolism and Structure of a "True" Image*. (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1991) p. 6-7.



fig. 5
 "And the Mob Dispersed"
 oil on canvas, 1999
 80" x 79"



fig. 6
 "Reclaiming the Self," 1999,
 steel, fabric, resin, wood,
 72"h x 21"w x 17"d

shards of wood, angular and pointed pieces that are held together to make up the shape of the body. These pieces represent her soul being broken and tortured, in anguish because she is powerless to stop a great wrong. The wood is stained a deep red, which corresponds to the red of the painting. The red is symbolic of strong emotions, of blood—the blood shed by Christ, the blood shed by Hemorrhissa, the blood pulsing in Veronica's veins. The box at her chest corresponds to the boxes in the painting that contain images of Christ. Inside the box in the sculpture is the veil, now rolled up and placed in her chest, her heart. It is her secret, her reminder, the vehicle of her conversion. Tacked to the front of the box is the hairshirt fabric, once again emphasizing her humility. The head and shoulders of the figure are made of cast aluminum—a silver that shines even more brightly against the deep red of the wood. This silver responds to the bright white of Veronica's face in the painting and reflects the gleam of her renewed spirit. She has been changed.

The third theme is baptism by fire, represented in the painting, "And the mob dispersed" (see fig. 5) and the sculpture, "Reclaiming the Self" (see fig. 6). This idea expands on the vera icon series in that I have taken the notion of the angry mob, which in the vera icon series is the mob trying to crucify Christ, and I have abstracted it to refer to any angry mob and how it should be dispersed. The painting combines three canvases in a before and after sequence. The top canvas, the smallest of the three, shows the angry mob. The palette of the painting is dark and foreboding, the only light coming from the torches carried by the front line of people and the shine of their white teeth as they shout and condemn. Below this canvas are two other, larger canvases. These show the "after" result of the mob—two views of the members of the mob dispersing. The red and gold flames above their heads are the changed fire of the once angry orange and black flames of the mob's torches. The flames above the dispersing figures also reference depictions in Christian illuminations and paintings of the revealed Holy Spirit, having descended on a soul. In this case, they reveal the will of the individual soul, renewed,

strengthened, and turning away from evil. I have shown two views to give the observer the impression of two "snapshot" images, taken from different perspectives of the same event. The canvas on the left shows light colored figures on a darker ground, while the right hand image shows darker figures on a lighter ground. The space they exist in is intentionally unclear. All the viewer understands is that there are several layers of people, of different genders and unclear races, that are moving away from each other. The opposing diagonal lines evident in the ground of the two canvases, and somewhat evident in the figures, refers to the motion blur of not only the movement of the figures, but also the movement of the viewer's head—from one perspective to the next. A small box, fixed beneath the canvases and relating to the boxes on the corresponding sculpture, opens to reveal a bronze flame, similar to the flame above the figures' heads.

The sculpture, "Reclaiming the Self," refers simply to the "after" images. The figure has moved past the experience of the mob and is now involved in renewing his own sense of spiritual guidance. The head and torso of the figure were created by strips of burlap, twine and rope, hardened into shape with resin. The diagonal thrust of the fabric echoes the diagonal strokes in the background of the painting. There is a sparseness to this figure, a skeletal quality to it, enhanced by the bare rope arms and the slender, flat, exposed steel armature. In the process of reclaiming, this figure is in the process of being remade, piece by piece. It is not yet whole. In place of knees are small, square boxes, opened to reveal small paintings of the same flame that exists above the heads of the dispersing crowd in the larger painting. These flames now exist in the figure's knees to show the potential of movement, the desire to move his legs, and body, away and towards a new fate. The feet, made of cast bronze, are also carefully attended to as a focus for potential movement.

