

BIBLICAL CHARACTER ANALYSIS IN PAINTING

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ABSTRACT

BIBLICAL CHARACTER ANALYSIS IN PAINTING

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My paintings are allegorical reflections of modernized narratives based on Biblical stories and characters. The subject matter also comes from historical religious painting, modern allegorical painting, and personal experiences gleaned from my own religious influences, including a staunch Christian upbringing with both Quaker and Baptist affiliations. I embrace the narrative traditions of religious paintings that were prevalent during the middle ages, but I update and change elements of the stories. I also use acrylic paint, a medium developed in the 20th century, as opposed to more traditional mediums like oil or tempera.

I pick narratives for my paintings based on my interest in gender roles in Biblical allegory and in religious art throughout history. The portraits depicting female subjects are self-portraits, reminiscent of artists Jenny Saville and Cindy Sherman. In these paintings, I engage in multiple relationships such as: artist as objective researcher, artist as subject, as well as artist empathizer, particularly with female Biblical characters. Male subjects depict dominant male characters like Jesus and are sometimes painted as portraits and other times only part of the male character is seen in relation to female characters. Similar to the way Edith Neff uses family and friends to portray mythological

characters, my significant other is my model for the Biblical male subjects within my paintings.

The paintings invite the viewers to become engaged participants in the narrative through the use of intimate, but large canvases and the viewers' connection to the gaze of the subject. An empathic concern with the subjects, as seen in the work of Erik Thor Sandberg, influenced my work. The intention is for the audience to empathize with the characters in the portrait and to better understand the characters' traditional plights and contemporary dilemmas. The reevaluation of Biblical stories for a modern audience, combined with a sense of empathy for individual characters, creates a space for the reconsideration of well-known stories of the Bible.

INTRODUCTION

The “Biblical Character Analysis in Painting,” is an autobiographical exploration that involves art historical and Biblical research to find stories that when augmented, illuminate new perspectives on traditional and sacred Christian beliefs. The work is also a consideration of the context of religious art and portraiture within the contemporary world. Religious and non-religious viewers can share in these paintings through familiar narratives and common symbols.

BIBLICAL IMAGERY OF THE PAST

In the Romanesque period and leading up to the Gothic period, painted personifications of Christian narratives were detached from human sentiment. Considerations such as the spiritual significance of symbols and their correct placement, as well as the amount of surface area to be covered, rather than laws of spatial illusion determined compositions. This explains why figures were often placed side by side and one above the other (Hoffstater 12).

I integrated this same idea of altered space within the picture plane to determine what the perspective would be. My paintings still employ the laws of spatial illusion, but this discovery that painters altered compositions to affect the viewer's consideration of what was most significant led me to employ that same idea in my compositions, while still maintaining the human sentiment that the paintings of the past were missing.

Compared to today's image-saturated culture, during the Gothic period the single image had a much greater level of importance and the visual narratives were much more powerful (Camille 129, 146). Christian ideology and the church in the Gothic Period relied heavily on symbolism for visual communication to a population that was largely illiterate (Camille 14). Halos, wavy lines, and beams of light were visual cues and symbols used by the artists to communicate an association of figures or objects with a higher, religious presence (Camille 16, 19). The Virgin Mary's body became a symbol for the physical structure of the church (Camille 33). Other symbols relating to the Virgin Mary were lilies, which symbolized virginity, and windows depicted in paintings, a sign that "she is the window of heaven...through which God shed the true light on the world" (Camille 53, 54).

This knowledge inspired the use of symbolism I could use in my paintings, but the symbols needed to be modernized for contemporary viewers. For example, drapery was also important in dressing figures such as the Virgin Mary and Jesus. I studied the tradition of how the drapery was used and how Jesus and other figures were clothed, and allowed this to affect my decisions. Color too became an important factor; I used it to depict royalty, purity, and sexuality within my work.

Early in the 11th century, in parts of Europe when Christianity was starting to spread, religious art was used in church to help with conversion (Camille 57). In the Middle Ages, the word for a painted picture, “ystoire” meant story and history, which explains the importance of these narratives in religious art (Camille 87). By the thirteenth century, images of God became more widely circulated outside of the church, as well (Camille 105). The use of religious art in different contexts informed my thinking about the audience of my paintings. In a contemporary context, the work maintains the idea of imagery as a means of conveying a religious narrative, and exploring this through a means of manipulation of that narrative, and modernizing the visual symbolism. The motivation behind this has been to bring these narratives out even further beyond the religious context and engage audiences who hold different belief systems.

