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### Sensual shrines

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Fine and Applied Arts  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

SENSUAL SHRINES

By

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May 8, 1992

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**SENSUAL SHRINES**

**To Elvis**

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THE DESCENT OF MAN AND THE ASCENT OF MEN: MAGIC  
AND THE MAGDALENIANS

O attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede  
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,  
With forest branches and the trodden weed:  
Thou, silent form! dost tease us out of thought  
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!  
When old age shall this generation waste,  
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,  
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty",- that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

KEATS: Lines from "On a  
Grecian Urn".  
(Silcock 1953, 38 ).

## THE INTRODUCTION



"What is beauty? What is truth? These simple questions have exercised the minds of the greatest of the world's thinkers, poets and artists from before the time of Plato, down to the present day. Never was there a finer example of the truth of the proverb that 'fools can ask questions which wise men cannot answer'."

(Silcock 1953, 28).

"For what is beauty but form, colour and tone so composed and combined as to give a reaction of pleasurable nature on the mind through the perceptive telegraphic apparatus of eye, nerve and brain?"

(Silcock 1953, 24).

"What, then, is the difference between good art and bad art, and why? Must good art be beautiful? Can bad art be beautiful?" (Silcock 1953, 18).

Observing nature in an intimate way led me to my paintings of sections and close ups of flowers and organic forms which is what I was doing before coming to Rochester. My first glimpse of Rochester was Mount Hope Cemetary and I was taken by the beauty of the Victorian graves. I started by keeping a photographic record of the graceful and classical angels I found there. The organic lines of their drapery and wings were a logical extention of the sinuous and sensual forms I had been using in my previous paintings. Combining these angels with still life settings of velvet drapery and imaginary landscapes became the basis of my body of thesis work. I found myself spending a lot of time at the Memorial Art Gallery and other museums as well as constantly looking at art books. I was consistantly drawn to images of traditional ideals of beauty. Beauty is something very personal from one individual to the next so its definition is elusive. Intuitively I linked together my thoughts on beauty. Whether they were to be my personal choices, universal choices or even popular cultures choices of beauty ranges from one painting to another and this exploration also led me to my thesis work. I've always been drawn to dealing with things in an intimate setting and this led me to the next step of my thesis the "shrine".

Another reason for the shrine format would unconsciously have to be my past career as a window trimmer. Setting up a window is much like setting up a painting, you have to work back to front and keep the entire window balanced visually and colorwise much like a painting. This formula manifested itself in my sculpture boxes which are stage like sets or tableaux sometimes using drapery, found objects, or photographs. These ideas of the sculpture box eventually merged into my ideas in my paintings. The paintings became "boxes" using trompe l'oeil frames as well as real ornamental frames to draw you into an intimate and sensual environment celebrating different forms of beauty suggesting different responses. The final phase of my thesis work was experimenting with actual wood shrines much like altar pieces. This last step completed my exploration linking together everything I had done.

PAINTING BY PAINTING

## "The High Priestess"

This was the first of the sculpture boxes which started my idea of "enshrining" everything. The Bougereau painting is in the Memorial Art Gallery and every time I see the painting I can not seem to take my eyes off of it. The crisp meticulous way it is painted with attention to every detail and the most expressive feet I have ever seen led me to celebrate it by giving it a shrine. The model for "The High Priestess" was a peasant girl and although she is not a classical beauty, I find her to be beautiful in a different way. Her strong spirit and innocence come through and this contrasts greatly with her trappings and the paintings title which excites me even more.



## "Angelus"

This painting celebrates nature by transporting the viewer into a world of lush flower forms and clouds. The drapery forms are carefully modeled echoing the organic movement of the petals. The angel in the center idealizes the female form.

A style of painting used in "Angelus" is trompe l'oeil, which is merely realistic illusion. I used this style for the illusion of a frame to make the setting of the painting even more intimate. The layering of space is also an important consideration giving the piece a shrine or box like quality.