Baptism by the earth is the fourth theme. In the painting, "To Sow, To Tend," (see fig. 7) I have focused attention on a farmer, in the process of sowing seed. The spiritual aspects of this

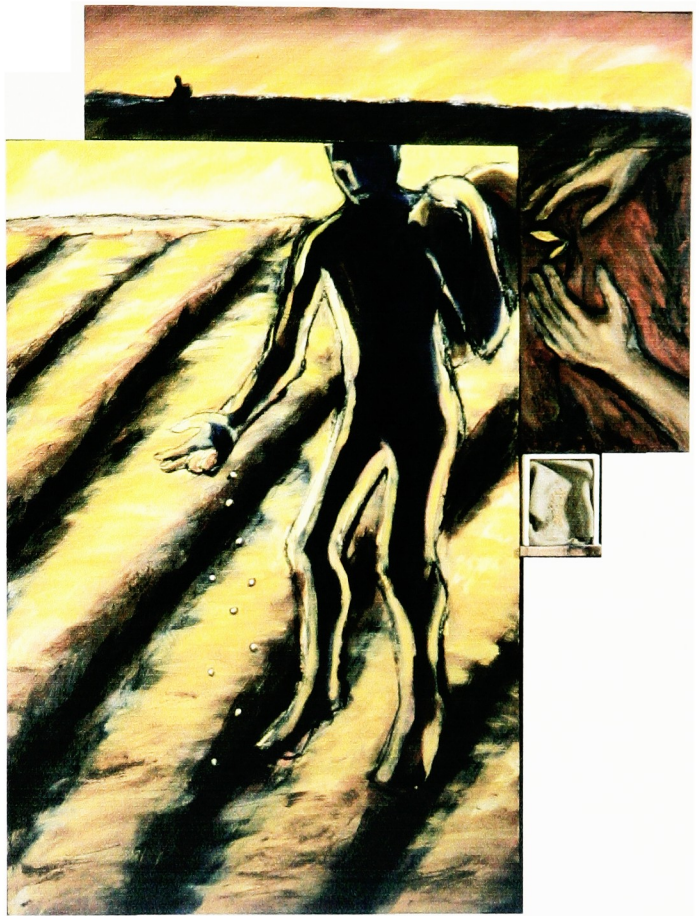


fig. 7
 "To Sow, To Tend," 1999,
 oil on panel, fabric, seeds,
 45"w x 57"h



fig. 8
 "The Sower," 1999, wood,
 concrete, fabric, seeds, wire,
 62"h x 22"w x 16"d

action have been well discussed in many cultures. The earth is what brings forth life in the greater sense. The life cycle of humans mimics the greater cycle of the earth—life, death, renewal. The theme of this painting is about becoming fully aware of how we, as humans, relate to nature. In the largest panel, the strong light of the sun warms a newly tilled field, and the backlit farmer spills seed onto the soil. Above this panel is a small, lengthened panoramic view, emphasizing the smallness, the insignificance of the figure in the scheme of the landscape. Another panel beneath this piece shows the farmer's hands, tending a new sprout. Finally, beneath this panel is a drawer, similar to the drawer in the sculpture of the same theme, filled with sackcloth and mustard seeds. The mustard seeds are also symbolic in Christian text in the passage, "Then Jesus asked, 'What is the Kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches.'"⁶ In both this painting and in the sculpture, a strong sense of love and communion with the earth are present.

"The Sower," the sculpture that elaborates on the themes of "To Sow, To Tend," takes the idea a step further (see fig. 8). Here, the figure has become part of the earth, one with his occupation. His head, torso and arm are made from bent branches—a drawing in the third dimension. His hips are a box, constructed from weathered wood that recalls old barns or wheelbarrows. Fit in the front of the box is a drawer, that pulls out to reveal the same mustard seeds—its placement a connection to the sexual symbolism of sowing seed. The figure's legs were created in cast concrete, the aggregate increasing in size as it nears the feet. The feet end, finally, in rocks, separating from the figure. The structure of the figure emulates the geologic strata of the earth, beginning with the growing environment, to the seed/soil layer contained in the hip box, to the rock foundation.

⁶ Lk. 13:18-19

The baptism I refer to in these pieces is not a sacramental baptism, but a continual and personal process of spiritual renewal. I believe that endless examples of this kind of renewal exist. My aim in describing a portion of these is to instill in the viewer a greater awareness of the presence of their own spirit and the journey it undertakes as we experience life.

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