Within this same period, there are examples of gender-distinction in religious images, particularly those involving Jesus Christ after he has risen from the dead (Camille 110). For example, in Caravaggio’s *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, from 1601-1602, Doubting Thomas is depicted placing his fingers in Jesus’s wounds, while Jesus is also depicted standing before Mary Magdalene saying, “Do not touch me” in Titian’s painting, *Noli Me Tangere (Do Not Touch Me)* from 1511 (Camille 110).

It is through comparisons such as this that it becomes clear that the representations of women of the Bible such as Eve, Jezebel, Delilah, and Mary Magdalene depict correlations between females and seduction, as well as a weakness for sinning and evil, directly associated with their femininity.

One 17th century painter who specifically addressed female characters of the Bible was Artemisia Gentileschi. Similar to female characters shown in my work, Gentileschi specifically chose to portray women of the Bible and mythology who suffered as well as women who overcame struggles and showed strength, such as her famous 1612 painting *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, which depicts Judith with a maid cutting off the head of the Assyrian general, Holofernes. The fact that a female artist of the time chose to depict scenes such as these supports the idea that portrayals of both female suffering and strength within the Bible may have been overlooked by other men and male artists of the time. It is this disparity that informed how I would depict these characters but through the lens of my own interpretations of their stories, current political expressions of gender, and the affects that gender may have had on their representations.

MODERN BIBLICAL IMAGERY

In studying Christian art of the past century, a divide emerges between the fine art community and what is mass marketed. The theme for the fine art world typically centers around a commentary on Jesus and his crucifixion, such as Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, whereas the mass marketed imagery relies heavily on a sense of nostalgia, as seen in the work of Thomas Kinkade.

At the time, in 1987, *Piss Christ* was shocking to many critics and viewers. This controversial photograph that involved Serrano's own urine was making a commentary on the commercialization of Christianity and Christian icons in today's culture (Freeland 7, 8). Serrano uses the title to place an iconic image out of context in a way that evokes a sense of rebellion on the part of the artist (Freeland 19, 21).

Serrano's photograph affected how I intend my own work to be received by audiences. Since my paintings have a basis in religious context, yet I consider myself to be non-religious, I must carefully evaluate how the reception for these pieces would be to both religious and non-religious viewers. While Serrano's work evokes a sense of shock among many viewers, I instead intend my work to evoke a sense of empathy for the individual characters in the stories, rather than be viewed as a commentary against religion. Also, by selectively choosing to depict the characters in moments that are not quite as iconic as the crucifixion of Jesus, I have been able to broaden the scope of interpretation for my pieces, in contrast to Serrano's work.

Interestingly, the commodification of Christianity is what has made artist Thomas Kinkade commercially successful. Kinkade evokes varying reactions of love and disdain, depending on the audience and critic (Harris 7). Said to be "America's most collected

artist,” Kinkade was coined as the “Painter of Light,” based on John 8:12 “I am the light of the world” (Vallance 9).

Although known for his nostalgic cottage paintings, Kinkade has claimed that the light in his paintings “represents God’s presence and influence.” The commercialization of Thomas Kinkade branches into collectible items such as calendars, housewares, Bible covers, Christmas ornaments, nativity scenes, key chains, and even funeral announcements (Vallance 10). Before his success, Kinkade saw the art world as “a subculture on the fringe of society that had little bearing on the average person’s life. He wanted to appeal to normal folk, not just art critics or academics in ivory towers” (Vallance 11). By appealing to the nostalgic and idyllic feelings that the average American attaches to their religious experiences, he creates paintings and merchandise that the average person would want to own, at accessible prices. This is what makes Thomas Kinkade the forerunner of religious art in America today. Kinkade has aimed at capturing religious feelings of nostalgia, capturing a feeling of close relationship to God as a spiritual illumination.

The societal acceptance of Kinkade’s work within the contemporary and commercial world also affects how I want my work to be received. While Serrano’s *Piss Christ* helps me to recognize the sensitivity of religion in a visual context, I want to maintain the same commercial appeal as Kinkade. The intention to appeal to a viewer who may not be immersed or initiated into the fine art world is directly influenced by Thomas Kinkade. While it is not my intention to commercialize myself, it is still important to appeal to a wider range of viewers.