This piece was the transition piece from the earlier flower paintings to the thesis idea. The triptych is a sensual and dramatic painting meant to indulge the senses. "Painting is a pagan rite which culminates in pure visual enjoyment. Imagination unfolds in a paean ornamentation which becomes ever farther removed from reality and larger than life itself." Ingres. (Gaudibert 1970, 24).





## "Renaissance Biblical Epic Nightmare"

This painting was the most frustrating of the series and may very well never be finished or always changing. It is the culmination of all my symbols and ideas throughout the entire process of my thesis work and was also the starting point for many of my ideas and the returning point to try out new ideas.



## " The Birth, Dream, and Death of Venus"

The Venus series was an attempt to create a timeless modern day Venus using the same traditional format I had used previously in "Renaissance Biblical Epic Nightmare" but attempting to make it a more universal painting. The triptych format is still evident, as is the female form. The possibilities are limitless and the image is a more subtle one. The element of drapery is still present only this time it is the actual fabric instead of the painted illusion. The fabric is also a synthetic plastic like fiber surrounding the natural elements in the painting tying together another facet of popular culture. The elements of sensuality and beauty are still contained as is the underlying everpresent suggestion of death.



" In Memory Of..."

This painting is a special memorial to a special person. It is a highly personalized response to death and even more devastating, an A.I.D.S. related death.

The angel is a symbol of sensitivity, sorrow, and compassion. She becomes an expressive vehicle confronting the viewer and setting the mood. The stone represents the finality of death and the hardness and ignorance society has in dealing with the reality and implications of the disease. Also, the block we still have to conquer to have a better understanding and a cure. The clouds express the universality of the experience and how it will soon touch everyone's life, they also are a symbol of hope and change. Death must happen for birth to occur and tragedy must happen for awakening and understanding. The atmosphere also denotes the winter day the death occurred and the cold and empty feeling felt from loss. These are some of the things I was feeling upon contemplating the painting, but I think too much explanation and dissection ruins the impact of an image and I want the viewer to bring to the piece his own experiences and impressions. That is why I choose my language to be a visual one and I prefer not to attempt to be a writer. " Words refer to other things by their very nature, and notes of music are only symbols to be played by others.

painting and sculpture can, and should be, self-sufficient." Adolph Gottlieb (Rodman 1961, 91).

The response to "In Memory Of..." in general was a very dramatic and emotional one from viewers who were unaware of the history of the piece as well as those who were familiar with the situation and this moment of emotion was my intention. This is what I feel makes the painting successful.

**In Memory of**

**Kevin J. Ambrosia**

**January 18, 1992**

“To laugh often and much; to win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children; to earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty; to find the best in others; to leave the world a bit better whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition; to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded.”

*Ralph Waldo Emerson*





"Lip Shrine", "Velvet Shrine", and "Cloud Shrine"

The wood shrines were the last step in my thesis work. I went full circle from the sculpture boxes to the shrine paintings to merging elements of both. These were highly experimental. I used rabbit skin glue to attach pieces of canvas onto the wood and was able to translate my paintings over in this way. I tried to keep the paintings very simple in this format and retain much of the wood as well. I hinged them like altar pieces and embellished each one in a different way. I also had my first experience with gold leafing.

The "Cloud Shrine" and the "Velvet Shrine" were celebrations of my symbols which are used consistently throughout my body of work. The "Lip Shrine" was dedicated to Rossetti's "lips", the lips of his femme fatales in his paintings are so sensual and bizarre and exaggerated at the same time that I was compelled to recognize them and acknowledge their independence and sense of humor.



## **THE INFLUENCES**

The philosophy and techniques of the Pre-Raphaelite movement have been influential on my painting. The Pre-Raphaelites being frustrated with the art of their time, looked back into history for their stimulus. They were influenced by medieval art and professed their aims to be "a return to nature" and "emotional sincerity". They were also dedicated to technique and devised a distinctive technique of painting. This method was painting with transparent or semitransparent colors over a white ground. This process afforded them a luminous clarity perfectly suited to bring small details into prominence. (Sambrook 1974, 8). The Pre-Raphaelites favored the use of the female form. Many of their paintings idealized women and put them in rich dream-like environments with elegant trappings.