While the nostalgic work of Kinkadee differs from the religious narrative paintings of the past, as well as my own religious narrative research, it is important to recognize what is popular as religious art in today's culture. Kinkadee's paintings and merchandizing have the foothold in the most relevant religious art of today, even if it depicts a feeling of spiritual illumination and nostalgia rather than narratives of the Bible. Without the narrative, Kinkadee has relied on symbolism for the religious meanings in his paintings. In addition to using the "light" to represent "God's presence and influence," he also uses windmills as the Biblical symbol for the "untamed human spirit," and pathways as symbols of God showing the way on the path of life (Vallance 32). In a similar sense, my work relies on the symbolism of color, clothing, and objects to evoke feelings and aid the narratives. In *The Washing*, for example, the coffin symbolizes death, and white symbolizes cleansing and purity (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Carrie Croom, *The Washing*, 2013

EXAMINING BIBLICAL STORIES AND CHARACTERS

My process for examining Biblical stories and characters relies heavily upon the first Bible I owned, an *International Children's Bible*. Through the years, I have amassed nearly ten copies of the Bible, including the King James Version. My decision to use a children's Bible as my primary source for examining these stories and characters is because of its use of simplified language and illustrations. The *International Children's Bible* is written for elementary understanding, therefore many instances of symbolism and semantics are explained thoroughly in footnotes, which I found relevant for my research.

Virago

Jezebel's story is the first to broaden the sense of duality for me within these characters and the narratives depicted in the Bible. After researching the story of Jezebel and the social perceptions synonymous with her name, it became important to me to retitile the painting as *Virago*. The term Jezebel is blatantly associated with the words "whore," "harlot," and "seductress." Throughout the past two thousand years, those are the words that are left to describe this female character and her story. The word "virago," however, has a broader spectrum of meanings, such as "a violent, ill-tempered woman," and "a strong, brave, or warlike woman," which are more applicable to the role this woman played (Dictionary.com). While this word, like "Jezebel" is meant to specifically describe a female, the term "virago" itself describes a woman with both terrible and admirable qualities. While Jezebel's character was indeed depicted as violent and domineering, she also appears to have been seen a strong and courageous character for standing by the faith of her homeland.

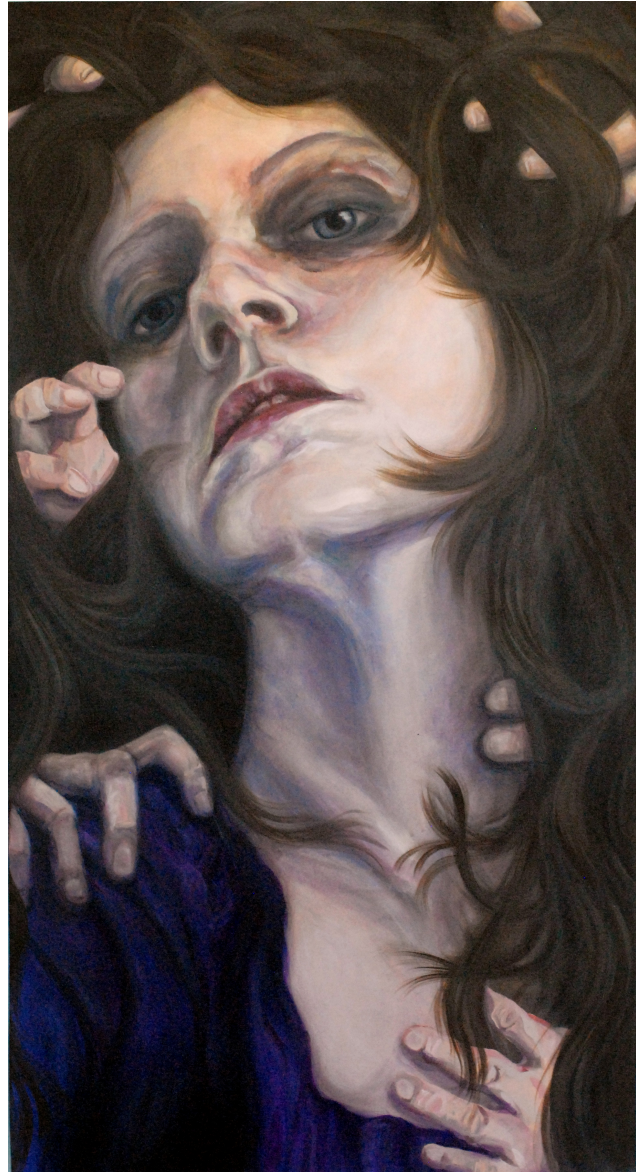


Fig. 2 Carrie Croom, *Virago*, 2013

The composition of *Virago*, shown in Fig. 2, displays the face of Jezebel in the upper portion of the canvas, with her hair floating around her. The narrative being depicted is from 2 Kings 9:30 and 2 Kings 9:33, when Jezebel is falling from a window to her death. Although at first she appears to be looking down at the viewer, she is actually looking upwards, as she is falling backwards. As the passage recalls:

When Jehu came to Jezreel, Jezebel heard about it. She put paint on her eyes and fixed her hair. Then she looked out the window. Jehu said to them, “Throw her down!” So they threw Jezebel down. And the horses ran over her body. Some of her blood splashed on the wall and on the horses. (*International Children’s Bible*)

Gustave Dore created an illustration of this scene in 1866, however, the perspective is that of an outside viewer watching Jezebel being thrown out of her window.

The importance of this scene is the symbolic political act of literally pushing Jezebel out of her elevated station to the ground below. Her exile from the window to her death represents an eternal lowering of her status as one of the most influential women of the Bible (Gaines). Feminist scholar Janet Gaines best describes this re-envisioned narrative,

Applying eye makeup and brushing one’s hair are often connected to flirting in Hebraic thinking. In Jezebel’s case, however, the cosmetic is more than just an attempt to accentuate the eyes. Jezebel is donning the female version of armor as she prepares to do battle. She is a woman warrior, waging war in the only way a woman can. Whatever fear she may have of Jehu is camouflaged by her war paint. Her grooming continues as she dresses her hair, symbol of a woman’s seductive power. When she dies, she wants to look her queenly best. She is in control here, choosing the manner in which her attacker will last see and remember her. (“How Bad Was Jezebel?”)

In the painting, she is looking up at the viewer as she falls to the ground, and the hands grasping her body and weaving through her hair are displayed grabbing her while giving the allusion of caressing her body, which is indicative of her supposedly seductive

nature. It is noted in the story that she paints up her face and dons her royal garb, here painted purple to represent wealth and royalty, but which many say was meant to seduce her killers. However, when reevaluating Jezebel's character for the painting, I have painted her face with "war paint" around her eyes, which can also be seen as bruises. It is unclear whether she is in pain or pleasure, and whether her downfall is her own, or by consequence of the others and how they have chosen to label her. While the subject is painted with a gaze that connects with the viewer, it is depicted to show a sense of resignation, as if Jezebel shown accepting her fate and is fully aware of what is happening to her in that instant and captured moment.

The narrative in this painting, as well as the other works, displays these characters as individuals. This is not only to show that there is an action either taking place before, during, or to come after these moments, but also to breathe life into these characters. By displaying the sense of humanity of these individuals, as well as their possible untold thoughts and feelings, the work is freeing them from their traditional roles as symbols.

The Wrong Mary

Traditionally, Mary Magdalene's story involved being a sinner and prostitute who washed Jesus's feet with a bottle of expensive perfume and her own hair, before she became one of his followers. According to the scriptures, this was not Mary Magdalene's story at all. Although her name is often associated with this story, it is actually the story of the unnamed sinner who anoints Jesus's feet with an alabaster jar of perfume and dries them with her hair in Luke 7:36-50, and combined with the story of Mary of Bethany, who sits and listens at Jesus's feet, found in Luke 10:39-42.