Dream-like environments were also the specialty of the master of illusion, Salvador Dali. He was able to make the unexpected come together in his surrealist paintings. Dali is certainly an influence not only because his imagery is interesting, but his technique is flawless, and he had a most charming personality I also admired.

I also enjoy very much the paintings of Gustav Klimt who would surround his main subject with "...an ocean of texture and ornament". (Whitford 1990, 16). Klimt was able to reconcile natural and artificial

elements in his paintings. He also proved throughout his career that ornamentation and decorative painting are not superficial elements in art.

Of course there are more influences that are too numerous to name. Learning from artists of the past and linking this knowledge with my own sensibilities and concerns is an important part of my painting. Many artists revived ideals from the past, while others reinterpreted the past to innovate the future of art. Everything new in art has been extracted from something that already exists. Originality and a fresh interpretation of Art History is an important tool. The past is the key to a more comprehensive future,

## THE PROCESS

" A Pre-Raphaelite

had to have things right.

The patient redhead, Elizabeth Siddal,

Lay in the bathtub up to her middle

(But richly gowned)

To show what she would look like drowned..."

Christopher Morely, in his verse on the painting of  
"Ophelia" by Millais. (Silcock 1953, 158).

As well as being inspired by traditional painters, I have also been interested in their techniques. Through years of experimentation, I have finally become intimate with the layering and glazing technique of oil painting.

I begin my process on an already prepared canvas. I lay out the image with fast gestural strokes using naples yellow oil paint and a medium sized bristle brush. I now lay out my lights and darks using another thin wash of oil paint in arbitrary colors.

After waiting at least 24 hours, I am now ready for the next thin layer of paint which determines the actual colors I will be using. At this point, I must also make any final changes I have in the composition.

At last, I can now work with a thicker layer of color working the image from dark to light, taking care to blend colors and create an extremely smooth surface.

The next step must wait at least a week, when the paint surface is dry. I can now put all my fine detail work and finishing touches in, using an extremely small sable brush. This is also the phase in which I must clean up any uneven patches of color, clarify edges, and put in final highlights.

The final phase of my technique is called glazing.



Glazing is a process used in traditional painting as well as many other areas of painting. This phase cannot begin until at least three months after the painting is dry. First I have to make my glaze formula. The mixture is one-third stand oil, one-third damar varnish, and one-third turpentine (Mayer 1966, 98). A very soft wide brush must be used so no brushstrokes are visible. I mix the glaze formula on a sheet of glass with a touch of oil color. The choice of color I use depends on the effect I need. I brush on the glaze in thin layers only, pushing the brush in one direction. When the entire canvas is coated, I must wait at least another week to apply the next layer of glaze. I usually apply at least three layers of glaze to each painting.

By now (If you are still awake) you probably are wondering why I go through so much trouble. The technique requires a lot of patience and time, but the results are well worth it. The final look is luminous, and the glazing ties together the colors creating unity in the painting. This technique is also highly suitable for my imagery.

## **THE CONCLUSION**

"No. This is what I'm trying to get at. Painting is self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is."  
Jackson Pollock. (Rodman 1961, 82).

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## LIST OF COLOR COPIES

1. "The High Priestess" Mixed Media 13x9x6.
2. "Angelus" Oil on Canvas Triptych 3 @ 30x40.
3. "Renaissance Biblical Epic Nightmare" Oil on Canvas  
Folding Screen 5'x5'.
4. "The Birth, Dream, and Death of Venus" Oil on  
Canvas Triptych 24x24, 30x40, 24x20.
5. "In Memory Of..." Oil on Canvas 4'x4'.
6. "Lip Shrine" Mixed Media 14x26. "Velvet Shrine"  
Mixed Media 18x24. "Cloud Shrine" Mixed Media  
29x15.

Thank you to my family who has always given me the  
love and support and encouragement to follow my  
dreams.