The falsehood of Mary Magdalene being a prostitute comes from an association made by Pope St. Gregory the Great in the sixth century, who linked together the stories of Mary of Bethany, the unnamed sinner, and Mary Magdalene. This interpretation is known as the “composite Magdalene” (Morrow). The fateful sermon of Pope Gregory was stated as follows:

She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark. And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices? It is clear, brother, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts. What she therefore displayed more scandalously, she was now offering to God in a more praiseworthy manner. She had coveted with earthly eyes, but now through penitence these are consumed with tears. She displayed her hair to set off her face, but now her hair dries her tears. She had spoken proud things with her mouth, but in kissing the Lord’s feet, she now planted her mouth on the Redeemer’s feet. For every delight, therefore, she had had in herself, she now immolated herself. She turned the mass of her crimes to virtues, in order to serve God entirely in penance. (Carroll 8)

In reality, Mary Magdalene’s name comes from her place of origin, Magdala, a town on the western shore of Galilee (*International Children’s Bible* 1491). Her character is first introduced in the Bible in Luke 8:1-3 as a woman healed by Jesus by having seven demonic spirits expelled out of her. The same passage also states that Mary Magdalene helped Jesus and his apostles financially.



Fig. 3 Carrie Croom, *The Wrong Mary*, 2013

The Wrong Mary, shown in Fig. 3, depicts a scene where Mary Magdalene is being forced into the position of the unnamed sinner, just as her character has been throughout history. Her passive gaze shows that she has had no say in the matter of being forced into this act of cleaning the feet of Jesus with perfume and her own hair. She is shown exposed, on the floor in nothing but a red bra, which symbolizes the false link of sinner and prostitute. This is an important link to the semiotics in my work. Since one major aspect of the Composite Magdalene is her character's misidentification as a prostitute, I chose to convey that attribution with symbolism, relying on associations with

women's red undergarments, rather than depicting Mary in a sexual act. It is important to note that had I chosen to represent a literal depiction of prostitution rather than using semiotics, the painting would have then garnered the same sense of shock-value as Serrano's *Piss Christ*.

The viewer's position is through the eyes of Jesus, looking down on Mary. This also provides a visual cue of Mary being placed into this position by a man. The irony of Mary's close, supportive relationship with Jesus being misconstrued into something terrible is translated into this painting. The composition of the painting is set up so that her own body and the man's body frame her face, to direct the viewer's gaze there. This illuminates a new perspective on Mary Magdalene's forced portrayal of this false persona within the Western churches. I am addressing an issue of miscommunication from 1,500 years ago, about an important female figure in the Bible, and how far the implications of lingering misinformation can travel based on the word of a man, Pope Gregory.

Unlocked

The story of Samson and Delilah comes from Judges 13-16. As a child, I was fascinated by this story about this strong man who had all of his strength and power taken away when a woman cut off his hair. In my children's Bible, there are four illustrations for Samson's story. The first depicts a longhaired image of Samson ripping ropes that were binding him. The second image shows Samson asleep, his head in the lap of a beautiful woman while a man shears off his hair into a basket. The third image depicts a weak Samson being forced to do labor with a look of despair on his face. The final image shows that same woman and many others running from a collapsing building, with Samson in the center breaking down the walls. As a child, I recall these images and my

“Sunday School” teachers telling us the story. What I recall most is a sense of sympathy for Samson, who was tricked by the evil Delilah, and how forlorn and broken-down he appeared in that third image. The illustrators of this children’s Bible, as well as my teachers and the preachers giving sermons on this section of the Bible create this sympathetic outlook on Samson by selectively choosing which portions of his story to focus on.

Guercino’s painted image, *Samson and Delilah*, from 1654 depicts Delilah as the one who cuts Samson’s hair, with scissors in her hand, while men stand to the side and watch. Delilah’s breasts are also exposed, while the other figures are painted fully clothed, which alludes to Delilah’s supposedly seductive nature.

Samson “must never cut his hair because he will be a Nazarite,” therefore losing all of his God-given strength (*International Children’s Bible* Judges 13:5). However, Samson is also described as a man who killed thousands of people. Samson had his first wife and father-in-law set on fire, and then killed 1,000 Philistine men with a donkey’s jawbone, and slept with prostitutes (*International Children’s Bible* Judges 15:6; Judges 15:16; Judges 16:1-3). In the Bible, Samson fell in love with Delilah (Judges 16:4), and that Delilah was sent by the Kings of the Philistines to discover Samson’s secret to save her people from his wrath (*International Children’s Bible* Judges 16:5).

After researching the events leading up to Delilah’s betrayal of Samson, it has changed my interpretation and vision of Delilah’s character, regarding her as a woman who would have been revered as a hero by her people after the event. Delilah was essentially a spy sent in to save her people, the Philistines, from any more destruction from Samson. It is important to realize that Samson is not a superhero with a spotless

record, but was a man with God-given strength, who killed thousands of people and slept with prostitutes. It appears that the Kings of the Philistines realized Samson's weakness, and sent in someone to seduce him to find out his secrets to keep their people and kingdom safe. After Delilah retrieved this information about cutting off Samson's hair, she would have been treated highly and was paid well for her services (*International Children's Bible* Judges 16:5).



Fig. 4 Carrie Croom, Unlocked, 2013

The painting *Unlocked* (Fig. 4) is a visual culmination of this research on Delilah. Delilah is painted wrapped in a cloth similar to that of the revered Virgin Mary. However, for Delilah, the cloth is a bed sheet. Although this fact is not made obvious to viewers, it is important to note that this is the cloth used to drape over her because of her connection to being a seductress. Behind and surrounding Delilah is a curtain of Samson's hair. Delilah's gaze is set forward at the viewer, in an acknowledging gaze, for she is aware of what she has done, and is not ashamed. Delilah is shown as being aware of the duty she has performed successfully for her people. The title *Unlocked* is a play on the word "lock" as a synonym for hair, and used as a means of describing Samson's hair being cut off. The title also works for Delilah "unlocking" the secret behind Samson's strength, and removing that as well. This metaphorical emasculation of Samson having his masculine strength removed is relative to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of castration anxiety, which is a theory involving a man's fear of having his masculinity removed or a literal fear of damage occurring to his penis. Symbolically, by cutting off his hair, Delilah removes Samson's manhood by taking away his strength.

SELF-PORTRAITURE

The thesis-exhibition focuses on self-portraiture as an examination of my role within a religious community as a nonbeliever reflecting on religious traditions. This thesis-exhibition represents a struggle to communicate my feelings about a religion that I no longer fully participate in, by depicting myself as these characters within their struggles, and to overcome the oppression of tradition. The struggles of the characters depicted each represent my own struggles growing up within a Christian community and family.

Jenny Saville is a contemporary painter whose use of self-portraiture influenced my work. Saville's paintings depict a grotesque perspective on the female body in monumental size, typically ranging from six to eleven feet (Poli 381). Saville's portraits and figural paintings reflect on mass-media images with a specific focus on women and beauty, and the use of female figures as tools of marketing (Poli 381-382). These self-portraits deal with how body imagery is manipulated in social media and how this manipulation in turn affects the definition of the self and identity. This relationship correlates directly with Saville's visual manipulation of the body in representational painting (Poli 279).

Saville's manipulation of the figure in her self-portraits relates to my manipulation of the Biblical characters and stories using my own image and the image of my partner. Saville's retrospection on the female portrayal is also comparable to the self-portraiture works of Cindy Sherman, who made commentary on the stereotypes of females as depicted in movies made in the 1950's with her *Untitled Film Stills*. Sherman chose to use photography to correlate with film stills to portray cinematic quality of a

suspended moment within a narrative, just as I am doing with my own painted narratives (Poli 383). These *Untitled Film Stills* create a series of masks for Sherman, as she dresses up to portray herself as characters, while also unmasking “the conventions... of woman-as-depicted-object” (Grundberg 170). By also choosing to portray myself as characters, I aim to unmask certain stereotypes associated with female characters such as Jezebel, Mary Magdalene, and Delilah, based on my perceptions within a religious community.

Another influence on my work is artist Julie Heffernan. Heffernan’s paintings mix allegory and portraiture, but in her titles they are all notably described as self-portraits, whether or not figures are central subjects. Heffernan creates surreal, fantastical scenes that are overwhelmed with objects and visual information. Her use of symbolism and semiotics for creating autobiographical work is what draws me most to Heffernan’s paintings. Regarding semiotics and structuralism, a theory of language and symbolism based on Ferdinand Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* from 1916, Andy Grundberg states, “What structuralist linguistic theory and semiotic sign theory have in common is the belief that [images] do not wear their meanings on their sleeves. They must be deciphered, or decoded, in order to be understood” (166). Heffernan’s reliance on symbolism and semiotics is what draws a connection to my work. However, rather than relying completely on semiotics, I use symbolism as a means to support my visual allegories.

OTHER INFLUENTIAL ARTISTS

Much of my research on modernizing Biblical narratives for this thesis-exhibition is based on Edith Neff's modernization of mythological allegorical paintings. The allegorical nature of Edith Neff's narrative paintings revolves around a basis of conceptual storytelling, featuring her friends and family members as the subjects. I appreciate the way that she updates and personalizes the allegories, therefore reenergizing older narratives.

Based on the narratives of classical mythological imagery, Edith Neff's work modernizes these allegorical depictions through modern dress and scenery. However, because the figures are painted to reflect the style of dress in the late 1980's and early 1990's, the result is a presentation of a specific era and fad of apparel. Twenty years later, the modernized dress of these allegorical figures is now perceived as out of date. During my research, I was aware of how this type of clothing dated Neff's figures, and was careful to avoid this mistake while making the Biblical stories more contemporary. I chose to keep the clothing general enough that as years pass, they will hopefully not become defined with a certain time period, but can be more universal in theme, dress, and setting, as shown in *The Beard Law*, Fig. 5.



Fig. 5 Carrie Croom, *The Beard Law*, 2013

Another artist that employs the use of Biblical narrative with contemporary garb is Alfred Leslie. In his series, *The Killing Cycle*, Leslie's paintings can be directly related to historical religious paintings of the past. *The Loading Pier*, from 1975, is comparable to depictions throughout history of Jesus descending the cross, specifically Peter Paul Rubens' *Descent from the Cross* from 1612, by depicting a scene where a figure is placed diagonally down the picture plane surrounded by other figures,. Although Leslie emulates the same composition of *Descent from the Cross*, his painting, *The Loading Pier*, does

not become a modernized depiction of a religious scene, but rather a completely new allegorical scene as a pastiche, based visually on religious imagery of the past.

Another influential narrative artist has been Erik Thor Sandberg. According to his artist statement, Sandberg's approach to his work is in pursuit of a dialogue between the artist and viewer in an attempt to define human identity. This determination to define identities is what relates Sandberg's work to my own, as well as his depictions of isolated moments within narratives that help the viewers to "empathize with the figures that are often transfixed by self-wrought disaster" (Sandberg). This quote specifically influenced my work in *Virago* and *Iscariot*. What separates my work from that of Sandberg's is the basis of my narratives. While Sandberg creates scenes that are set in imaginary worlds and environments, my work is more grounded in the basis of Biblical stories, which many people consider non-fictional.

PROCESS

The traditional roles I am confronting have typically been presented as paintings, therefore painting seems the appropriate medium to use, because it is what audiences expect for the visual form for religious narratives. However, in order to confront this pictorial tradition, I have chosen to paint in water-based acrylic paints, which did not become commercially available until the mid 20th century, rather than more traditional mediums like oil or egg tempera. By trading plastic for the precious gems and oils I am further deflating the tradition that I am challenging.

Historically, religious narratives have been depicted not only as figurative works, but also with multiple figures for a sense of human interaction and dialogue. My challenge has involved a shift in the composition to center on a single figure, where the dialogue and interaction is taking place just outside of the viewer's reach, rendering a sense of ambiguity in the narrative. My goal has been to illuminate a new perspective on the narrative and redirect the focus of the viewer from action and dialogue towards the individual character.

When comparing Caravaggio's painting from 1602, *The Kiss of Judas*, to my painting, *Iscariot* (Fig. 6), the difference is not only in the style of dress or the part of the narrative being depicted, but also in the isolation of Judas. Caravaggio's painting shows Judas in the act of betraying Jesus with a kiss, surrounded by other figures in suspended movement. Caravaggio painted the scene to depict a story and the interaction between the characters that led to Jesus's crucifixion. *Iscariot*, on the other hand, depicts Judas and his internal struggle over the act of betrayal that he committed.



Fig. 6 Carrie Croom, *Iscariot*, 2013

CONCLUSION

My research in Biblical narrative as it is presented in both text and imagery has led to a deeper understanding of the representation of gender roles in religious figurative portrayal through history. Though my choice of relying heavily on symbolism provides a direct link to the past, my choice to focus on the Biblical characters as individuals allows me to depict those gender roles in a new way. Without criticizing Christianity, I have successfully observed and modernized a way of viewing religious content in a contemporary, fine art setting.

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